



America's ethnic mix: From melting pot to Salad Bowl

by Steven Frissora, Partner, Arcanna, Inc.

That treasured description of America as the great melting pot is no longer true. It hasn't been true, in fact, for decades.

A more accurate description would be America as a great salad bowl, where each of the many ingredients are tossed together while retaining its own identity.

Marketers have for decades subscribed to the melting pot concept, demographically segmenting their efforts and their messages according to one location, one age range and one set of race. That method of targeting is in need of dramatic change.

In the salad bowl society in America, we share many common values that make for the American Dream. But immigrant populations also retain key aspects of their heritage, which is evident in the foods they eat.

A recent New York Times article quotes an immigrant parent on the challenges of assimilation. "Because we are trying to raise our daughter as bi-cultural, much in our family is up for grabs, from the food we eat — and what we say before and after eating it," the parent lamented.

This is an exemplary opportunity for marketers to develop offerings that speak to the various heritages that these consumers identify with. It is becoming clear that they certainly don't identify with just one, as many marketers had previously assumed. There is already a solid trend afoot in fusion foods--the blending of flavors and ideas from different cultures and ethnicities to develop brand new dishes (e.g. Taco Pizza, Mango Green Tea), even new food categories (e.g. Tex-Mex, Pan-Asian).

What are the possibilities in serving these new markets? Between the levels of choice and authenticity that today's consumers are demanding, the innovations are near endless. Moreover, as foods

that are of rooted in the histories of one culture continue to migrate to the palates of other cultures, and into the mainstream, the profit potential provides a solid business case for more experimentation, not less.

The first step will be for marketers to better understand these markets and how to effectively connect with them. A July, 2007 Washington Post article cautions us that "Multicultural Marketing 101 does not understand such nuances, just as it does not understand the animus of many middle-class and upper-income blacks against advertising campaigns that seem to portray all black people as hip-hop artists or sports figures. It seems to think that all Asians are from Japan, China or Korea, and all Spanish-speaking people are from Mexico, and all Mexicans are alike."

The challenge marketers face today begins with recognizing that differences exist. We then need to do a better job of understanding them, so we can speak to them in a way that reflects that understanding of their uniqueness and by offering products that serve their tastes with authenticity.

After all, today's dynamic changes in America's demographics are unprecedented and those specialty foods companies that ignore the demands of these rich and varied audiences will do so at the price of market share for many years ahead.

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