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Reaching out to Hispanic consumers

Dedicated campaigns target fast-growing customer base

March 19, 2012 | By Mark Brandau

When Taco Bell last month adopted its first new slogan in 12 years, "Live Más," the quick-service Mexican brand was looking to make the tagline as much about who their customers are these days as it is about how they eat.

"Even though it's a tagline, 'Live Más' is much more for us — it's about an experience and a way to live life," said chief executive Greg Creed. "So far it's really resonating with our customers."

The half-Spanish slogan — "más" means "more" — is likely to appeal to the U.S. Hispanic market and reflects one of several efforts restaurant chains are making to tap into that growing demographic.

U.S. Census figures show that Hispanics have led the way in the nation's population growth since 2000. Between 2000 and 2010, Hispanics increased their numbers by 15.2 million, accounting for more than half of the 27.3-million-person increase in the U.S. population. During that period, the Hispanic population grew 43 percent, compared with a 10-percent increase in population for the United States as a whole.

While many U.S. restaurant brands possess the goal of attracting more Hispanic customers, individual chains are pursuing a variety of different strategies and demonstrating how earlier niche marketing efforts have today blossomed into a broader advertising approach.

Some chains, for example, mix Spanish into their marketing message, like Taco Cabana does with its "Sí food" pun in its commercials.

Drew Madsen, president and chief operating officer of Darden Restaurants, said during an investor conference in February that the Red Lobster chain saw a long-term growth opportunity in reaching out to Latinos by "launching Spanish-language advertising and other multicultural marketing initiatives."

Others, like Denny's, partner with Hispanic personalities with crossover appeal, and completely remake ads for Spanish-language audiences rather than simply translating English-language messages.

And brands that always have served the Hispanic demographic specifically, like Pizza Patrón or El Pollo Loco, are seeking deeper connections by playing to those guests' pride in their heritage.

Mixed messages

Family-dining chain Denny's sought to engage its Hispanic customers — who account for about 25 percent of the chain's business — in the same way it has reached out to younger diners: through "branded entertainment" webisodes online.

The chain partnered with Cesar Millan, host of "Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan," to film an online video called "Skillet Whisperer with Cesar Millan," distributed on comedy website FunnyorDie.com. Millan helps customers tame Denny's Sizzlin' Skillets in two separate videos: one with a family of English-speaking actors and one in Spanish, recast with Hispanic actors. The Spanish-language version further clinches the campaign's authenticity with Hispanic viewers, said chief marketing officer Frances Allen.

"Just translating our general-market creative isn't going to have the same power of connection," Allen said. "We wanted to partner with an agency that could help us communicate our 'Always Open' positioning in a way that is more acculturated with the Hispanic market."

Denny's was keen to work with Millan because of his popular TV program and large Facebook following, as well as his appeal to most American demographic groups and his willingness to poke fun at his show, Allen said.

"It was the right kind of vehicle for us, as Cesar is a Hispanic personality that crosses over in the general market, and he was game to spoof his own show," she said.

After about one month, the Spanish-language version had been viewed more than 1 million times, while the English-language video had racked up slightly fewer than 1 million plays.

"It's an encouraging indicator that we picked a personality and used him in a way that crosses both the Hispanic and the general market," she said. "If you think of the proportion of Hispanic viewers to general-market viewers, we're thrilled."

The key to engaging a demographic group like Hispanic Americans through platforms like films, sports teams or celebrities like Millan is that "it has to be done in a genuine, authentic way," Allen said.

"For us, Cesar and the way he teaches and tames dogs on the 'Dog Whisperer' were a very amusing analogy to the way in which we wanted him to ham up the loud sizzle of our skillet," she said.

"Presenting that to the Hispanic community was more powerful because he can do Spanish in a very authentic way."

The power of cultural promotions

Authenticity matters most when marketing to Hispanic Americans, agreed Gary Stibel, founder and chief executive of New England Consulting Group. As such, restaurants can avoid appearing insensitive by realizing that "there is no such thing as a Hispanic" covering all Americans with Latino roots, he said. Rather, Hispanics are Americans with varied backgrounds who require varied messages, not just a translation of general-market messages.

"The worst thing you can do is treat them in messaging like they're different and not fully American," Stibel said. "If you're going to call them out in ads, put them on a pedestal, and make their involvement aspirational."

Dallas-based Pizza Patrón agreed, and plans to run three ad campaigns this year that celebrate Hispanic American heritage in hopes of recreating the connection it forged with 2007's Pizza por Pesos program, said brand director Andrew Gamm.

For that "cultural promotion," the chain accepted Mexican pesos as payment, and it has maintained the practice ever since the initial media frenzy five years ago.

The idea came from a need Pizza Patrón operators saw in their neighborhoods: Customers possessed Mexican currency left over from visits to Mexico, and wanted to use it at the restaurant, where 75 percent of transactions occur in Spanish, Gamm said.

"The best advice I could give anybody is to become a part of the community," he said. "You have to go out of your restaurant and be where they are, whether it's a church or school event or whatever, if you want to see that loyalty in return. It's much more difficult than writing a check to a radio station and running an ad in Spanish."

Pizza por Pesos, which offered no discount, increased same-store sales 50 percent in January 2007 and 34 percent in the first quarter of that year.

"Late last year, when we were developing our marketing calendar, we'd heard from our franchisees again and again, 'When are we going to do something that makes a connection like Pizza por Pesos?'" Gamm said. "We don't want to manufacture news, but we thought about what besides product- and price-related ads we could do."

The first promotion, set for early June, will celebrate the Spanish language, he said, followed by another campaign around July 4 that will recognize the history of immigration in America. In October the chain will reincorporate pesos by accepting them for its fundraising efforts for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

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