

Reprint

Accelerating Your Multicultural Communications

By Michael Bramwell

Multicultural communications can be a powerful addition to the armamentarium of the healthcare marketer. Often the most “successful” campaigns do not reach as wide an audience as possible because of a failure to understand either cultural or linguistic gaps when communicating with ethnic audiences. These people are a fast-growing segment of the population in the United States, and particularly in the area of health, they face huge disparities that call for proactive, aggressive, and ongoing multicultural healthcare communications campaigns.

Why address multicultural communications? “From a business standpoint, it just makes sense. When 30 percent of your audience is ethnic, it no longer becomes a risk to address this audience, but a priority,” said Walter Arenzon, President and Creative Director, Farmacopea, Inc. He was speaking at the Women’s Health and Wellness Conference held in Iselin, New Jersey, July 15-16.

Sex, Drugs, and Salsa Music

Effective multicultural communications, however, isn’t just about conquering language barriers. It’s about understanding and respecting cultural cues and reaching out to audiences in ways that appeal to them. According to Arenzon, “Multicultural communications is about sex, drugs, and salsa music.”

“It becomes about sex when you recognize that 50 percent of HIV/AIDS patients are ethnic. It becomes about drugs when you recognize that many ethnic patients self-treat. In fact, 40 percent of patients with diabetes self-treat because of ingrained cultural beliefs, which can pose serious problems. Finally, it becomes about salsa music when you recognize that while these people do have a commonality, they also live and experience life differently from each other,” he continued.

Effective Multicultural Communications

In the U.S., cultural obstacles abound. Ideas and beliefs that counter traditional marketing practices are often found ingrained in ethnic audiences.

Effective multicultural communications requires that healthcare marketers understand the societal, historical, and cultural factors that impact their target audiences.

“Spanish people might speak English fluently and be totally ingrained into mainstream culture,” Arenzon explained, “but Spanish people make love in Spanish and get sick in Spanish. Simply understanding this can be the difference between a good marketing campaign and a great one,” he continued.

As an example of effective multicultural communications, Arenzon presented a campaign for diabetes healthcare. One component of the campaign was an ad that featured a family, with the mother as the focal point.

“Here we made the mother to be a caterer. A caterer is the typical ethnic business owner,” explained Arenzon. “The caterer also represents an authority figure. The caterer tells people what to eat. In this picture, she is surrounded by her family members. This is representative of the typical Spanish family dynamic. In this population, health is a family affair.”

The ad was deliberately made to be very accessible to ethnic audiences. Arenzon offered, “This ad was designed to be a dialog, not a monolog. This ad was designed to empower the person that reads it. The astute multicultural marketer knows that, chances are, if an ethnic person does not have type 2 diabetes, he or she knows someone who does.”

Talk to Ethnic Women

Notably, the campaign also acknowledged the importance of women in ethnic populations. Unfortunately, these women have a great need to be educated about a spectrum of healthcare issues, being at high risk for osteoporosis, cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and the constant threat of gender disparity. Domestic violence, abandonment, and lack of elder care are other concerns.

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“Women are the great healthcare communicators in ethnic families. Men don’t talk about healthcare so talk to the women,” suggested Arenzon. “These women are mothers, healers, cooks, and teachers who never retire. When mentalities need to be changed, they are where you begin,” he added.

Addressing the issues that are at the forefront of ethnic audiences, such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, is also effective healthcare marketing strategy. “If healthcare problems are addressed in a way that respects cultural cues, people will listen,” said Arenzon. “Marketers who strive to be culturally competent in a culturally incompetent environment will have the highest chance of reaching audiences successfully,” he concluded.

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