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Habla español?

Businesses try, but not all succeed
in marketing to local Latinos

BY KAREN BELLS | COURIER SENIOR EDITOR

Marketing and media efforts aimed at the local Hispanic community are much like the group itself -- relatively small but growing. "Only about 2 to 3 percent of this area is Hispanic," said Roberto Peraza, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Greater Cincinnati. But, he said, the number is growing rapidly. And the numbers are expected to keep growing, said Mike Robinson, owner of Montgomery-based La Verdad/Hispanic Marketing Solutions.

"Even though the greatest concentration of Hispanics is in places like California, Miami and Texas ... you'll find all the huge growth in Hispanic numbers in the Midwest -- Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan -- and places like North and South Carolina," said Robinson, who is Mexican-American.

In the Cincinnati area, the Hispanic population grew 120 percent from 1990 to 2000, Robinson said, while the white population grew 5 percent during the same period. Nationally, Hispanics accounted for 40 percent of the increase in total population during that time period, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

At 13 percent of the population, Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the country. All that growth means plenty of opportunity for businesses that want to get their message to the Hispanic community -- and also plenty of opportunity to mess it up. José Cuesta, the Colombian-born business development director of Norwood-based Grupo Xela Integrated Hispanic Marketing, said marketing and advertising to Hispanics requires more than just translating your existing materials into Spanish.

"Some companies are placing ads in The Spanish Journal that are not culturally attuned," said Cuesta. "Some are just translating the material and not developing a culturally relevant message." The whole look of the messages has to be appropriate, too, from the choice of colors to the selection of images, he said. "I've seen some brochures for retail locations that are in Spanish, but they don't look like it -- they look American," Cuesta said.



MARK BOWEN | COURIER

Mike Robinson, President of LaVERDAD Hispanic Marketing Solutions, with a coupon book aimed at the Latino population.

HISPANIC: *Area's Latino consumers can't be reached effectively just by translating ads into Spanish*

Other tips for businesses courting the Hispanic community, he said, include getting a qualified translator ("I've seen some horrendously translated ads," Cuesta said) and making sure your back office is ready to handle the business when it comes. Cuesta recalled a local attorney group that made the effort to advertise to Hispanics. But when potential clients started calling, no one at the firm could answer the phone calls because no one spoke Spanish.

Both Cuesta and Robinson said marketing to this demographic requires creativity and a more grass-roots approach than typical marketing. Because there aren't many Spanish-language media options in town, and many Hispanics either don't speak English or strongly prefer Spanish, marketing efforts often involve going out into the community, Robinson said.

It's labor-intensive, but the trade-off is that Hispanics are generally loyal customers and very brand-loyal, he said, something global firms like Procter & Gamble have long known. And there are lots of opportunities in a variety of industries.

"For instance, Hispanics account for almost 10 percent of all new car sales in the United States," Robinson said. "There are great opportunities for the retail market, too, because Hispanics typically like to look nice."

Other industries that have lots of potential business with the demographic include banking, restaurants and telecommunications, among others, he said.

One thing that might surprise businesses, he said, is that Hispanics tend to be more responsive to direct mail than other groups. While studies show other people throw away most of the direct mail they receive, La Verdad found out differently when compiling its 2004 Cincinnati Hispanic Marketing Snapshot, a consumer behavior analysis it sells to companies.



Cultural differences make typical American marketing less effective for Latinos, says Mike Robinson, president of La Verdad/Hispanic Marketing Solutions in Montgomery.

"Seventy-two percent of Hispanics say they open and read their direct mail, and 30 percent say they actually want to receive more direct mail," Robinson said.

La Verdad also found that many local Hispanics are not getting coupons because they don't read mainstream newspapers, where the coupons are often found. So his company created the Don Cupón booklet in conjunction with various clients and hit the streets -- at churches, festivals, restaurants and Hispanic-heavy neighborhoods like Fairfield and Florence -- to hand them out.

The Spanish and bilingual coupons include everything from Allstate to Jake Sweeney Chevrolet to the Newport Aquarium. Participation in the booklet is just one effort the aquarium is making to attract Hispanic business, said CEO Dr. Tim Mullican. "The Hispanic population is increasing tremendously, and this demographic is very family-oriented," which is the aquarium's target, he said. "Just the fact that they know they're welcome is a big step."

While grass-roots efforts are still the best way to reach Hispanics locally, there are a few media options, too, said Cuesta.

George Lopez's Spanish Journal Network has published the biweekly

The Spanish Journal (also called La Jornada Latina) for six years and is about to introduce several new products.

Starting this month, Lopez will launch a biweekly sports journal, Deporte Grafico, on opposite weeks. With the second publication, there will be a weekly presence in town, Lopez said. While The Spanish Journal is bilingual, with about one-quarter of content in English, Deporte Grafico will be entirely in Spanish. Ads for both are accepted in either language, and Lopez said about half are purchased by Hispanic companies and half by "corporate America."

Spanish Journal Network also has a three-hour news radio show that runs every Sunday at 8 p.m. on 1050 AM, and in September it will launch an around-the-clock information service. Users call a free phone number to ask all kinds of questions, and advertisers can pay to become sponsors of the service.

And in March, Channel 12 (WKRC) launched a half-hour Spanish-language show, "Nuestro Rincon," at 5:30 a.m. Saturdays and 6:30 a.m. Sundays. The Sunday show is all news, while the Saturday show includes news but also has more features stories and entertainment.

Response already has been better than expected, said producer Francisco Caceres.

Though the time slot is very early, he said, "as a Hispanic, I see the alternative as nothing."

Ad sales have been slowly building up, Caceres said, and the station just hired a sales representative to exclusively handle "Nuestro Rincon."

"It is time. I don't think it's going to be long before all the stations will be doing something," he said. "(The Hispanic community) is not going to stop growing. The smart business will see that there's money to be made here."