



MARKETING RESEARCH IN ACTION

Reaching Hispanics through Qualitative Research

More than 50.5 million (16 percent of the U.S. population) are classified as Hispanic. The Hispanic/Latino population is diverse as it flows from many Spanish-speaking countries around the world characterized by different levels of acculturation. When Hispanics become acculturated, they often strongly identify with both America and their country of origin, an effect that persists across generations. A minority of Hispanics use Spanish as their primary language, with most Hispanics preferring to speak both Spanish and English. Vice president of multicultural business development at Horowitz Associates, Adriana Waterston, emphasizes that approaching the Hispanic segment “has never been exclusively about language as much as cultural relevance.”¹ Other researchers have concluded that whatever the country of origin, five themes are relevant in Spanish-speaking communities: family, moral values, religion, music, cooking, dancing, and socializing.

How do these findings influence marketing research? Ricardo Lopez, president of Hispanic Research, Inc., asserts that qualitative research is especially appropriate for the Hispanic marketplace and emphasizes that the population has to be approached differently in order for research to be useful. Quantitative research methods are structured, linear, and dry, suggesting government and academic research rather than connection. In contrast, Latinos prefer qualitative approaches that involve tangents, storytelling, and an expressive process often characterized as lively. This style of interaction is especially noticeable among less-aculturated Latino populations but is evident among acculturated Hispanics as well. Participants in qualitative research projects should be treated like a guest in your home as it is important to form a strong emotional connection to facilitate interaction. Face-to-face focus groups, in-depth interviews, and ethnography are all appropriate for the Latino marketplace. When a relevant population can be recruited that has access to the Internet, in-depth interviews using webcams, bulletin board focus groups, and MROCs can also produce high-quality insights into Hispanic populations for clients.

MROCs are increasingly being utilized with Hispanics, including those who prefer to participate in Spanish as well as those who prefer to communicate in English. Community space has recruited Hispanics of all ages, nationalities, and acculturation levels to participate in Spanish-language brand communities. The facilitators of research among these communities recommend a different approach for engaging these consumers. Facilitators allow members to make the community their space where participants can form close bonds, trading advice and personal stories. Also, participants should be allowed to build personal relationships with each other and the facilitators, replicating the sense of family so important in Hispanic culture. Last, more facilitation is needed in Hispanic MROCs not only because this segment values connectedness, but also because more help is needed for technical issues. If the extra work is invested, the insights generated can be extraordinary.

Traditional marketing research among Hispanics has often focused too heavily on classifying the marketplace in terms of language, acculturation, and generation. Perhaps this is because of overreliance on quantitative research approaches. One strength of qualitative research is the ability to tap deeper contextual, psychological, and cultural issues. As the Latino marketplace continues to grow, marketing researchers will need to adjust their research approach, continually identifying “culturally relevant ways to interact.”²