

Ethnocentricity in Multicultural America

Three mothers—an African-American, a Hispanic, and an Asian—go to the supermarket to buy baby supplies. Different races, different cultures, same basic need: to feed and care for their child. Considering Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, fundamental needs exist and must be fulfilled regardless of ethnicity. And yet, among different segments, some are clearly *ethnocentric*, and as marketers, we must not lose sight of this fact.

Defined as “evaluating other races and cultures by criteria specific to one’s own,”¹ the concept of ethnocentricity often carries negative connotations. It is usually viewed as a pitfall when seeking objectivity in a given situation. In a marketing context, it should not be a drawback at all. To put a marketing spin on the definition, think of an ethnocentric consumer as one who “evaluates products by criteria specific to his/her own culture.” Viewing ethnocentricity in this light can lead to strong consumer insights.

As marketers in a multicultural economy, we often focus on the differences between consumer segments. However, unexpected similarities among segments can help fine-tune our marketing efforts. Let’s compare a Cuban immigrant in Miami with a Black resident in Atlanta’s suburbs—what might these two distinctive individuals have in common? If you see past their differences, you will find the answer lurking beneath the surface.

The U.S. Hispanic Consumer

Examining Hispanic consumers has become increasingly popular given the current and expected shifts in American demographics. By 2050, about one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic.² Furthermore, Hispanic buying power soared to \$700 billion in 2006, and is expected to reach \$1 trillion by 2008.³ Naturally, these numbers have pushed Hispanic consumer segmentation to become increasingly sophisticated; nevertheless, the longest standing and arguably most relevant segmentation variable is the level of acculturation, ranging from Spanish language and Hispanic culture dominant on one end of the spectrum, to fully assimilated and English language dominant on the other end.⁴

The African-American Consumer

The increased attention on Hispanic consumers is welcome news to multicultural marketers, but somewhat frustrating to those who have focused on the African-American community for years. A recent study by Packaged Facts shows that by 2012, African-American buying power is expected to grow to \$1.1 trillion. These figures highlight the fact that the African-American segment also deserves the multicultural spotlight.

¹ *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

² *Analysis of Census Bureau data by William H.Frey, Brookings Institute, 2008.*

³ *Hispanic Market Overview*, GfK Roper Reports, July 10, 2008.

⁴ *Hispanic/Latino Market Profile*, Magazine Publishers of America, 2007.

Yet, marketers have been sluggish to acknowledge African Americans as a distinct and relevant consumer segment. For example, in an article heralding overdue research on African-American consumers, leading African-American market research expert Pepper Miller laments the "... ongoing struggle to convince marketers about the value of Blacks online."⁵ However, the recent 2008 study, "Black America Today," has produced insightful information regarding today's African-American segment:

- Seventy-nine percent preserve traditions associated with Black music, culture, and food.
- Sixty-four percent prefer businesses that give back to the Black community.
- African Americans are more than twice as likely to trust Black media as they are to trust mainstream media.
- Among African Americans age 13-74, 68 percent are online.
-Among Black teens, over 90 percent are online.
- Over 11 million visit Black Web sites or social networking sites.

One interesting variable that has been uncovered is the degree to which African Americans want to associate with other African Americans. For example, about 30 percent of African Americans prefer to associate with someone of their own race.⁶ Moreover, among African Americans/Blacks, two thirds say that ethnic identity is more important than national identity; they are "Black" first and "American" second.⁷

Marketing to Ethnocentric Audiences

The recent (or not so recent) Cuban immigrant living in Little Havana is most likely to be ethnocentric. Constrained by language barriers, and perhaps the recent nature of their immigration, his/her choices may be limited. The Cuban immigrant will naturally be drawn to Spanish language messages and information that touches on their Caribbean roots. In the wake of desegregation, the Black suburb resident in Atlanta is more likely ethnocentric by *choice*, not limitations. For example, instead of moving to traditionally white suburbs, there are affluent Blacks in the South who have chosen to live in new, predominantly black, suburbs.⁸ This type of choice serves to perpetuate an ethnocentric mindset. So whether ethnocentric by choice or circumstance, these multicultural segments favor messaging that resonates with their culture.

Often, marketing to multicultural segments is watered down to a featured Black or Hispanic person in the commercial and a Spanish translation of the campaign's tagline. Thus, when marketers are asked, *are we reaching multicultural audiences?* they can nod yes and check it off the To Do list.

⁵ Miller, Pepper, "The Truth About Black America," Advertising Age, July 15, 2008.

⁶ *Black America Today: The Future, The Past, The Present*, Radio One, June, 2008.

⁷ *African-American/Black Market Profile*, 2008.

⁸ LaFleur, Jennifer, "Black Wealth Blossoms in Suburbs." *Dallas Morning News*. June 25, 2005.

But we cannot afford to underestimate multicultural segments and their nuances, since “over the next four decades, the non-Hispanic white population will get older, eventually going into decline between 2030 and 2040. Minorities will become a majority of the population aged zero to 17 years first – in about 15 years – and move up through age groups from there.” (The Wall Street Journal, August 14, 2008)

Through the ethnocentricity lens, certain marketing tactics are more effective than others. When marketing to ethnocentric consumers:

- ✓ Brands that are identified as “theirs” will likely perform better than multicultural versions of major brands (e.g. Boost Mobile vs. Sprint Cellular advertising that simply uses ethnic actors).
- ✓ They are more receptive to communications in “their” language (e.g. Spanish).
- ✓ They are more likely to be reached in “their” communities (e.g. community-based and local marketing vs. mass advertising).
- ✓ They are most likely to be reached with messages that authentically embrace “their” culture (e.g. KFC’s recent pride360 promotion: <http://www.kfc.com/pride360/default.asp>; McDonald’s 365 Black and MeEncanta micro sites: <http://www.mcdonalds.com/usa/fun.html>).
- ✓ They respond positively to well-known African-American and Hispanic icons. Moreover, these artists have strong crossover power and mass appeal—selling to General Market audiences with equal fervor (e.g. Beyoncé Knowles, Rihanna, Snoo Dogg, Jennifer Lopez, and Daddy Yankee).

Conclusion

Not all consumers are ethnocentric of course. This fact has possibly led to the broad-brush idea that African-Americans are “covered” by General Market advertising. Indeed, oversimplified, ethnic sounding messages may even be offensive to minority culture consumers who are more acculturated/less ethnocentric. On the other hand, ignoring consumers that are indisputably ethnocentric can prove detrimental to a brand.

The Black suburb resident and the Cuban immigrant both want to know their preferred brands understand and respect who they are. Look at it this way: to meet their basic needs, we can view both groups through the same lens, but to take our consumer’s image from a sepia tone to brighter hue, we must consider all factors, including ethnocentricity.

Far from being an obstacle, ethnocentricity is an opportunity—a window into the particular needs and motivations of specific consumer targets. Today’s media fragmentation demands deeper one-to-one relationships between brands and consumers; therefore, by targeting these ethnocentric consumers with a tailored message, we can build relevant marketing programs that get results.

