

Use and Abuse of Cultural Elements in Multicultural Advertising

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THE USE OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS in advertising targeted to minority segments can help get the message through—but it certainly does not guarantee success. Furthermore, the misuse or overuse of this type of tool can be counterproductive and negatively affect consumers' perceptions of brands. First and foremost, advertisers must ensure that their multicultural advertising is easy to understand and engaging, generates the desired associations with brands, and motivates consumers to take some sort of action—just as they do when developing their mainstream communication.

There is much evidence that tells us that targeted advertising is generally more effective than commercials borrowed from the general market. There is no doubt about it. The problem is that we—and this includes all of us: marketing, advertising, and research professionals—are sometimes so focused on looking for those cultural elements that we take less care of the other elements that an advertisement must have to break through.

Far more important than having a culturally relevant *format* is to have an advertisement with a culturally relevant *content*. In the end, we must not forget that Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asians are, primarily, consumers . . . *that happen to be of multicultural origin*. As do Caucasians, they look for specific attributes in products and services. We should first focus on communicating on these attributes and then see whether we can do it more effectively in a culturally relevant way.

The worst scenario is perhaps when we actually misuse these cultural elements. The line between cultural cues and cultural stereotypes is extremely fine and, unfortunately, very easy to cross if one does not have trusted sources of information or advice. For example, commercials that generalize the idea that minority segments mainly live in low-income urban areas, or advertisements that use African-American characters with specific (and frequently stereotyped) body shapes are likely to generate negative reactions among consumers.

When considering Hispanics, it is common knowledge that family is the most important aspect in life. Using family concepts in commercials can be positive, especially for some product categories. However, overemphasizing family concepts can make advertisements look unreal and hence generate rejection or be misleading. As a group of moms once said after evaluating a commercial in a qualitative study, "The ad was great in telling us how to be good parents." When prompted about the advertised brand and its initially intended message though, there was an absolute silence in the room.

The overuse of cultural elements can also generate undesired consequences. Let's look at Hispanics and their passion for soccer. Yes, we all know that soccer is the number one game among Latino consumers. But what happens when many brands in different categories, or even within the same industry, use soccer-related concepts in their commercials? Little or no differentiation is achieved.

A question that might be helpful to ask ourselves before we start developing any culture-specific advertising is, what does being culturally relevant mean in the first place? Can one concept be culturally relevant to an entire cultural segment?

The answer is yes and no. Yes, there are several concepts that are relevant across entire cultures, but often these concepts are more important to some subsegments than to others, or they are just expressed in many different ways by people within the same ethnicity. The key to address this issue effectively is to truly acknowledge the diversity within minority segments.

Among African-Americans, for instance, there can be huge differences between pre- and post-civil-rights era consumers. And can we really talk about an "Asian-American" market? Japanese, Filipino, and Indian consumers can be diametrically different from each other, and within each nationality.

Hispanics may be the segment that has been analyzed in more detail in recent years. Today, marketers are aware of the differences among first, second, or third generation consumers—or among levels of acculturation or Spanish/English language dominance. However, even within this group, we cannot assume that all Spanish-speaking Hispanics are part of a monolithic subculture.

A lifestyle segmentation conducted by Millward Brown last year clearly described five typologies of Hispanics that are different in a diverse array of dimensions, regardless of whether they speak Spanish or English predominantly. Millward Brown has segmented the U.S. Hispanic market into five groups: Social, Progressive, Go-getter, Virtuous, and Pragmatic consumers. Although there are similarities in some aspects of their lives, consumers in each segment have values and lifestyles that differentiate them from people in other groups significantly. These

differences go beyond language and traditional acculturation variables.

Surprisingly, the current presidential race has helped the public better understand many of the factors emphasized above. As there are many different trends and political colors among Caucasians, so there are among and within minority segments. As happened in the business world a few years ago, the increased number of multicultural voters has prompted candidates to finally take a closer look at these groups.

In conclusion, we can say that cultural elements do help make advertising more relevant to minority groups. However, we need to be careful when using them. We must not forget that they are just a tool to make the message more relevant, not the message itself. Cultural elements must be relevant to the brand or the message we are trying to communicate, and they need to be well integrated into the story of the advertisement to make real sense to consumers.

The basic advertising principles that guide the development of mainstream communication are equally valid for the work we do with multicultural segments. Ignoring them will result in great advertisements that talk about the Hispanic, African-American, or Asian cultures, but say nothing about the advertised brands or products. **JAR**

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