

OUT OF THE BOX

By Amiel Moskona

- *Where you from?*
- *Venezuela.*
- *Minnesota? Funny, you don't sound like you're from Minnesota.*
- *No... Venezuela. You know, in South America?*

One-beat pause. Startled look. Sound of brain reaching for something to say.

- *Venezuela? Isn't that near Nicaragua? I once knew this guy from Peru. His family lived in Quito... or was it Bogota?*

Granted, America's strength is not geography. We kick ass when it comes, for example, to clever marketing ideas and extending a generous hand to countries in distress. But exactly where those countries are... well, we'd rather not bother if we don't really have to.

Except that we do. We live in an increasingly complex world. And the blurring of ethnic and cultural lines by virtue of intermarriage and migration is reshaping the very notion of traditional national identities.

Our societal fabric is composed of a rich gamut of hues where every thread is unique and fascinating. And unless we make the effort to learn about ourselves and the world around us, we'll miss out on our amazing potential for positive change.

But more pragmatically, it's about business and dinero... mucho dinero...

... which brings me to the newest star in the marketing firmament: the U.S. Hispanic population. Much has been said and written about it as of late, but despite the buzz and the catchphrases, many marketers are no closer to understanding this 44 million-plus, highly fractured and diverse market than they were just a few years ago.

Too often, Hispanics are viewed as a one-dimensional group devoid of any kind of subtleties. But peel away the layers of Old Ortega and Corona, and you're left gaping at a universe unto itself, where stereotypes and bad Tex-Mex food are not only unappreciated, but also utterly useless at helping us understand it.

U.S. Hispanics hail from 19 independent countries in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean, each with their own folklore, traditions and speak. 20 when you add "indigenous" Hispanics, whose North American roots hail way back to Colonial times. Factor in Spain, Brazil and Portugal and you have 22 distinct nationalities with a powerful set of common values, but also with deep –and sometimes conflicting– differences.

There's much to discover about this market. And for those tenacious souls who are willing to climb and conquer the learning curve, it's a challenge worth embracing and an adventure brimming with excitement and great rewards.

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