

Throwing All Cultures Into the Marketing Pot

By HILLARY CHURA FEB. 21, 2006

Correction Appended

MARKETERS are embracing America's mishmash of cultures as the influence of immigrants is felt in areas like cuisine, music, holidays and clothing.

"You don't see it creeping up," said Luke Visconti, co-founder and partner in DiversityInc Media, which measures diversity management at large companies and publishes a magazine on the subject. "You don't see the changes unless you go back and think of it."

These days, contemporary men seek advice from old-world marriage brokers; home sellers consult feng shui practitioners before an open house; shops selling Asian-style bubble tea (made with tapioca) are opening in central business districts. And the results of earlier waves of cultural immigration, like Brazilian-inspired bathing suits and Caribbean cocktails, have given way to Cossack-inspired fur coats and sparkly Indian slippers. Many dishware manufacturers seem to offer square Asian-inspired dishes.

Some insurance covers acupuncture. Japanese anime comic books are becoming more popular. The Japanese pop music group Puffy AmiYumi performed during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and Broadway has had at least two Latino-influenced plays -- "Forever Tango" and "Latinologues." Companies like Pepsi-Cola

and Ford Motor are tapping into reggaetón, which mixes Spanish-language hip-hop with the rhythms of Caribbean music.

Marketers seeking innovations may need only to commandeer ideas from home, tweak a flavor, change packaging or borrow from an old-country holiday. "The Chinese New Year in a generation or two could be what St. Patrick's Day became a long time ago," said Robert Thompson, professor of popular culture at Syracuse University. "Hunan and Sichuan food is served in school cafeterias, and you've got sweet and sour sauce with your McNuggets."

Immigration may have had its greatest impact on the palate. Before the 1980's, a city's ethnic offerings may have started and stopped at chop suey and pizza; today, it could include Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Ethiopian or some fusion of two or more cuisines. Shoppers and diners have their choice of Greek yogurt, ready-to-drink mojito mixes, short-rib flautas, tortilla chips with tamari seasoning, sushi and Mediterranean olive bars. Asian ingredients like lemon grass and bok choy increasingly show up in recipes.

So, too, do peppers like chipotle and jalapeño and fruits like mangoes and guavas. "These weren't mainstream until the Hispanic population grew," said Marcia Mogelonsky, a senior research analyst for Mintel International.

According to the Census Bureau, by 2020 the Hispanic population will account for 18 percent of the total population, up from 6 percent in 1980. But the trend has moved well beyond Spanish-speaking Americans to include Indians, Chinese, Russians and other ethnicities. While immigrant influence remains greatest in major metropolitan areas, these enclaves have expanded to smaller cities.

Children's television reflects that diversity. Disney now shows "American Dragon: Jake Long," featuring a pint-size superhero who is half-Asian and half-Caucasian, hangs out with blacks and whites and consults a wizened Asian elder.

Other crossover shows include Nickelodeon's "Dora the Explorer," a 7-year-old Latina cartoon heroine who has several merchandise deals, including Campbell's soup. Last year, she spun off "Go, Diego, Go" that features her equally bilingual cousin.

Some marketers are inching forward. Bank of America sponsored a Manhattan family music festival -- promoted in English and Spanish -- with a Chinese music ensemble and a gospel choir from Soweto. McDonald's spun off the Chipotle Mexican Grill chain this year and still owns a big stake.

Last year, Schieffelin & Company rolled out Navan, a vanilla cognac intended to play off the spice's appeal to Hispanics but also to blacks and Asians. Diageo last year introduced the high-end Brazilian rum Orinoco.

Procter & Gamble is trying to expand sales for its Ariel laundry detergent, which is popular in Mexico, into Wal-Mart in the United States, said one Procter & Gamble marketer who asked not to be named because he is not authorized to speak to the media.

He said a mainstream marketing campaign for Pantene shampoo, likely to begin before July, will be based in part on market research that showed Latina women prefer long, straight hair.

At the same time that Asian chains like 99 Ranch Market have grown more popular with non-Asian customers, Wal-Mart and other supermarkets have expanded their ethnic food aisles, said Saul S. Gitlin, executive vice president for strategic services at Kang & Lee, part of WPP Group's Young & Rubicam Brands.

In introducing the Ford Fusion four-door midsize sedan in 2005, Ford's general market advertising campaign borrowed from its Asian campaign's soap operas, said David Rodriguez, multicultural marketing manager for Ford, Lincoln and Mercury brands.

He said the Ford Fusion Mixer, a Web-based music mix that includes genres like R&B, salsa, reggaetón, Asian, hip-hop, rock and alternative music, was developed for Fordenespanol.com but now runs on all company sites.

"In many cases, we will very much acknowledge that what is multicultural today very much will be general market tomorrow," Mr. Rodriguez said.

Pepsi-Cola North America is bringing Manzanita Sol, a popular apple-flavored soft drink in Mexico, to Southern California, Texas, Arizona, New York City and

Miami. It is aimed primarily at Latinos but is also tied to the American affinity for apple juice.

Lara Montilla, senior marketing manager for multicultural marketing at Pepsi, says the drink is selling well, in part because of nonethnic consumers.

"The U.S. consumer is exploring different flavors more now than before," Ms. Montilla said. "We definitely will see a lot of crossing paths when it comes to innovation -- innovation that is targeted to ethnic consumers but crosses over to the general market."

She said only a handful of companies had figured out how to achieve that crossover and that Pepsi-Cola North America had learned from its sibling, Frito-Lay. The snack company introduced Doritos Guacamole for Latinos but expanded it to the general market. She said aguas frescas, a drink with fruit pulp, sugar and water that is popular in Latin countries, was an area of interest and that Pepsi was considering how to make the category more prevalent here.

Expanding a product from a specific ethnic group to the general market makes good business sense.

"A lot of major companies have tried developing merchandise just for specific ethnic groups and may not have gotten the volume," said Peter Krivkovich, president and chief executive of the Chicago-based advertising agency Cramer-Krasselt, whose clients include Barton Beer, which imports Corona, and H. J. Heinz. "For large companies, small brands are just not worth it."

The tactic, however, could also alienate a brand's core clientele, said Tom Pirko, president of the beverage consultancy Bevmark. "A lot of people, if you give them something other than what they want or expect, will reject your product, boycott it," Mr. Pirko said.

Mr. Rodriguez of Ford said the automaker would accelerate ethnic efforts this year, taking into account how many immigrants were big adopters of technology and were more accepting of the Internet, broadband, text messaging and mobile marketing.

"As fluency levels increase," Mr. Rodriguez said, "you are going to see more opportunity via different media mixes to reach out and connect with these people in more creative and innovative ways."

ADVERTISING Correction: February 23, 2006, Thursday The Advertising column in Business Day on Tuesday, about marketers' efforts to take advantage of the United States' cultural diversity misspelled the name of a Brazilian rum that is being sold in this country. It is Oronoco, not Orinoco.

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