

The Soda and Fast-Food Industries Target their Marketing Towards Mothers of Color

Prepared for Communities Creating Healthy Environments
(CCHE)

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If the public's information came only from the media, what would they know?

What wouldn't they know?

What is “target marketing” and how does it relate to race?

Some people think of target marketing as innocent promotion of products to certain groups. For example, Coca-Cola created Coke Zero so that the company could target men who were uncomfortable choosing a product that said “diet” on the label. But there is also another type of target marketing that focuses on communities of color. The industry often calls this “multicultural marketing.” The industry does target marketing by using carefully chosen language and visual cues, such as popular celebrities, designed to resonate with the specific community so that this group responds favorably to their product and brand.^{1,2} The problem with target marketing is that it exploits cultural ties and values to create a demand for some of the unhealthiest foods and beverages that contribute to the obesity epidemic that disproportionately affects communities of color.

One group that the food and beverage industry is currently targeting is African-American and Latina mothers. This group, which Telemundo’s Chief Operating Officer describes as “Chief Household Officers,” is a very important population for the industry because they are often the ones who decide what types of food to buy for their families.³ In addition, Latina women are one of the fastest-growing Internet users⁴ and African-American moms are one of the most loyal groups to brands.⁵ Two campaigns from 2010 targeting ethnic moms—General Mills’ *Que Rica Vida* and PepsiCo’s *Pepsi We Inspire*—are examples of this type of target marketing.

General Mills’ “Que Rica Vida” Campaign Targets Latina Moms



Que Rica Vida (QRV, “what a rich, fulfilling life”⁶) is a campaign sponsored by General Mills targeting Latina mothers. The QRV program and website is written in Spanish and claims to encourage healthier lifestyles by promoting education, nutrition, and balanced diets. It focuses on three themes: “education,” “moments

around the table,” and “health and wellbeing.”⁷ According to General Mills’ Multicultural Marketing Manager, Rodolfo Rodriguez, the strategy behind *Que Rica Vida* is to “gain awareness and trial by positioning General Mills as a trusted source of information for Hispanic moms who need help navigating life in the United States.”⁸



The site draws on cultural ties centered on family, Latino recipes, and children. The website also uses blogs and articles written by Latina women, photos of Latina mothers, and pictures of family dinners. The website's "Opini3n" section encourages users to post their thoughts and recipe ideas. In the process, users lend their support to the brand and become spokespersons or "brand advocates." Brand advocates are especially important for marketers because they lend the brand their integrity when the Latina moms discuss the brand among their family and friends.

In addition to the website, General Mills QRV campaign uses other ways to reach the Latina mothers: a free QRV magazine, raffles at supermarkets, and nutrition classes offered in select locations with high Latino populations such as Los Angeles, Houston and Miami. The main food products promoted in these are General Mills products, such as Honey Nut Cheerios, Bisquick, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and Hamburger Helper. The QRV magazine is published every three months with articles about what the company thinks are healthy foods, simple recipes tailored for Latinos (example "chiles poblanos rellenos") and coupons for General Mills products.



General Mills' target marketing campaign takes advantage of the fact that, according to a leading marketing blog, Latinas "are one of the fastest-growing online demographics."⁹ Because Latina women are becoming more deeply engaged in social networks, marketing experts warn that "if brands don't find a way to join these conversations, they are missing out on connecting with Latina women in an authentic and relevant way."¹⁰

"Pepsi We Inspire" Targets African-American Moms



Similar to General Mill's QRV campaign, the "Pepsi We Inspire" campaign targets African American mothers. This website (<http://www.pepsiweinspire.com>) is heavily branded: it is filled with Pepsi's logos, its blue, silver, and red colors, and Facebook

“Like” links. It offers an online community forum that encourages users to share their thoughts, personal stories, and photos to inspire others. Six themes serve as the pillars of the campaign: beauty, laughter, joy, hope, wisdom, and love. PepsiCo uses popular African-American celebrities to represent and personify each trait. For example, Queen Latifah is the icon for beauty and Keshia Cole is the icon for hope.



The online campaign aims to engage African-American moms with blogs, photos of everyday moms, social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube, and personal stories from celebrities and everyday African-American women. The social-networking aspect of this campaign is very strong. From its homepage, users are encouraged to share thoughts, communicate with other mothers, upload photos, and record audio with inspirational messages. On almost every item featured on the page, there is a “share” link, which encourages users to share their thoughts with other people in their social networks and in the process attract new users to the site.

In contrast to the QRV campaign which claims to promote healthy diets, “Pepsi We Inspire” focuses on promoting the PepsiCo brand as an inspiration and good Samaritan in the community. PepsiCo also includes cross promotion to its “Pepsi Refresh Project,” another campaign promoting its brand paired with community service.



In targeting African-American moms, PepsiCo creates brand loyalty among a group that can improve Pepsi’s image in the African-American community. For example, the NAACP presented Pepsi We Inspire with an award for “advancing positive multicultural images in advertising and media.”¹¹ Marketers also find that African-American moms remain loyal to a brand more so than other ethnic groups, even when faced with economic hardships.¹²

The Problem with Target Marketing towards Mothers of Colors

From a food marketer’s perspective, it makes sense to target ethnic moms in Latino and African-American communities through online campaigns. Marketing research shows that Latinos are more likely to “befriend a brand on a social-networking site than non-Latinos. And African-Americans as well as Latinos are



more likely to use social-networking spaces to share opinions with friends about products, services and brands than ‘general market’ consumers.”¹³ Companies want to take advantage of where groups are already gathered. Today, people gather electronically which provides many opportunities for companies to insert their brand into the conversation.

Food and beverage companies also know that mothers are the ones choosing the type and quantity of food that their family eats and buys. Multicultural women hold a buying power of more than \$1 trillion and are the primary decision-makers in their homes.¹⁴ The companies want to increase the likelihood that those families will purchase their products. But this is a problem when the products marketed are unhealthy. For example, the QRV campaign claims to promote healthy lifestyle choices, and yet they also promote some of the unhealthiest cereals, such as Cinnamon Toast Crunch, which is high in sugar.¹⁵

Besides promoting products people should eat less of, campaigns like QRV promote ideas. The emphasis on individual “choice” diverts the responsibility from the industry back onto individuals. The company puts all the responsibility for what families eat onto the mother, ignoring the fact that it is the company itself that decides what products to develop, how much sugar, salt and fat they will contain, and how aggressively to market them.

Another tactic, illustrated in the Pepsi We Inspire Campaign, is the industry’s efforts to portray themselves as good corporate citizens. It is a way for PepsiCo to claim that it is part of the solution instead of the problem, while at the same time putting its brand in front of mothers. This type of marketing is especially problematic when targeted at ethnic communities who already face disparities in chronic conditions such as obesity and diabetes. Advocates must monitor these campaigns and expose them for what they are: marketing strategies hidden behind claims of community service while promoting brands and products that make our communities sick.

Endnotes

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Endnotes, continued

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