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## American Companies Adjust to Anti-American Fervor

By STUART ELLIOTT

**I**TH the recent surge in petition drives, demonstrations, even physical attacks that equate brands born in the United States with imperialism or militarism, advertisers are confronting perhaps the most sustained anti-American feelings abroad since the Vietnam War.

For marketers like the [Northwest Airlines](#) division of the NWA Corporation, which introduced a redesigned look for its fleet of airplanes yesterday, the current conditions were carefully considered.

In developing the new look, "we led off with the idea that this is a time for a conservative brand strategy in a conservative world, a sobered America," said John Diefenbach, partner at TrueBrand in San Francisco, a consulting company.

The graphic overhaul, in which the letters "NWA" are played up more than the Northwest name, represents a balance, Mr. Diefenbach said, in that "NWA is more global than Northwest, but at the same time it's about being a very proud American company that represents the American heartland" from its headquarters in Minneapolis.

The changes at Northwest are indicative of shifts being studied by United States-based corporations with multinational businesses in the wake of backlash over the war in Iraq.

For instance, the Adbusters Media Foundation in Vancouver, British Columbia, which fights what it considers the overcommercialization of culture, is organizing a protest called Boycott Brand America; a petition on its Web site ([www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)) had almost 36,000 signatures as of yesterday. And the Qibla Cola Company in Derby, England, which is selling its soft drink as a Muslim alternative to [Coca-Cola](#) or Pepsi-Cola with a campaign carrying the theme "Liberate your taste," urged consumers yesterday to boycott American brands sold globally.

"It's an incredible challenge," said Christie Nordheim, assistant professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. "The fortunes of these companies hinge on the fortunes of the Bush foreign policy."

"Until now, American brands have reaped the benefits of being associated with America," she added. "Now, they're suffering the consequences."

- As a result, marketers are scrutinizing everything that represents them internationally, from ads to package designs to promotions.

"Some of our companies have made adjustments to accommodate the current environment," said Richard Detweiler, a spokesman for the Frito-Lay International and Pepsi-Cola International divisions of [PepsiCo](#) in Purchase, N.Y., after taking steps "to protect employees, first and foremost, and assets."

Mr. Detweiler declined to discuss specific changes being made by the companies, which sell products under locally based brand names in addition to American names like Fritos and Pepsi-Cola.

Ms. Nordheim differentiated between marketers under fire for their "American-ness," which include the [McDonald's Corporation](#), and those like the [Procter & Gamble Company](#), which "are more embedded in the countries in which they operate."

Clearly, those most closely associated with the American way of life "are going to suffer the greatest harm," Ms. Nordheim said.

At McDonald's, Walt Riker, a vice president in Oak Brook, Ill., said that while the company was "very recognized" for the American values and lifestyles that inspired its products, "we are absolutely decentralized."

"Our operations in 118 countries around the world are run by locals who know what's best for their markets," Mr. Riker said. "McDonald's France is a shining star in the McDonald's system because it's run by smart national management that knows France a lot better than Oak Brook, Ill., does."

The French operators of McDonald's have worked hard to distinguish themselves from their United States parent, offering unique menu fare, designing the restaurants to look different from the American stores and even establishing a brand identity for McDonald's as "McDos." They also run campaigns stressing the local nature of their operations.

"These are messages run periodically in local countries," Mr. Riker said, "that remind people that while McDonald's is an American brand, it's a brand that stands for local ownership and local jobs."

Similar messages are increasingly being delivered by the overseas divisions of other marketers based in the United States.

"Boycotts hurt the local economy, the local bottlers, the local employees" in the more than 200 countries outside the United States in which Coca-Cola products are sold, said Kelly Brooks, a spokesman for the Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta.

"We have acknowledged that boycotts have had an impact on our business in general, without being specific," he added. "And any changes in advertising or marketing would be made locally, based on situations in particular countries."

At Procter & Gamble, said Gretchen Mutchnick, a spokeswoman in Cincinnati, "though our headquarters is in the United States, we've worked really hard to establish strong local roots in each country in which we operate, and we will continue to do that." Procter has operations in more than 80 nations.

Several multinational marketers with American heritage have sold products abroad for so long from so many indigenous offices that they are widely perceived as locally based rather than American icons.

"Yes, we're an American company and we know we're on some boycott lists, but we haven't found it to be much of an issue for us," said Jack Kennedy, general manager for strategic communications at the H. J. Heinz Company in Pittsburgh.

"In the United Kingdom, people say we're a British company because we've been there more than 100 years," he added. "And our products are not always sold under the Heinz name; in Italy, we sell Plasmon, the leading baby-food brand that just celebrated its centenary."

The [Gillette Company](#), which sells products in 200 countries and territories, has operated overseas for nearly 100 years, said Eric Kraus, a spokesman in Boston, so in countries like France and Germany, "we are very much a part of the local culture, the local fabric." Gillette also benefits from selling brands under non-American names like Braun, the German appliance maker.

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Local ties developed overseas over the course of a century by [the Ford Motor Company](#) are the reason that "so far this hasn't been an issue with us," said Jennifer Flake, a Ford spokeswoman in Detroit.

Of course, dislike for products with American identities was not born out of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Those with long memories can recall the outcries against "Coca-Colonialism" in the 1950's and 1960's that were spawned by Communist attacks against capitalism and the resentment of colonial nations before they were freed from the control of American allies like Britain or France.

Such protests even became part of the American popular culture, as seen in the 1961 Billy Wilder film "One, Two, Three," a cold war comedy that lampooned the influence of United States business culture abroad as symbolized by Coca-Cola.

"As a cultural historian, I'd have to say, This too shall pass," said James B. Twitchell, a professor of English and advertising at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

"Thirty years ago, people burned effigies or U.S. flags to express outrage," Mr. Twitchell said. "Now, destroying the Golden Arches is an act of rebellion."

"If I were with one of these companies, I'd do absolutely nothing," he added, "because calling attention to it only exacerbates it."

Besides, said Marc E. Babej, president at Reason Inc. in New York, a marketing strategy company, "people in Arabic or European countries protesting against American brands were not likely to love America, or be the biggest buyers of those brands, in the first place."