Tapping into their connections

The multicultural world of social media marketing

By Felipe Korzenny and Lee Vann

Social media is now ubiquitous. Usage of blogs, social networks and video-sharing sites is increasing rapidly and millions of people now look to social media Web sites as their primary source of news, opinion and entertainment. As we witness this dramatic shift from traditional to social media, we believe it's important to examine its cultural dimensions – that is, who is driving this shift, what are the cultural factors behind it and what are the implications for marketers seeking to reach specific ethnic/cultural groups via social media?

We recently conducted an analysis of newly-collected data to examine the patterns of social media behaviors of different ethnic/cultural groups in the U.S. The data comes from the Florida State University Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication, with the support of DMS Research, from a national online sample of nearly 2,500 people with approximately 500 cases in each of the following cultural groups: Hispanics who prefer English; Hispanics who prefer Spanish; non-Hispanic whites; African-Americans and Asians in the United States.

We aggregated information to find out what ethnic/cultural groups are more likely to visit social networking sites. We found broad diversity in social media behaviors among different ethnic/cultural groups and that emerging minorities visit social networking sites more frequently than non-Hispanic whites. In general, ethnic minorities visit social networking sites more frequently than non-Hispanic whites (Figure 1).

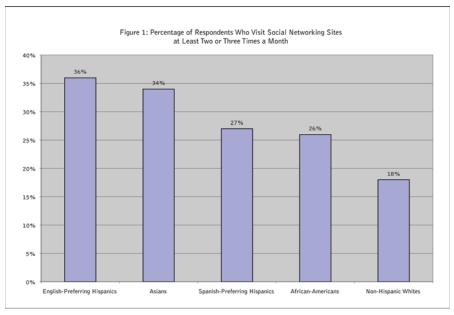We then broke out the data for social networks MySpace and Facebook (Figure 2). Again, minorities lead the way, with English-preferring Hispanics being twice as likely to visit MySpace regularly than non-Hispanic whites. The relative importance of emerging minorities as compared with the traditional majority points to a major shift in social influence.
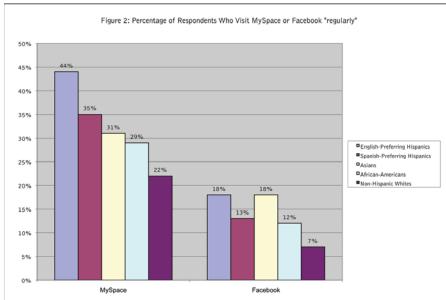
We also looked at the demographic, cultural and market factors that drive ethnic minorities to social networks. This data is interesting, but in order for these findings to be useful and actionable for us as marketers, we need to determine the reason for the strong

snapshot

The authors present findings from a survey of social media usage among ethnic groups and argue that as these outlets become more and more a part of multicultural consumers' lives, companies that incorporate them into their marketing plans will earn the loyalty of these segments.

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Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents Who Visit Social Networking Sites at Least Two or Three Times a Month

Figure 2: Percentage of Respondents Who Visit MySpace or Facebook "regularly"

representation of ethnic minorities on social networking sites and how to best engage with this audience. We believe that there is a mix of factors that make social media particularly appealing to emerging minorities.

Demographically, ethnic minorities are younger than non-Hispanic whites. It's no secret that younger people in general are more likely to adopt new technologies, particularly technologies that enable communication and provide social connectivity. This age gap between minorities and non-Hispanics only partially explains the gap in social media involvement.

In order to analyze the influence of age on social media behavior, we divided respondents into two segments, those 35 years of age and younger and those 36 years of age and older. Figure 3 shows that people 35 and younger of all cultural backgrounds are more likely to use social media, with Hispanics who prefer to communicate in Spanish lagging behind. Young Spanish-preferring Hispanics may lag because they are likely to be newer to the Internet and also because their friends and relatives are less likely to be online due to economic and access factors. While Hispanics in general are aggressively getting online, those less acculturated are still somewhat less represented in the digital realm today.

When examining the usage of social networking sites among those 36 and older, we find that that older Hispanics, regardless

of language preference, are more active especially when compared non-Hispanic whites within the same age group.

This substantiates the notion that age is only a partial explanation for the higher usage of social media among Hispanics and other ethnic minorities. Culture and market factors also play an important role in promoting online social connectivity among these groups.

Collectivistic values

Culturally, ethnic minorities tend to be drawn to collectivistic values and often look to one another to help guide decisions and opinions. In addition, ethnic minorities are more likely to use social networks to communicate with groups of family and friends who are geographically dispersed. Social media facilitates such collective sharing of information and communication.

In addition, market forces are driving ethnic minorities to use social media. There is a dearth of culturally-relevant and in-language content available online. As a result, ethnic minorities tend to be proactive and create and share their own content and social networks are ideal platforms for publishing and distributing such original content.

Social networking services allow people to organize and enhance their relationships online, but regardless of technology, culture is still the glue that bonds people together. Marketers seeking to reach ethnic minorities through social media must reinforce and connect with the culture of their target audience if they seek to strengthen their clients' brands on social networks. Doing so requires a strategic, long-term approach that should include the following elements:

Define your objectives. Using social media can accomplish a number of business objectives. Do you want to advertise a new product? Gather research? Provide customer service and build goodwill? Knowing what you're trying to do will make it much easier to
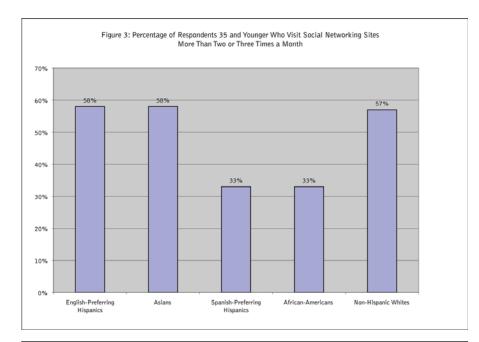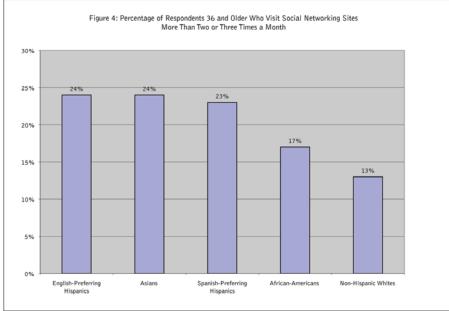
determine how to do it.

Understand your audience and be strategic. A successful social media strategy requires a clear definition of objectives, an understanding of your audience and a strategy for engaging them. Consider the cultural motivations that are driving your target audience to social media. Are they there to talk about music? Are they keeping in touch with relatives overseas? Are they there to connect and share their collective culture? What language are they using? They may be doing all of these things and more, but if you can determine what's drawing your audience to social media in the first place, you'll have a better chance of engaging them when you join their conversations. Building and maintaining conversations with a target audience requires research, careful planning and a strategic approach.

Engage your audience with timely and relevant content. Ethnic minorities are turning to social networks to express themselves, connect with their culture and communicate with each other. To be successful, marketers must be open to engaging audiences with timely and relevant content that stimulates feedback and sharing. Engaging in meaningful conversations is the goal of social media marketing and doing so requires a deep understanding of needs, openness to negative commentary and dedicated resources. A social media presence is worthless if it lies dormant.

Critical audiences

Few marketers are proactively tar-

geting ethnic minorities online and even fewer are leveraging social media to do so. A first-mover advantage is available for those who devote the time and resources to engage these critical audiences in ways that they find meaning-

ful. The fact is that we now have an unprecedented ability to reach and interact with ethnic minorities; and companies that deliver value to these segments today will be rewarded with their long-term loyalty. | Q

Figure 3: Percentage of Respondents 35 and Younger Who Visit Social Networking Sites More Than Two or Three Times a Month

English-Preferring Hispanics: 58% | Asians: 58% | Spanish-Preferring Hispanics: 33% | African-Americans: 33% | Non-Hispanic Whites: 57%

Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents 36 and Older Who Visit Social Networking Sites More Than Two or Three Times a Month

English-Preferring Hispanics: 24% | Asians: 24% | Spanish-Preferring Hispanics: 23% | African-Americans: 17% | Non-Hispanic Whites: 13%