

From Total Market to Total Relevance

In an era of hyper-segmentation and personalization, can mainstream marketing still provide total relevance?

The Backdrop

The concept of mainstream is obsolete. It comes from a simpler time, when the U.S. population was less diverse. The overwhelming majority was non-Hispanic, White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant, and, relatively speaking, the population was much more economically secure. The media was far less fragmented, where programming reflected traditional American values and the news covered primarily concentrated on domestic, local stories. Corporations had fewer brands, each with one single message strategy targeting one-mass consumer audience through a media plan comprised of the usual vehicles: TV, radio, magazines and newspapers. Niche audiences certainly existed, often with customized messaging strategies to help build relevance and interest, but the priority was always the mainstream.

Fast forward to 2000, when the U.S. Census showed rapid growth in the compositional diversity of the U.S. population. Demography spoke. All of a sudden the so-called mainstream was now becoming something else—something radically different. It became evident that the U.S. Hispanic Market—moreover, the community that propels it—was booming and reaching some kind of impressive zenith. It became obvious in the consumption marketplace: Latinos make a difference in sales in most product categories. In actuality, Latinos were showing the world nothing but the miraculous powers of American diversity unleashed: the ability to further enrich the country by sharing in commonalities while positively influencing the rest of the population by asserting its vibrant cultural identity. There exist points of comparison to the shaping influence exerted by African-Americans—in the case of U.S. Hispanics accentuated by the proliferation of culture-affirming media outlets that celebrate an abundance of cultural icons and Latino's endless cultural expressions. The crossover effect was inevitable and it has seemed as if the human ability to enrich each other has guided this fluid process until recent date. Organic to an extreme, the process has nearly behaved as an implicit two-way accord

in which both groups agree to adopt the good from each other, while allowing—without a hint of disbelief—for the varied expressive manifestations of Latinos.

A new America is born

Whatever the case, the concept of a “new mainstream” was born—what we now call The New America—and, shortly thereafter (circa 2007), the idea of a Total Market approach began to arise. Some observers gravitated to political reasons to explain the phenomenon. Some alluded to an ongoing philosophical clash between those who embrace the benefits of multiculturalism and those who advocate for an old-fashioned, homogenous, “purely American” culture. Meanwhile, others, perhaps in a more practical assessment, attributed the sudden appearance of Total Market to an understandable financial “root reason”: as attention to the Hispanic Market grew exponentially and results were proven, so did the media dollars destined to it. For some, it meant a need to redirect the trend by influencing and controlling media budget allocation. Most brands, however, have tended to lean in favor of embracing diversity and, as such, the intent of Total Market could be traced back to the need of promoting inclusion of those diverse audiences in brand communication strategies from the onset, rather than having them relegated to being an afterthought in the planning process. Needless to say, that concept has been twisted and reinterpreted freely based on the differing motives of each brand telling the story. However, the premise was still based on one overarching strategy for all audiences—“mainstream” and diverse. To do business profitably, in the context of the New America, however, some questions demand the smartest answers: Will one size fit all? How will relevance be authentically achieved and sustained? What kind of emotional value will Total Market bring to the segment audience? Can marketers possibly achieve a more successful Total Market approach by conducting a Segment Marketing strategy at the same time? Are brands willing to trade effectiveness for efficiency?



The Evolution

Today, the diversification of the U.S. population is such that many counties and states have already reached a majority-minority status, and Census Bureau foresees this momentum will only continue. Everything has changed. The idea of a traditional family, for example, no longer applies as the number of multigenerational and blended households continues on the rise, and consumers are literally reinventing who they call “family”. With regard to media, not only has the landscape changed dramatically, but the stories told are now global in nature and people have become part of the media. They are content-creators and influencers; but, more importantly, they are a diverse collective of unique individuals with distinct lifestyles and brand relationships. They are critics of new products and write reviews for the world to read. And they can indeed influence the purchase decisions of others in a way that can kill a brand for lack of relevance, or worse, insensitivity.

And then, marketing is experiencing a shift. Technology has afforded brands the ability to engage in one-on-one conversations with consumers, using personalized messages that address their unique behaviors and preferences within specific categories.

No longer are consumers passive recipients of branded communications. They are now active protagonists and co-creators that have a much higher expectation about the purpose a brand serves in our global society, above and beyond the benefits the brand promises consumers.

The Desire to Be Recognized as Unique

Walking a fine line regarding Total Market, brands need to carefully understand that Total Market does not necessarily do the job of Segment Marketing. Overarching strategies are often generalistic and based on acceptable common denominators. That, combined with a mass communications approach, can dangerously yield inferior insights and predictable creative ideas with the potential of showcasing inauthentic scenarios—or worse—blatant stereotypes. While seeing themselves as part of the greater collective, today’s consumers want to celebrate their unique identities and singularities, and now expect customization, not generalization. Brands need to engage in conversations that are less geared to a population and more specific, and relevant, to a person. Technology is helping brands create personal relationships with their users. However, results show—as we all know—that there is something more powerful than an algorithm, and that is cultural intimacy.

Culture is the central factor of a person’s identity—and its foundation. Even an English-speaking Latino knows a little Spanish. It’s the language that resides in her/his heart—it’s also the language heard from the crib, the language present in music and street-talk.

When talking to the consumer in that language, not only can she or he feel familiarity but the words used can also trigger unique, singular emotions and memories that tug at heart strings. Regardless of language, speaking within their culture—with the right cultural cues—not only demonstrates deep understanding and relevance, it also proves the brand’s sincere desire that it cares about diversity and all communities. Relying only on the seemingly “absolute strength” of Total Market can inadvertently send a negative message of disconnection, disregard or abandonment of a social group by a brand. That famous KPI, “This is a brand for people like me”, tends to operate more effectively every time brands “speak the culture” of their consumers, particularly when the strategy reflects the consumer’s use of the category and relationship with the brand.





The Need for Total Relevance™

It is important to understand that there is diversity within diversity. Within the Hispanic community, a Colombian who was raised in Miami since her/his teenage years is not the same as a Puerto Rican who was born in New York and now lives in Raleigh, or a Mexican who just arrived in Chicago. Each has varying levels of category use and understanding, and each has varying levels of brand awareness and esteem. Multiply this by the ever-increasing diversity of our society and any new campaign assignment may easily appear to be daunting and, at times, an insurmountable endeavor. Hence, the too obvious, and sometimes deceiving, appeal of a total market approach. In essence, the reality is that every consumer has his/her own journey, and for that reason, every brand has a different position in the purchase funnel, depending on the individual. For that, we need an approach that ensures Total Relevance™.

Total Relevance™ is an approach we coined —and, in fact, trademarked— that, regardless of consumer segment, multicultural or otherwise, allows a brand to view the totality of the consumer opportunity in order to deliver the most relevant message for them. All message strategies would align to, and support, one overarching goal or objective, but brands are able to customize the conversation based on an individual's or group's lifestyles, needs and preferences.

Does our approach rule out Total Market? Not at all; it enhances it. It shows that the term shouldn't be exclusionary but totally complementary as it works on a macro level while Segmented Marketing takes care of the micro. Our Total Relevance™ approach makes sure that the Segmented Marketing's serious initiatives are not cancelled, obliterated or relegated faintly by the superstitions of assured automatic success of Total Market. What we are saying is simple: Total Market should not be seen as the "do-it-all" miracle recipe.

The Future

The need for micro-targeted, personalized messages that are customized to be relevant to an individual, will only grow in the future. Companies like Ancestry and 23and-Me have seen widespread adoption of their DNA tests because people want to know how their cultural heritage shapes their individual identities. This phenomenon has seen the creation of products that give consumers suggestions based on an individual's DNA. Voice-assistants will predict the mood of the user, and, with that in mind, Chatbots and tech companies are hiring poets to help craft communications that are warmer and feel more humanized. There are micro-communities where the closer individuals are, the more culturally diverse the community gets. Future technological patterns will offer consumers the opportunity for more curated experiences that fit their total lifestyle, inclusive of culture, and the meaning of culture will continue evolving and reinforcing a person's identity.

Hispanics, just like any consumer, know too well when a brand speaks to them— they get it. They know when the brand is in the community and when the brand leaves the community. Their awareness of who cares and who is supportive, and who projects a sense of shared purpose, is as impeccable as anyone's.

In this context, is a wishful and fragile total market approach, as it's currently being heaped with praise and presented by its enthusiasts, something that makes total sense? Wouldn't it make more sense to apply Total Market alongside a strengthened, fully-empowered, unapologetic Segmented Marketing Strategy that will ensure Total Relevance™? Most savvy brands know that to pass the emotional and sensorial test with consumers —to really win the desired share-of-heart—, the message needs to be truly relevant. The challenge then lies in doing it right. In the end, doing it right is America's oldest formula for success.