

Back to Basics

As I was preparing my remarks for today I tried to develop some novel scheme or agenda that would wow you and would cause you to be astonished at my insight and knowledge.

Unfortunately I failed to achieve this goal. I recognized that although our company successfully serves a very large Latino market; as an example we are the largest convenience operator in El Paso, and one of the largest operators in the Southwest with over 300 stores in towns and cities where the Latino population ranges from 40% to 80%; that in fact you in this audience are also very successful operators and marketers to the Latino community and it would be somewhat arrogant of me to try to school you. So I decided to just re-enforce the basics as I view them. I do think that sometimes we try to overwork an issue and sometimes end up outsmarting ourselves. Thus, please forgive me if my remarks seem too quaint.

To me the basics of marketing to the Latino or any culture are based in the fundamental recognition that there are not silver bullets and one size does not fit all. There are clear differences between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd generation Americans. There are also clear differences between Puerto Rican Americans, Cuban Americans, Mexican Americans, and Guatemalan Americans to name a few. These are two of the basics on which I would like to focus.

In regard to the difference between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd generations, as an analogy I tried to put myself and my family in a similar situation. Let's presume my family and I moved to Japan. Based upon the travels I have had with my family I can make the following assertions. Although we would want to learn and try the local foods, etc. when we go shopping we would probably feel most comfortable buying brands and products with which we are familiar and recognize. In addition to the local fare we will probably buy Coca-Cola or Pepsi, apples or oranges, steak or salmon, Hersheys or Mars bars. Also, we would probably frequent and be most comfortable in a store in which we can communicate in our own language. We would feel we would make fewer mistakes in a store where we understood the clerk and we were confident the clerk understood us. I would assert the same applies to 1st generation immigrants or visitors into our country.

We have found in our stores that many customers prefer the brands they recognize from home such as Coca-Cola, Budweiser, Jarritos, etc. and they also feel more comfortable transacting in Spanish. Thus, it is critical that we provide a variety of products from home and it may be more important for our clerks to have Spanish as a first language rather than English as a first language.

Now, based upon my experience, if my children were raised in Japan and went to English/Japanese schools, when they grew up I believe they would probably experiment much more than Karen and I. They would try the squid on a stick, they would try the octopus sushi, and they would try pickles with rice. But, also I am sure they would appreciate a good old Hersheys bar and Coca-Cola now and then. Also, they would likely be able to communicate effectively enough to be able to buy these local goods from local merchants who only spoke Japanese. But, when they bought the basics of milk, etc., or were experimenting with new food they did not know they would likely feel more comfortable in a store which spoke their first language, English, such that they could be sure they communicated and were not surprised to find they had bought pigs brains when they thought they were buying feta cheese. I think the same applies to 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants and visitors to our country. As they have lived in our country their tastes broaden, thus we need to assure we provide a broad array of all our American delicacies but we also need to continue to supply the “old” dependable products and provide someone who can communicate with them effectively in their first language to avoid mistakes and surprises.

Finally, by the time my grandchildren are born and raised in Japan, they likely would be fluent in the culture and language and in many ways would be no different than their Japanese friends with the exception that they would still like to periodically enjoy the strange American delicacies which their grandparents love, the foods and traditions of the old country. Thus, I believe that no matter how long our Latino friends have lived in our country they will always love the delicacies and traditions of the “old” country. Thus, through all generations we must provide these iconic products even as the communication barriers dissipate.

The next basic is that in Japan the best marketers in Tokyo have probably recognized that New Yorkers act differently and have different tastes than Californians who act differently and have different tastes than us Texans. Can you imagine someone thinking that all Americans are alike? Crazy!! Thus, as U.S. marketers to the Latino community it should be obvious to us that there are different regional preferences from Puerto Rican Americans to Cuban Americans to Mexican Americans to Spanish Americans. Thus, I am certain the products from home we find in successful convenience stores in Miami are different than the products we provide in El Paso which are different than the products found in New York. This is only natural and basic.

Thus, although my points are not very revolutionary I do think the most effective way for us to design our marketing programs for our Latino customers is to follow the Golden Rule. Provide our products and a shopping environment in a way which we would enjoy if we moved to Japan and raised our families there. Think about what you would expect as a customer in that environment and treat your customers here as well as you would want to be treated there.