

Acculturation In Marketing To Latinos In The US

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ABSTRACT

Latinos in the U.S. are one of the most rapidly expanding customer segments with almost one trillion dollars in expected purchasing power in 2010 and growing almost ten times faster than the rest of the population (US Census 2010). Moreover, Latinos are expected to become one third of the people living in the U.S. around mid-century, and about half of the California residents by that date (Berkowitz, Bao & Allaway, 2005). This paper is part of a larger research study about the perception and attitudes of Latinos receiving messages about environmental sustainability. By reviewing selected literature and previous research studies in this manuscript the authors examine whether or not acculturation may become a pivotal factor in designing an effective promotional campaign geared towards this target market. Acculturation is the process of embracing the culture of a host nation while keeping the culture and values of the country of origin, and it has many intricacies since it depends on the personal attitude of the individual, how long they have lived in the host country, as well as the level of interaction at work and within the local community. If companies want to effectively engage the Latino ethnic group and make them loyal customers, they have to understand the various levels of acculturation, and consider using the adequate message that respects their culture and country of origin, as well as the suitable language (Spanish or English or both) to reach their goal.

INTRODUCTION

Hispanics are one of the fastest growing ethnic group in the US, and according to the 2010 U.S. Census the total number of Hispanics reached 50.4 million people, equivalent to 16.3% of the total population. In California alone, there are more than 14 million Latinos that represent 37.6% of the state population. What is truly representative is that the Latino population grew 43% from 2000 to 2010, whereas the non-Latinos expanded only 4.9%, which means Latinos grew nearly ten times faster than the rest of the US population (2010 Census). One major reason for this is that Hispanics have much higher birth rates than the general population. Moreover, the US Bureau of the Census recognizes five major racial groups: Whites, Blacks, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. Hispanics therefore, are considered an ethnic group, not a race (2010 Census). Most Hispanics identified themselves as white but some are black. These facts bring numerous challenges as well as opportunities to reach this lucrative market. Hispanics have now a purchasing power of more than 1 trillion dollars which is over 9% of the total US purchasing power (Liesse, 2008) that makes them a very attractive target market for most companies. The four major subgroups of Latinos are Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics, including people from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Spain (Herbig, 1998).

Despite their differences, Hispanic Americans often share strong family values, a need for respect, brand loyalty, and a keen interest in product quality (Kotler and Keller, 2009). For this reason, numerous studies have been made to try to understand how this segment of the population differs from the rest, and most importantly, what marketing strategies and efforts are more effective. Marketers are trying to reach this target market using different promotional techniques, but they need to be mindful of the subtleties within the Latino groups, to be successful, the most important being language and country of origin, which are defined by the level of acculturation.

ACCULTURATION

Acculturation takes place as a process of embracing the host's country culture, including language, attitudes and behaviors. (Kim, Laroche & Joy, 1990). In other words, it is the integration of the individual's own culture with the one of the host country. As alluded before, Latinos come from a wide variety of countries, predominantly Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico, hence they bring those cultural values and merge them with those of the host country. Acculturation is a very complex process that is difficult to understand, and even more important, to use it to create more effective marketing programs is a challenge. Acculturation is different for each person based on their attitudes to embrace the local culture, but at the same time keep their own. Other factors include the education level and the stage in the life cycle. Isabel Valdés (2000) affirms that the process of acculturation takes place at all levels of the social interaction and further highlights the importance of understanding its dynamics and the way these individuals interact, communicate and work, for companies to successfully reach this segment. It is essential for a successful marketing campaign to be in tune with their culture at all message levels: symbolic, explicit, visual and subliminal. For this reason, advertisers who want to reach Latinos should consider the complete range of acculturation, and its ever changing dynamics. Furthermore, globalization has driven this process further based on new telecommunications technologies, (i.e., the Internet, wireless communications, satellite TV, mobile devices such as iPhone® and Android® based platforms) which accelerates getting ideas and attitudes for the person living in the host nation. Interestingly, these same devices such as Facebook and twitter also help immigrants to stay in touch with their family and friends in their country of origin, sort of a "reverse acculturation" process. There is no current literature about how this technological change may affect or alter the acculturation process.

For the acculturation process to take place, there are two competing paradigms: 1) a uni-dimensional model for the immigrant who travels alone and is submerged in the local culture and economy, and in time loses his culture (Laroche et al. 1998) and 2) a multi-dimensional model in which the person embraces the host culture but at the same time keeps many elements (such as language) of his/her own country of origin. The validation of this model has gain tremendous relevancy for the marketing of products and services to Latinos residing in the US. Integration is the process of adopting elements of the new culture while keeping facets of the old. Assimilation on the other hand, consists of losing one's culture and adopting the one of the host nation. Separation means that people form their own groups within a particular nation, and finally marginalization is to relinquish to both the new and old cultures (Palumbo & Teich, 2004). Notwithstanding, marketers need to develop value propositions that combine both models in order to be effective, i.e. cultural elements of the country of origin as well as the host nation.

Research shows that Hispanics are acculturating into the American society even while retaining their own value (Palumbo & Teich, 2004). The longer they live in the US, the greater or higher rates of the adoption of American attitudes, customs, language and beliefs occurs. It is interesting that immigrants go through a process of translation (relating a concept to their culture back home) and adaptation (learn to live in the new culture), which is meaningful for marketers, too. On the other hand, if the person arrived in America at a mature or old age, it is less likely he/she will embrace the new culture, and it will be more difficult to integrate into the new society, find work, get involved with the community, and the like. The opposite is also true, if the person arrived younger to the US and/or was born here, the more likely that individual will get immersed onto the society very easily.

According to Penaloza (1994), there are other factors in the environment that determine acculturation, especially family and friends who can contribute to this process and facilitate or hinder the adaptation. While sometimes Hispanics tend to form groups and keep their own activities and attitudes, and more importantly speak only Spanish, that does not help the acculturation process. Many tend to get more involved in the social and professional activities that help the assimilation with the local society.

There is abundant research about the implementation of code-switching messages for Hispanics, consisting of mixing both English and Spanish in a slogan, to try to increase the persuasion process (Luna & Peracchio, 2005). From a sociolinguistic perspective, the pilot program concluded that this model increases the awareness and selective attention of the bilingual consumer.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The motivation for this manuscript is to explore current literature in the acculturation process of immigrants, and more specifically the ones related to Hispanics, to evaluate if this process can be relevant in designing marketing strategies to this lucrative segment. Some of the elements under consideration include the influence of family and friends, the emphasis on family values and tradition, the level of acculturation of the individual, the language proficiency, and the peer and social pressure in choosing a particular product or brand. The purpose of this research is to distinguish specific elements of the acculturation process in successfully marketing to Latinos in the US.

RESEARCH METHOD

This is exploratory research to determine if acculturation requires further study as a pivotal factor in determining a marketing strategy for a company that wants to reach Latinos living in the United States. It involves the analysis of previous research in this field and compares results to try to arrive at concrete issues about what specific aspects of the acculturation process is needed in marketing to this ethnic group.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The cultural implications are crucial for ethnic marketers if they want to reach their target market effectively, and make sure promotional messages are correctly interpreted and perceived by the receptor. In some occasions in advertising it happens that some concepts and ideas are misinterpreted or lost in translation, and even considered insults or aggravations to certain people and cultures. Consumers behave in a particular way based on their cultural attributes such as values and religion, which could greatly impact their perception and reaction towards buying a product or not. The integral perception of a product or service is always perceived as a result of both the cultural and environmental context. Furthermore, the level of satisfaction based on performance is influenced by the individual's beliefs. Individuals perceive the world through their own cultural lens (Ueltschy et al., 2003).

Companies need to include a plethora of tools and symbols when targeting ethnic groups, and entice individuals toward the purchase of the product or service, and do not limit themselves to use only the language as a determining factor for good results. Even after a well advanced level of acculturation, the use of symbols such as family gatherings or values is a powerful tool to entice Hispanic customers to buy, since it has a strong influence in the perception of the company making the promotion or offer, and its respect to their culture.

Although family continues to be a significantly more important factor for Hispanics, as well as other behaviors and attitudes, it is also true that many stereotypes have emerged that are not necessarily applicable any more, such as all moms stay at home cooking and do not work, for instance. Therefore, the marketer wants to make sure of the relevancy of the cultural symbols utilized in the promotional message.

The level of acculturation of a target consumer is important because it identifies the level of understanding of the product or service as well as the degree in which the consumer is familiar with the features and benefits in the US context, e.g. to understand the advantage of sending photos via a wireless phone to a person who just recently started using the cell phone, or do the grocery shopping via Internet, and the like.

CONCLUSIONS

Latinos living in the U.S. are one of the fastest growing minority group and will continue to lead as a powerful force in demanding products and services. They can no longer be identified as one segment but companies need to understand the differences of the subcultures mentioned in this paper, especially the country of origin and the level of acculturation, if they want to successfully reach the profit potential of this group. Companies also need to ponder the marketing implications of familism for the Latino consumer, especially the implications in attitudes, behaviors and the decision-making process of products and services.

The level of acculturation seems to be an important factor in developing marketing strategies for Latinos, hence companies should know the specific characteristics of the target customer they are trying to reach and adapt their strategies correspondingly, e.g. using the Spanish language, Latin music or food, and so forth.

The question then may also be whether or not to use Spanish language for a marketing message to the Latinos, and clearly the studies shows that, while it may effectively reach a good number of Latinos, it also could hinder the reception for many others who prefer to use English as their main language. Another aspect that may affect the acculturation process is the internal communication system used by Latinos, both within the family and with other families and friends, and their influence in the purchasing decision of products and services. The “word of mouth” marketing tends to be more prevalent in Latinos than other ethnic groups. (Corona, 2008),

Finally firms must work closely with Latinos in order to better understand their values and norms, symbols, and to create a positive impact and a better marketing positioning for their products and brands.

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