



Tackling the Multicultural Issues in Internet Marketing

Different ethnic and cultural segments of our populations flock to the Internet to seek information relevant to individual beliefs, cultural practices and interests. Marketers can support these concepts by developing culturally segmented and appropriate content.

By Daria Blackwell

Marketers around the world are grappling with the rapidly changing environment of the Internet. What started as an “information superhighway” has become a global social network. But how is that network aligning? Is it forming along the traditional lines of how people relate face-to-face? Are people networking with others like themselves or are they seeking out different types of relationships? Or, as the novelty of dramatic new applications wears off, are they really still just searching for information. That is what we set out to explore.

Global multicultural vs. U.S. multicultural

As a global medium, the Internet is a multicultural phenomenon: anyone can access Web sites just about anywhere in the world. But not everywhere in the world is “multicultural.” Whereas Europe is multicultural, most countries in the EU are not because their populations

represent predominantly one culture. Each country has its own set of learned beliefs and behaviors and one set of laws that govern its communications.

The United States, on the other hand, is a microcosm of global cultural influences that affects how we relate with each other and with the brands around us, and this interrelation is not duplicated anywhere else in the world ... yet. Countries with open door immigration policies, such as the UK, Canada, Australia, and France, are experiencing a similar diverse ethnic influx, but the influences are nowhere near the complexity we have in the US.

US marketers have long known that, to reach certain audiences effectively, they must develop culturally relevant communications and reach out into the appropriate communities using the voice and the media most respected by their cultures. But what about the Internet? It doesn't reach out to consumers in the traditional way. The Internet serves the needs of information seekers and social gatherers.

Do we need to do things differently or are there common bonds that unite everyone in this cyber universe?

Who is online and how?

In a further sign of the United States' diversity, non-whites comprise a majority in almost one-third of the most-populous counties in the country and in nearly one in 10 of all 3,100 counties, according to a recent reanalysis of census results. The population in total is growing at an increasingly fast pace. Although immigration is contributing to some degree, the fastest growth is attributable to high birth rates among minority populations. In fact, the government estimates that, by the year 2050, people of color will be the majority. We need to reach these growing segments effectively with specific disease and treatment information as the population dynamics shift.

The good news is that more and more households are online, and many are searching for health information. A 2006 Pew survey of people 18 years of age or older showed that use of the Internet is reported by 74 percent of white Americans, 61 percent of African Americans, and 80 percent of English-speaking Hispanics. Asian Americans are among the most connected, with 85 percent of the English-speaking population online.

Being born outside the United States appears to be an independent factor associated with decreased likelihood of using the Internet. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, more than 75 percent of Latinos who are English-dominant or bilingual use the Internet, while only 32 percent of Spanish-dominant Hispanic adults do so.

Because Latinos who are online more often than not acquired access more recently, their connections tend to be higher speed and broader band allowing delivery of more sophisticated content. The AOL Latino 2006 Hispanic Cyberstudy found that 77 percent of those online have broadband access. Telemundo cites 80 percent access to broadband among Latinos online.

Although use of the Internet is substantial among all segments, the differences among segments are notable, according to the U.S. Internet Industry Association (usiia).

A demographic view of the Internet

Asian Americans are the most in-depth users of multiple Internet tools that can keep them in touch. They are more likely to engage in multiple Internet activities on a daily basis, including e-mail, instant messaging (IM), voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP), e-commerce, and Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Social networking sites are often reported to be integrated into their daily lives. Demographically, this segment tends to be more educated, with higher income, and skews younger. Because they are so

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deeply involved, Asian Americans online seek highly secure arrangements with effective privacy agreements. This is especially important in conveying health information.

Hispanics embrace technology when it supports a clear purpose, such as family ties. The importance of staying in touch with family is also clearly reflected in the higher than average use of mobile phones. Multigenerational homes and family-centric life support a high level of interest in health information online. Hispanic Internet users look up health information at a higher rate (61 percent) than average (55 percent). They also report a higher interest in monitoring chronic health conditions, such as high-risk pregnancies online, as well as other telehealth communications.

The strong growth in Internet use among the African American segment is driven largely by women, which is contrary to other ethnic and cultural segments. African Americans on the Internet are less likely to use the Internet on a daily basis (less e-mail use), spend less time online, and access the Internet more for entertainment and religious information than for other uses. Video programming services and music downloads are among the services most sought. Younger African Americans who are online are more likely than other groups to report using the Internet to search for jobs and enroll in online courses.

Many ethnic social networks and online communities have quickly sprung up and the uptake of Web delivery of culturally competent and relevant content is increasing almost exponentially. Just search Google Groups and you'll see how many ethnic communities are forming in virtual reality. Unfortunately, some of the sites created to capture share with these increasingly powerful audience segments also deliver content that is inappropriate and may even be offensive due to stereotypical portrayal of the audience (latino.aol.com/ has been cited as an example by young Latinas).

Behavior blurring across generations

Perhaps one of the most interesting trends is that Web use behavior is blurring across the many cultural segments and is skewing toward similar generational trends across cultures and ethnicities. What makes people go online in the first

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place, how often they go online, and how they use the Internet tend to be similar across cultures – with younger people adopting readily and expecting technologically advanced content while older people go online less often and access content-based delivery such as health information and e-mail communications. As people age, however, they take their acquired behaviors with them, so although few Americans over age 70 use the Internet today, Boomers are heavy users and will take that participation into retirement.

Where the difference lies is in the culturally rooted behaviors that take over once the individual is online. To explore this further, we assembled working groups within the agency using our diverse employee base to conduct some community-based research and to seek understanding of the behavioral differences in approaches to Internet and the implications for development of content.

If we explore the “gender culture,” in general, men tend to be more social online, using the networks to gain career contacts. Women are more information driven, view networking as a chore, and choose to join when asked, networking with people they truly care about. As a result, men tend to have a lot more “friends” in the social networks. Several participants in our survey noted that there are quite a few men who list more than 500 friends, whereas the women tend to hover around 25. These are generalities, but the interesting aspect is that it parallels behaviors we’ve noted in non-online behaviors. For example, in women’s organizations, like HBA, networking is the #1 skill women feel they need to improve.

In focusing on health, we found that women drive the information-seeking for the family, and that people of culturally-similar backgrounds tended to behave similarly. For example, Asian women tend to research every aspect of a diagnosis and treatment until they are satisfied they understand it clearly. Hispanic women reported trusting their physicians’ judgments and used the Internet to learn more about the disease and the treatment prescribed – but not to question the recommendations. They do so for themselves and for the immediate and extended families.

Women of African-American or Caribbean black descent tend to distrust their physicians – and medicine in general – so their use of the Internet is to corroborate the diagnoses and treatment recommendations with family and friends, and to verify that what is being recommended is indeed an appropriate course. Understanding these differences, which are rooted not in age or degree of acculturation but in a set of deep personal beliefs, helps to structure Web content that will satisfy the needs of the audience.

As the makeup of the population changes, it is likely that mass communications to the consumer will lose relevance at an increasing pace. The Internet, with its ease of tailoring and simple ability to deliver targeted relevant information to those seeking it, will take healthcare communications to its next evolutionary state.

Examining the conclusions

Different ethnic and cultural segments of our populations have been flocking to the Internet, seeking different experiences based on their cultural practices and interests. The desire to have information that is relevant to individual beliefs supports the concept of developing culturally segmented and appropriate content. One primary deterrent to use of the Internet may not be ethnicity but, rather, lack of facility in the English language. As a result, despite the current practice of simply translating content, the true best practice in Internet marketing is to market in culture – not just in language. ■

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