Innovation succeeds best when it is culturally appropriate. This axiom of applied anthropology could guide the international spread not only of development projects but also of businesses, such as fast food. Each time McDonald’s or Burger King expands to a new nation, it must devise a culturally appropriate strategy for fitting into the new setting.

McDonald’s has been successful internationally, with more than a quarter of its sales outside the United States. One place where McDonald’s is expanding successfully is Brazil, where more than 50 million middle-class people, most living in densely packed cities, provide a concentrated market for a fast-food chain. Still, it took McDonald’s some time to find the right marketing strategy for Brazil.

In 1980 when I visited Brazil after a seven-year absence, I first noticed, as a manifestation of Brazil’s growing participation in the world economy, the appearance of two McDonald’s restaurants in Rio de Janeiro. There wasn’t much difference between Brazilian and North American McDonald’s. The restaurants looked alike. The menus were more or less the same, as was the taste of the quarter-pounders. I picked up an artifact, a white paper bag with yellow lettering, exactly like the take-out bags then used in American McDonald’s. An advertising device, it carried several messages about how Brazilians could bring McDonald’s into their lives. However, it seemed to me that McDonald’s Brazilian ad campaign was missing some important points about how fast food should be marketed in a culture that values large, leisurely lunches.

The bag proclaimed, “You’re going to enjoy the [McDonald’s] difference,” and listed several “favorite places where you can enjoy McDonald’s products.” This list confirmed that the marketing people were trying to adapt to Brazilian middle-class culture, but they were making some mistakes. “When you go out in the car with the kids” transferred the uniquely developed North American cultural combination of highways, affordable cars, and suburban living to the very different context of urban Brazil. A similar suggestion was “traveling to the country place.” Even Brazilians who owned country places could not find McDonald’s, still confined to the cities, on the road. The ad creator had apparently never attempted to drive up to a fast-food restaurant in a neighborhood with no parking spaces.

Several other suggestions pointed customers toward the beach, where cariocas (Rio natives) do spend much of their leisure time. One
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Anthropology: Appreciating Human Diversity, 14th ed. (2011)


To my mother, Mariana Kottak Roberts
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Conrad Phillip Kottak (A.B. Columbia College, 1963; Ph.D. Columbia University, 1966) is the Julian H. Steward Collegiate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, where he has taught since 1968. He served as Anthropology Department chair from 1996 to 2006. In 1991 he was honored for his teaching by the university and the state of Michigan. In 1992 he received an excellence in teaching award from the College of Literature, Sciences, and the Arts of the University of Michigan. In 1999 the American Anthropological Association (AAA) awarded Professor Kottak the AAA/Mayfield Award for Excellence in the Undergraduate Teaching of Anthropology. In 2005 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 2008 to the National Academy of Sciences.

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Conrad Kottak’s articles have appeared in academic journals, including American Anthropologist, Journal of Anthropological Research, American Ethnologist, Ethnology, Human Organization, and Luso-Brazilian Review. He also has written for more popular journals, including Transaction/SOCIETY, Natural History, Psychology Today, and General Anthropology.

In recent research projects, Kottak and his colleagues have investigated the emergence of ecological awareness in Brazil, the social context of deforestation and biodiversity conservation in Madagascar, and popular participation in economic development planning in northeastern Brazil. Professor Kottak has been active in the University of Michigan’s Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life, supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. In that capacity, for a research project titled “Media, Family, and Work in a Middle-Class Midwestern Town,” Kottak and his colleague Lara Descartes have investigated how middle-class families draw on various media in planning, managing, and evaluating their choices and solutions with respect to the competing demands of work and family. That research is the basis of his recent book Media and Middle Class Moms: Images and Realities of Work and Family (Descartes and Kottak 2009, Routledge/Taylor and Francis).

Conrad Kottak appreciates comments about his books from professors and students. He can be reached by e-mail at the following Internet address: ckottak@bellsouth.net.