

Staying Relevant in the Face of Demographic Change*

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I am no expert in fundraising or ethnic marketing or any such specialized subject. This article is based on my experiences since arriving in Canada about 16 years ago. It draws on my cultural and traditional beliefs and experiences and will, I hope, illustrate how charities can continue to be relevant to the ever-changing demographics of this wonderful land.

While most immigrants come to Canada in search of opportunities and a better life free from all kinds of difficulties and persecution “back home”, I believe that immigrants also want to play a meaningful role in their adopted home and want to become contributing members of society and their communities. How are we to include these vast numbers in our activities so as to enrich society as a whole?

“Ethnic marketing” would certainly make a list of top buzzwords of the 1990s, right up there with “thinking outside the box” and “talking offline”.

We’ve all heard of jokes about efforts to market to those in other cultures. The original slogan for the Swedish Electrolux vacuum cleaner was “Nothing Sucks Like Electrolux!” Likewise, when Pepsi-Cola entered the huge Chinese and German markets, the campaign fizzled. The slogan “Come alive with the Pepsi generation”, was translated into Chinese as “Pepsi brings back your dead ancestors” and into German as “Come out of the grave with Pepsi”. Not exactly ideal customer appeals.

While these anecdotes illustrate some of the potential pitfalls in ethnic marketing, they certainly do not negate the opportunities to be realized by reaching out to our ever-growing ethnic populations. The opportunities are, in fact, immense, and that’s why everybody’s talking about them.

I have been fortunate to have been involved in the voluntary sector for a number of years, particularly in the last decade with United Way of Greater Toronto where I have recently completed a three-year term as Chair of the Board of Trustees. It has been highly gratifying to have been part of United Way as it evolved to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population – to have seen

*This article was developed from a presentation to the Annual General meeting of the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy on December 6, 1999 in Toronto.

the change in the culture and composition of staff and volunteers and how we think and do business.

My involvement with United Way began as a result of one of its early ethnic marketing efforts. I was one of the organizers of an international cricket match at Skydome in 1989 which was designed to benefit United Way. We were hoping to bring in around 10,000 to 15,000 spectators and make approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000 from the event. We would have been more than satisfied with that, but by the time we had finished, we had actually raised \$650,000 – still the most successful special event in United Way history. The huge crowds (upwards of 40,000) were almost entirely from the South Asian and Afro-Canadian communities and I believe this event truly marked a groundshift in United Way's thinking. From that moment on, the importance of reaching out to the immense and growing ethnic markets was never in question.

Immigrants now make up almost half the population of Toronto. In the former satellite cities of the Greater Toronto areas – North York, Scarborough and York – they are already the majority. One in every four immigrants living in Canada lives in this area. What is also astonishing is the diversity of the immigrant profile. More than 100 countries from around the world have each contributed at least 1,000 people to our population. Forty years ago, almost all immigrants were from Europe. Now the majority come from Asia, principally Sri Lanka, China, the Philippines and Hong Kong.

Clearly then, it is incumbent upon all organizations, whether profit, not-for-profit, or public sector, to reach out to these ever-growing segments of the population if they wish to remain relevant and healthy over the long term. For the charitable sector, this means we must know the people we are presuming to serve in order to serve effectively. Hours of operation may have to be modified, different food may need to be served, print materials may have to be specially produced, and so on.

This accommodation is particularly important when you want to build a case for financial and volunteer support.

With increasing competition for donor dollars, a shrinking donor base, and a changing society, ethnic marketing is clearly one of the most promising areas for growth. We have to reach out to our many new communities and let them learn about our organizations and why they should be contributing to our support. What are we doing for them? Even the most established charity around is probably not a familiar name to a newcomer to Canada. We have the challenge of defining and justifying ourselves as if it were our first day of operation.

Another important motivator for change is maintaining your most important resource: your people. You need to be considered a worthwhile place at which to volunteer and at which to work as an employee. That means appearing

worthwhile to all groups. The company that draws upon only half the population for its human capital is at a significant disadvantage.

For all these reasons then, it is clear that ethnic marketing must become part of both short- and long-term planning. At United Way, we were fortunate to have the services of A.T. Kearney consultants who did extensive research to help us develop a marketing plan to guide our efforts to reach the whole community. Using a number of standards of measurement, they identified four of these that were likely to be the most desirable targets in both the short- and long-term.

For such analysis, there are a number of things to consider. Are there ethnic communities to whom you are likely to appeal because of the kinds of services you provide? A community with large numbers of elderly people or with very strong intergenerational attachments will find an organization that cares for seniors very appealing. Is the geographical concentration of the community in line with your area of service? For example, if you operate in one particular area and there are very few, say, Jewish people in that area it will be difficult to succeed with an appeal directed to the Jewish community. Consider also if you have natural strengths already such as a number of employees or volunteers of a certain ethnicity whom you can leverage for your marketing campaign. These are just examples of the things to consider.

Above all, remember from the outset that, like the so-called mainstream population, ethnic communities are made up of numerous subgroups that may be divided along religious, geographic or racial lines or any number of other divisions. Failing to take these differences into account can quickly become counter-productive and leave you worse off than when you started.

I am reminded here about a special event I once attended that was planned to target the Indian population. The event was planned for a whole evening, but much to the organizers' surprise, around eight p.m., suddenly half of those in the room got up and left. What the organizers had failed to take into account was the Muslim component of the group, for whom prayer at eight is mandatory. The Muslim attendees left, leaving the Hindu members behind. It is no stretch to say that what had been an outreach effort to the Indian community had, in fact, alienated half of them because a fundamental component of their faith had not been respected. This could easily have been avoided by having a break during the proceedings and providing a space for quiet prayer. Do your homework.

This is a dramatic example but it illustrates the importance of understanding your audience – a fundamental component of *any* marketing plan. A less dramatic example would be to understand the preference for special events in the Chinese community as a vehicle for gift-giving rather than simply being asked to sign a cheque, or the place of food in the South Asian communities. For example, people in my community want to get to know you before they

give to you. We expect you to talk about our families a little bit and come into our homes and share a meal with us. At United Way, we know that “people give to people” and nowhere is that truer than among South Asians.

Your commitment to truly understanding a culture is demonstrated every time you prepare an advertisement or introduce a message into a particular community. This is the area in which you must understand the important difference between translation and transcreation. Consider the misinterpreted ad slogans that I mentioned earlier. They make for amusing stories but you don’t want such a disaster to happen to your organization. Simply translating your brochure or your poster into another language is seldom adequate. What you’ve said in English may not make much sense in another language, or it may have no relevance. You may be highlighting all the wrong things. It is important, if you can, to create a piece which is specifically designed for a particular community, preferably designed by members of that community and conveying a message that that community wants to hear.

Recently, United Way launched a new advertising campaign specifically designed for the Chinese community, using the kind of language and highlighting the kinds of issues that resonate for a Chinese audience. This advertising, aside from our logo, looks nothing like, and sounds nothing like, United Way’s regular advertising. We were fortunate to have an agency specializing in Chinese marketing to help us in this endeavour.

Another important element to take into consideration is that ethnic communities are always *evolving*. Members do not necessarily all have the same level of exposure to Canadian life. What you have, in effect, is a kind of tiered system in which people who have been here for a considerable period of time, or their children or grandchildren, have a different outlook from those who are newly arrived. Understandably, newcomers at the grassroots level will probably have a narrow view: they will be interested in helping people of their own community – the people they understand and feel close to. The established residents and their children will start to develop a broader view beyond their own community. They are the people you are aiming for and to whom you really need to appeal because, as their interest broadens to the entire community, they will feel more closely aligned to you and will have the resources to make a difference. You must develop a more tailor-made approach, therefore, to both the grassroots level, which is always being replenished by newcomers and the broader outlook of the established residents and their children who, remember, were once at that grassroots level.

Now, obviously, you’re going to need help with all of this. Nobody can know all the intricacies of each culture; all the dos and don’ts. It’s one of the major reasons why you need to develop a solid core of senior volunteers from the community to whom you are trying to appeal. These are the people who will

guide your efforts to reach out, inform your strategy, and warn you of possible pitfalls.

You also need these senior volunteers, because they command respect and act as a seal of approval for your organization. They are your conduit to gaining acceptance, making further contacts in the community, and broadening your base to involve other senior volunteers. I speak of a *core* of volunteers from a particular community because of the obvious dangers of relying upon a single person or a couple of people as your champions. There is the question of tokenism to be considered, for starters. Also, your senior volunteers, it is important to realize, do not represent their community. They are *reflective* of their community, but no single person or small group can represent any community, let alone a diverse community. I reflect the South Asian community and I reflect the Ismaili community, but I do not represent them and I am not the authoritative voice on all things pertaining to them. I am a good bellwether indicator of their feelings. Too much reliance upon one or two individuals also makes you vulnerable should these people choose to disassociate themselves from your organization or should they become a liability for reasons you cannot foresee.

When you do have such volunteers, remember to make the best use of them. They have a valuable perspective on all issues affecting your organization and you need to hear it. Do not make the mistake of having people from the Afro-Canadian community on your board and seeking their advice and assistance only on matters relating to Afro-Canadians. As the African-Canadian community is helping to shape and affect the direction of society as a whole through their numbers and through their world view, so also should your Afro-Canadian volunteers be affecting all of your decision-making. That is something you definitely want, a major part of what you are trying to achieve through ethnic marketing. For success you must transform your relations with ethnic communities from an isolated "outreach" approach and begin internalizing and engaging members of this community so they become a constituent part of your organization. Everything you do then will have input from their perspective and that's what your organization needs in order to stay relevant, appealing and effective.

Many of these imperatives also hold true for your employees. People have a tendency to be most comfortable with those who are like themselves and therefore to hire people who are most like themselves. But it is important for the composition of your staff to also reflect the broad direction in which you are going, for it is the staff who provide your continuity and structure and it is through them that your volunteers are most effective. A lively, diverse workforce is a valuable asset and will particularly attract young employees who will help broaden your vision.

In the end, since charitable organizations are community-based, it is simply a fact of life that we have to change in order to grow. I have outlined some of the challenges of ethnic marketing and some of the pitfalls but what I want to get across more than anything else are the remarkable opportunities it offers. Any period of change is an opportunity to evolve and succeed or to be left behind and ultimately fail. We simply cannot afford to let that happen. As members of the third sector, we fill a vital place that neither the private nor the public sector can fill. The challenge of responding to an ethnically diverse population is the same as any challenge we face, whether it is new technology or changes to government funding. It is a matter of analysis, planning and execution.

It is invigorating to see your organization respond and change and truly gratifying when careful plans start to pay off. The key is to stick with it, don't be discouraged by disappointments – because there will be some. This is an evolutionary process and ethnic marketing is a function of adapting to changing times. Take heart from the exciting opportunities it offers.