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# MARKETING STRATEGIES IN A MULTI-ETHNIC ENVIRONMENT

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Recent demographic changes indicate the increasing importance of ethnic minority consumers in American society. A review of practices of marketing towards ethnic minorities reveals several perspectives: traditional marketing, separated marketing, integrated marketing and multicultural marketing. The article adapts research in international marketing and proposes a framework of four distinctive strategies for marketing to ethnic consumers: total standardization, product adaptation, advertising adaptation and ethnic marketing. Factors that influence the selection and implementation of the strategies are examined, such as product preference, ethnic identification, acculturation and advertising responses. Managerial implications for firms to reach ethnic markets are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent demographic changes indicate the increasing importance of ethnic consumers in the market place. Ethnic minorities now comprise 25% of the U.S. population, and they are predicted to approach 50% by year 2020. Overall, ethnic minorities are younger, have bigger families and are achieving higher level of education and income than in the past. Thus, they are more upward mobile than the previous generation and represent major market opportunities (Miller 1992; Waldrop 1993). Purchasing power of minority groups has increased tremendously during the past thirty years. African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans today have a combined annual purchasing power estimated at \$600 billion. Spending by ethnic consumers in many product categories such as soft drinks, cosmetics, electronics and automobiles has caught the attention of marketers. Adapting to these changes has become a focal point for many American companies.

Many firms have realized these changes and expanded their market by taking a proactive approach. A recent survey indicates that half of the Fortune 1000 companies all have some sort of ethnic marketing program (Brill 1994). While some marketers have become increasingly experienced and sophisticated in reaching minority

consumers, other firms are suffering from a new kind of "marketing myopia." For those who want to target ethnic consumers, lack of knowledge and naive assumptions about ethnic consumers often result in misconceptions and unpleasant surprises (Russell 1990; Miller 1992). There have been several incidents in which products and campaigns launched by companies to target ethnic consumers backfired, such as PowerMaster malt liquor and Uptown cigarette (Bromberg 1990; Freedman 1991). Lack of knowledge and sensitivity has made some marketers reluctant to reach these consumers and somewhat mystified ethnic marketing. In fact, some marketers consider ethnic minorities a "minefield" where a minor *faux pas* can lead to a marketing blunder (Blanton 1993; Lynn 1995).

Developing strategies for marketing to consumers of diverse ethnic background has become more important than ever as we are approaching the 21st century. Yet due to diversity in race, nationality, religion, geography, language and customs, etc., it has become increasingly difficult for marketers to use the same marketing mix strategies for all consumer groups. Diversity and complexity of the US population require marketers to understand each group of consumers including their demographics, media usage and consumption patterns and to use sophisticated marketing techniques to reach them.

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To design effective strategies, marketers should research the meanings of such theoretical concepts as race, ethnic background, ethnic identification, acculturation and their interaction with the marketing mix variables. As the market place becomes increasingly diversified and minority consumers' purchasing power and ethnic consciousness grow, incorporating multiculturalism into marketing and developing effective marketing strategies are inevitable.

### **PERSPECTIVES ON MARKETING TO ETHNIC CONSUMERS**

Marketing researchers must integrate issues of cultural diversity into their research and develop concrete recommendations so that marketers can make intelligent decisions. Before we contemplate marketing strategies to reach ethnic consumers, it may be necessary to review how the concept of marketing has evolved with respect to ethnic minorities. Cui's (1995) brief historical review of the perspectives of marketing to minority consumers can help shed some light on the history, current transition and future direction of marketing to ethnic minorities.

#### **Traditional Marketing**

Economic activities were a large part of this country's history of discrimination against ethnic minorities. This discrimination is reflected in the long period of repression of African Americans and other minorities and is well documented (Aguirre, Jr. and Turner 1995). Since the beginning of Colonialism and even for a long time after the Civil War, ethnic and racial minorities were denied products and services available to others and excluded from becoming full participants of the free economy. As a result, ethnic minorities used to be primarily associated with the "culture of poverty." For instance, African Americans were excluded in many social and professional situations. A classical study of attitude and behavior relationship dealt with the racial prejudices that business owners had toward a minority group (LaPiere 1934). Although ethnic minorities were a significant part of the consumer base, few firms ever attempted marketing their products to them. Practices of exclusion, racial segregation and discrimination created tremendous social and economic problems which still haunt this nation. Today, ethnic minorities are still suffering from discrimination and disadvantages in income, education and employment opportunities, etc. (Tuma and Haworth 1992; Aguirre, Jr. and Turner 1995). Discriminatory activities can be found in housing and mortgage lending, which have been investigated by federal agencies (Schafer and Ladd 1981; United States Commission on Civil Rights

1986). Some marketers are still reluctant to go into ethnic communities or to market their products to these consumers.

#### **Separated Marketing**

Conditions of minority groups have gradually improved since the Civil Rights movement of 1960s. Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action programs nationwide brought many members of minority groups into the mainstream society. Equal access and participation was then the major concern. This change brought ethnic minorities many new opportunities previously unavailable to them. More of them have since enjoyed professional growth, higher income and standard of living. Over the years, some firms started marketing their products to ethnic minorities. But the number of products geared towards minority consumers were very limited. They received a narrow selection, inferior products and services, and paid more for less (Andreasen 1978; Schwadel 1992). While most marketers stayed away from ethnic consumers, firms such as alcoholic brewers and tobacco companies targeted nondurable, low quality and health hazardous products to the already disfranchised and impoverished ethnic communities and created much controversy (Russell 1990). For instance, filters did not become available in cigarettes targeted at African American consumers six years after it was introduced into the market place. This type of marketing is synonymous with "Separated, But Not Equal" (Pollay, Lee and Carter-Whitney 1992). Although most marketers today disclaim that their products are intended only for certain consumers, many companies still feel wary about associating their products with ethnic consumers, for fear that this association is going to turn off their white patrons (Whittler 1991). Some firms are still hesitant when it comes to marketing to ethnic minorities, citing that it is too difficult or costly to reach them or they can be reached through regular channels (DiGiacomo 1990; Miller 1994; Tong 1994).

#### **Integrated Marketing**

Two decades after the beginning of Civil Rights Movement, ethnic minorities have experienced tremendous growth in purchasing power. Although cases of mistreatment still abound, ethnic minorities are generally no longer denied or excluded from any products or services. Initial research in this area found that ethnic minorities were largely under-represented in advertising (Lee, Liebman and Liebman 1993). Instead of separating minority consumers from the mainstream market, many firms now seek to integrate ethnic consumers into their marketing planning and activities. Conscious marketers

are concerned primarily with the number or the proportion of ethnic consumers represented in marketing and advertising. One indication of this change is the increasing number of "people of color" representing different ethnic groups being "included" in the execution of advertising (Wilkes and Valencia 1989; Stern 1993). This practice has been widely adopted since late 70s and has to do with seeking common ground for ethnic minorities to become part of the mainstream society. However, it has been charged with tokenism - "permission to buy" or "faces in a crowd" - which does not represent any fundamental change and is not sensitive to ethnic consumers' needs and identities (Stern 1993). For instance, African Americans are often portrayed as if they happen to have dark skin and act like white people or Asian Americans as if they are all rice-swallowing karate experts (DiGiacomo 1990; Schlossberg 1993). Ethnic consumers are offended by stereotypes and superficial assumptions of product preferences. Integration, to many ethnic minorities, means being assimilated. They have started questioning the assumptions of many marketing and advertising activities geared towards them.

### **Multicultural Marketing**

As a response to the criticism of "integrated advertising," a new concept of marketing has emerged - multicultural marketing. The increasing purchasing power, heightened political and cultural awareness and ethnic pride have led minority consumers to re-examine many of the products and marketing practices aimed at them, to affirm their cultural and ethnic identities and to demand more realistic and fair representation of minority groups. Many feel that integration does not necessarily lead to diminished ethnic identity. Being equal and integrated does not mean that we all have to be the same or ignore our differences. Actually, due to the growing population of ethnic minorities, many of them today feel less obliged to assimilate and prefer to speak their own language and to buy products that reflect their cultural heritage (Brill 1994). Now minority consumers demand that marketing and advertising truly represent the rainbow spectrum of the American society. Research in marketing has shifted to examining the content of advertising, dispelling racial and ethnic stereotypes and seeking viable solutions to these problems. The increasing ethnic consciousness and sophistication of ethnic minorities call for more attention to their true and unique needs, and ethnic-sensitive products and services. Stereotypical and biased portrayals of ethnic consumers in the media have been either updated or abandoned, such as Aunt Jemina, Uncle Ben and Frito Bandito (Rao and Kurtz 1993). Many companies now

include ethnic consumers in their planning and marketing of a particular product or brand. Some have incorporated ethnic consumers in the overall marketing process while others have special staff to coordinate marketing to ethnic consumers. Consequentially, advertising shows the many different faces of America, extending the "invitation to buy." Ethnic media such as magazines, newspapers and TV channels have experienced tremendous growth in the past ten years, and they are competing with traditional channels. Minority businesses such as Goya Food are courting ethnic consumers and competing with the giants in their industry like General Mills. Marketers who embrace the multicultural concept have been well received and are very successful with ethnic consumers (Rao and Kurtz 1993).

### **Summary**

By following the recent American history, we can see that each of the marketing perspectives reflects the evolution of racial and ethnic relationships in America. Although the traditional and separated marketing perspectives may not seem relevant today, we still can feel their persisted effects. Not all marketers are at the same stage in terms of their perspective on marketing to minorities. These concepts, however, allow us to look at the past problems, the current trend and the future course as we attempt to design effective strategies for marketing to ethnic consumers.

The brief research history of minority marketing largely parallels that of feminist literature (Stern 1993). The early stage of minority marketing research was largely concerned with the proportional representation of minorities in the media. Continuous research in the area focused on the content of advertising and the stereotypes of minorities in marketing. Researchers have recently started questioning the underlying assumptions of these practices and seeking solutions to these problems by incorporating multicultural perspectives into marketing education, research and practice (Rao and Kurtz 1993; Cui 1995). Synthesizing previous research and empirical findings has become an urgent task for formulating strategies of marketing in a multi-ethnic market place.

### **ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES FOR MARKETING TO ETHNIC CONSUMERS**

Although the need for researching marketing strategies to reach consumers of different cultural background in the U.S. domestic market has become more prominent recently, marketing researchers and practitioners have been dealing with this very issue on a larger scale in the

international arena for many years. In a sense, America has actually become a small scale model of the global market. Some multinational corporations are already using their international experience and talent in marketing to domestic consumers (Brill 1994). Research in communication has also studied the impact of cultural and social factors on dissemination of new ideas, social programs and technological innovations in this and other countries. Diffusion of innovation research is a good example how this type of cross-fertilization from other disciplines has benefited the field of marketing (Rogers 1983).

Even though international marketing does not exactly parallel domestic marketing in the U.S., they share many of the same issues and problems (Bartels 1968). As U.S. firms seek market opportunities overseas, in addition to the vast differences in political, economic and legal systems, they have to overcome tremendous barriers in culture, language, religion and customs. Numerous theoretical research and empirical studies have addressed the differences or similarities among consumers of various cultures and explored marketing strategies to reach them. Their effort has focused primarily on product preferences of foreign consumers, advertising and distribution in those countries. One framework of international marketing suggests that firms can elect to use either the standardized or the customized strategy depending on whether consumer characteristics, product preferences and media structure of the target country are similar to or different from those of the home country (Keegan 1969, 1989; Jain 1989). When consumer preferences and communication requirements are largely similar among consumers of diverse cultures, the standardized strategy is recommended and can be cost-effective. In contrast, when consumer preferences are unique and/or channel structures and advertising appeals are discrepant, the customized strategy would be more relevant. This framework has proven to be an important analytical tool in assisting multinational firms as they seek expansion in the global market place (Jain 1989; Keegan 1989).

By the same token, an important question facing many domestic marketers today is whether standardized marketing strategies can be used to market to ethnic consumers without much modification or marketing should be adapted for consumers of each ethnic group. Therefore, the same framework of standardization vs. customization can be applied to marketing to consumers of different ethnic cultures in the domestic market. Depending on consumer product preferences, advertising

responses and channel structure, marketers can either standardize its product and communication or to customize them to attract ethnic consumers. The following (see Figure 1) is a proposed framework of marketing strategies adapted from international marketing (Keegan 1989, pp. 378-81). It deals primarily with two elements of the marketing mix: product and promotion (communication). The 2-by-2 grid, defined by whether product preferences and/or communication of the target group are similar to or different from those of the majority, results in four distinctive marketing strategies:

**FIGURE 1  
STRATEGIES FOR MARKETING TO ETHNIC  
CONSUMER**

		COMMUNICATION	
		Similar: Standardize	Different: Customize
PRODUCT	Similar: Standardize	<b>I</b> <b>Total Standardization:</b> Use current marketing mix without modification e.g. electronics	<b>III</b> <b>Advertising Adaptation:</b> Use current marketing mix except advertising e.g. soft drinks
	Different: Customize	<b>II</b> <b>Product Adaptation:</b> Use current marketing mix except product e.g. cosmetics	<b>IV</b> <b>Ethnic Marketing:</b> Use totally new marketing mix e.g. ethnic food

total standardization, product adaptation, advertising adaptation and ethnic marketing. In order to determine which one is a viable strategy, marketers need to answer two essential questions: 1) Are the needs and product preferences of ethnic minorities similar to or different from those of the majority population? and 2) Are the media usage patterns and advertising responses of ethnic minorities similar to or different from those of the majority population? The primary purpose of this research is to adapt this framework of international marketing strategies to the multi-ethnic domestic market. Each of the four strategies is elaborated in the following section with explanations and examples.

## Standardized Strategy

In certain product categories such as high tech items and home appliances, there are no significant differences between ethnic minorities and the majority population in terms of product preferences and communication. Consumers of different ethnic background use these products for exactly the same purposes such as to wash dishes and dry clothes. Furthermore, the rapid development in technology and travel has broken down the barriers of communication and brought together a universal consumer culture where differences are diminishing and similarities are converging (Levitt 1983). Consumers of all groups attend to similar media and channels, and respond favorably to universal values and appeals such as convenience, quality and efficiency. Thus, when there are no apparent differences between groups of consumers in product preferences and communication, the standardized strategy should be considered. For instance, Reebok has adopted one strategy for its product line of sport footwear for all consumers. Because other than age, income and sport activities, there are no apparent differences in product preferences and advertising responses that can be attributed to ethnic background. In this case, companies may opt to combine different consumer groups using the stitch-niche approach, promote the product to all groups of consumers using integrated advertising. Many firms practice this strategy because it is cost-effective in promoting consumer awareness and uniform product image. However, if consumers of various ethnic background differ in their product needs and/or communication patterns, alternative strategies should be considered.

## Product Adaptation

In certain product areas, ethnic consumers may have unique preferences which are different from those of other groups. In this case, it is important for marketers to recognize these differences and adapt their product designs to the need or taste of ethnic consumers. Cosmetics companies, for instance, have been a pioneer in adapting their products to the needs of ethnic women. Knowing that women of various racial background differ in their skin tones, Prescriptives introduced a full line of skin care products customized for each group of women. Other cosmetics companies including Maybelline and Revlon followed suit (Sloan 1990). Now all major US cosmetic manufacturers offer various products to women of different racial background and skin tones, yet still using the same glamour and skin care appeals in communication. Products satisfying the unique needs of ethnic consumers, which cannot be substituted by others, have been very successful and made record sales for companies (Rao and Kurtz 1993). However, target marketing is welcomed only

when ethnic consumers have unique needs for a healthy and beneficial product. To appeal to Asian American consumers, for instance, food companies have managed to cultivate rice similar to those grown in Asia. But if ethnic consumers do not have particular needs for a product or if the product is unhealthy, target marketing can backfire and even result in consumer boycott, as in the incidents of Uptown cigarette and PowerMaster malt liquor. Thus, it is of utmost importance for marketers to conduct scientific research and then determine whether ethnic consumers genuinely have unique needs for a product before targeting them.

## Advertising Adaptation

In many cases, ethnic consumers have no visible preferences for certain product attributes or features. However, the communication element regarding a product may vary greatly among consumers, in terms of values, languages, advertising appeals and media usage patterns. The language barrier often requires marketers to translate or re-create their messages. Different advertising responses and media usage patterns mandate modification of advertising messages and selection of alternative channels. For instance, consumers may not have different requirements for long distance telephone service. However, they vary dramatically in their response to advertising efforts. On average, African-American consumers have been found to hold more favorable attitudes towards television advertising. In this case, long distance providers have promoted their services to African American consumers by focusing on television commercials. To reach Asian American consumers, phone companies have recruited Asian American sales staff and advertised in Asian language publications. Multicultural advertising, in both content and channel selection, has become popular among companies who try to reach a diverse audience. Although the products are essentially the same for all consumers, companies like Pepsi Co., Coca Cola and Nike all have different campaigns and discrepant messages for minority consumers. Advertising in non-English publications has grown tremendously in the last decade. Newspaper, magazines and even telephone books for different ethnic groups have become popular places to target ethnic consumers (DiGiacomo 1990; Shermach 1994). However, when designing advertising messages and selecting channels, marketers need to ensure that these decisions are sensitive to the traditions and feelings of ethnic consumers.

## Ethnic Marketing

When there is a culture-driven demand for unique products and services, when ethnic groups differ in values,

consumption and media use patterns, and when there are important variations in the assumptions and perceptions of marketing activities, a firm should adapt both its product and communication component. For instance, Kosha food has special requirements in terms of its production and distribution (Schlossberg 1994). Other examples of ethnic niche marketing are Afro-centric wedding ceremonies and Hispanic greeting cards. Therefore, ethnic marketing strategy should be applied when minority consumers have unique needs that cannot be fulfilled by the products designed for majority consumers, and when they can not be reached through traditional channels. Marketers need to consider the cultural idiosyncracies of ethnic groups in product development. These products can then be effectively advertised through ethnic media and distributed through ethnic networks. For instance, several companies have developed hair care products specifically for African American consumers who have different hair texture. They have marketed these products using unique advertising appeals, ethnic media and specific distribution channels. There are many ethnic enclaves in the country where immigrants maintain their ethnic lifestyles and are not affected by the host culture. To reach these ethnic markets, the optimal strategy is to adapt both product and advertising. Many firms have committed tremendous marketing resources and have become increasingly sophisticated in reaching specific segments of ethnic consumers (Brill 1994).

### **APPLICATION OF THE ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES**

There are a number of factors that influence the degree to which firms should standardize or customize their strategies when going to overseas markets (Jain 1989). Although adaptation of the framework is necessary for domestic marketing, the central issue here remains the same - whether product preferences and communication patterns of ethnic consumers in a given product category are similar to or different from those of the majority population. In other words, marketers need to uncover the underlying motivations that lead to ethnic consumption and media usage. Based on previous research findings in marketing and other fields (summarized in Table 1), the following sections examine such major ethnic factors and variations that affect the selection of marketing strategies.

#### **Consumer Product Preferences**

Product is an important element of a firm's strategy when marketing to ethnic consumers. In order to determine when a standardized or customized strategy is a viable approach, the foremost task is to examine whether in a given product category, ethnic consumers have unique needs and preferences discrepant from those of the

majority consumers, and more importantly, whether these differences can be attributed to their ethnic background. When a product satisfies a universal need and requires little adaptation across ethnic groups, standardized marketing ought to be pursued. There may be a universal culture with generic necessities and high-tech products where consumer preferences do not vary much, for instance, salt, stereo and major appliances. On the other hand, for many low-tech but high touch products such as fashion, food, home furnishing and skin care, consumer preferences differ greatly (Jain 1989; Reid 1994). Demand for these high involvement products is particularly culture-driven. In this case, ethnic consumers prefer products that can satisfy their distinctive needs and preferences. Marketers need to investigate and understand what cultural and ethnic factors influence the consumption of a particular product by ethnic consumers.

In some product categories, ethnic consumers may naturally prefer certain product features and designs that have unique cultural meanings for their ethnic group. For instance, various cultures are known to have different color preferences, popular design patterns and food preparation processes. Ethnic consumers tend to seek out products that represent their cultural heritage, such as home furnishing and decorations of their ethnic origin, greeting cards in their own language and religion. In this case, segmentation of consumer markets based on ethnic background is a plausible step. While the three major ethnic groups including African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans are readily segmentable, there are also important variations within each of these ethnic markets. For Hispanics, nationality is a frequently used dimension for segmentation such as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Many ethnic minorities are still actively immigrating, thus increasing the diversity within that group. If any of the common denominators such as country of origin is used in segmenting the Asian American consumers, many submarkets would emerge because they come from a dozen of Asian countries. Then firms should consider whether the size of each national group and potential sales from them warrant the customized strategy.

Even though a consumer may nominally belong to a specific ethnic group, he or she cannot readily be classified as an ethnic consumer. The extent to which a consumer identifies with his/her ethnic culture, is an important factor in ethnic consumer behavior (Green 1992; Wooten 1992). Hirschman (1981) elaborated the difference between ethnic background (nationality, race and religion) and the degree of ethnic affiliation, and its implications for marketing to ethnic consumers. There may exist some fundamental consumption-related differences between ethnic consumers who identify strongly or weakly with their group. Several researchers suggest that many ethnic

consumers, especially the high identifiers, demonstrate a strong preference for products that emphasize their ethnic identity and cultural heritage (Hernandez and Kaufman 1991; Donthu and Cherian 1994). For instance, Barbie dolls and Santa Claus in different skin tones are very popular among the high identifiers. In contrast, the low identifiers may not be that different from the average American consumer.

Conversely, acculturation - the degree to which an immigrant is acculturated into the host culture - is also a useful tool for segmenting ethnic consumer markets (Choe 1987; Webster 1992; Cui and Powell 1993). This is particularly applicable for minorities who are actively immigrating into the U.S.. Many first generation immigrants have completed their socialization in another country. They tend to remain in their respective ethnic communities such as China town, Korean section, Jewish quarter or Italian neighborhood. More often this group of immigrants has maintained its ethnic life style, still speak its native tongue and has a strong preference for products with ethnic identity. In fact, most ethnic marketing programs are targeted at these consumers. However, the second or third generation of immigrants grow up and become socialized and educated in the host society. With better communication competence, they would participate more in social interaction with the host culture. They often move outside the ethnic community and are more likely to be assimilated. These consumers may not show preference for ethnic products as much as the first generation. In fact, they are more likely to pursue the "American" life style. Therefore, level of acculturation can help firms determine which group of ethnic consumers deserves special attention in product development and advertising.

In addition, using human biology and genetics to segment ethnic consumers may be meaningful in certain product areas. For instance, some racial or ethnic minorities may be particularly prone to certain illnesses and medical problems due to their body biology, genetic history or food habits. Targeting beneficial medical products or services to minority consumers based on scientific concepts and research is always welcome by them. However, extra precaution needs to be taken so that any such segmentation and target marketing does not imply or suggest that ethnic consumers are in any way inferior. Any harmful product, segmentation or targeting that cast minorities in stereotypical or degrading roles, and marketing practices such as redlining ethnic communities, are likely to be met with charges of ethnocentrism and racism or boycott.

### **Communication Strategies**

Sometimes even if ethnic consumers do not have specific preferences for certain product features, they are still more

responsive to advertising that addresses their ethnic identities and cultural heritage. So the advertising responses of minority consumers should also be considered in marketing strategy. Language is often considered a formidable barrier for effective communication. Many ethnic consumers do not speak English as their first language, particularly among the first generation immigrants. Advertising in ethnic language publications has become increasingly popular among marketers and it is often inexpensive compared to the mainstream media. However, word-for-word translation of a firm's existing message could be a problem as in the case of Exxon's "Tiger in the Tank" and American Airline's "Flying First Class in Leather." Instead, it is often more desirable to re-create the message in the native language (DiGiacomo 1990). For service providers, having staff with other language abilities is often required. Language differences among ethnic subgroups should be noted so that one ethnic group or nationality is not mistaken for another one (Lynn 1995). For instance, all three major long distance companies have a team of sales people which focuses on Asian American consumers. The team is composed of people who can speak several Asian languages or dialects. There are also variations among Spanish speakers of different origins. Although English is the first language for most African Americans, their language is also different and unique.

Ethnic identification or conversely acculturation of ethnic consumers also has tremendous impact on advertising responses, media usage patterns and information search behavior (Kim 1980; Webster 1992; Cui and Powell 1993). Ethnic consumers at various levels of acculturation often have different interpersonal networks and mass media usage patterns (Cui and Powell 1993). Differences between first generation of immigrants and the following generations are noticeable. Recent immigrants tend to rely more on the ethnic network for social, economic and emotional support. They depend mainly on ethnic interpersonal network and ethnic media for product and shopping information (Webster 1992). But ethnic consumers who are low identifiers or have achieved a high level of acculturation can be reached through standard channels. Many second and third generation immigrants move out of ethnic enclaves and become fully integrated into the society. These ethnic consumers may not want to be singled out and prefer to be treated like other American consumers. They are more receptive to standardized marketing strategies. Across different immigrant groups, the "generation gap" or level of acculturation sometimes is more important in determining product preferences and media usage patterns than ethnic background. In other words, immigrants of different ethnic background yet the same level of acculturation may have a lot in common (Cui and Powell 1993).



Access to ethnic media is crucial for the customized strategies. Ethnic media tend to concentrate in areas where ethnic consumers gather such as California, Texas, Florida and New York. Institutional completeness of an ethnic community is an important factor in determining the use of ethnic media (Breton 1964; Inglis & Gudykunst 1982). Many ethnic communities have their own civic organizations, churches, newspaper, TV and radio stations. Among various options, one medium could be more effective than others, because ethnic consumers differ in their perceptions of media credibility (Durand, Teel, Jr. and Bearden 1979).

Regarding advertising appeals, there are some universal values that are common to all consumers such as well-being, happiness and family. The glamour appeal, for instance, may be applicable to women of various ethnic groups. However, the specific beliefs regarding each general value can be very different. For instance, one may believe that the structure of shopping roles in American families has changed tremendously, with many roles exchanged between husband and wife. However, structures of African American and Hispanic families have not changed as much as those in the white population, and sometimes advertisements showing women in their traditional roles are more effective for ethnic consumers (Solomon 1992). Thus, when addressing minority groups, an important question is whether research findings based on samples of the majority population are culturally universal and can be generalized to ethnic minorities.

Previous research suggests that minorities often respond better to models and spokespersons of their own ethnic background in advertising, and that there are no unfavorable responses to ethnic models or integrated advertising from the majority population (Bush, Hair, Jr. and Solomon 1979; Whittler 1991; Gerlich and Gopalan 1993). Thus, the fear that associating a product with minorities could alienate white patrons is largely unfounded. One study suggests that ethnic consumers in a location where they are a significant minority would consider a spokesperson of their own ethnic background more credible than consumers of the same ethnic group in a place where they are a significant majority (Deshpande and Stayman 1994). This finding certainly raises an important question regarding the effectiveness of using ethnic advertising appeals in a predominant ethnic area. For more accurate understanding of this issue, further research needs to examine multiple factors including ethnicity, income, education and product type, and use multivariate analytical techniques in order to clarify the interactions among them and the unique contribution of each factor.

Ethnic consumers also show variant responsiveness to different promotion methods. Ethnicity and acculturation play a key role in ethnic consumers' responses to sales, coupons, sweepstakes, etc. (Hernandez and Kaufman 1991). An ethnic group may be more receptive to one promotional method than to another. Some ethnic consumers are not comfortable shopping in regular department stores because they feel disoriented. They prefer shopping in stores of their ethnic group where they are familiar with the plentiful information cues of their culture. Thus, promotional messages in ethnic languages and staffing ethnic personnel would certainly give a company the competitive advantage in attracting ethnic consumers.

### **Other Considerations**

Adaptation and target marketing to ethnic consumers are not without pitfalls. While it may be true that increased attention to ethnic consumers is mostly welcome and may produce positive feedback, targeting minority groups can also backfire and be counter-productive if it is not based on solid research or managed with sensitivity. The reason for many ethnic marketing failures is that the underlying and unexamined assumptions and the specific messages aimed at minority consumers are stereotypical and do not realistically reflect the diversity among ethnic consumers. They are often based on superficial presumptions which do not represent the true and unique needs or distinctive preferences of ethnic consumers. This is why even with good intention, a "Pink PC" designed for female professionals is doomed to fail because women do not use computers for a purpose different from men, such as glamour. Likewise, targeting ethnic groups must be based on the genuine needs of consumers. Whenever there are no true differences in product preferences between ethnic consumers and the majority, targeting marketing and ethnic segmentation should be avoided.

In addition, before targeting ethnic consumers, it is important for firms to determine whether a particular need or preference can be attributed to ethnic background instead of some other social or economic factors. Confounding income with ethnic background is a common mistake and may create inadvertent bias (Moschis 1987). For instance, it would be erroneous to assume that one ethnic group would not be a good market for packaged vacations, because the group overall has lower income. Following this logic, a company could lose a small yet significant group of high income ethnic consumers. The demand for vacations and many other products is largely determined by the amount of discretionary income rather than ethnic background. Thus, marketers should examine the impact of other social and economic factors before attributing certain behavior to ethnic background, and find

a balance between the general characteristics of an ethnic group and the diversity within the group. Managed with knowledge and sensitivity, a firm can avoid common stereotypes and establish a lasting relationship with ethnic consumers.

Selection of a marketing strategy in isolation of market-specific factors is insufficient. Sometimes the pressure of competition may necessitate customization to gain an advantage over rivals. By providing a product that ultimately matches the needs and taste of consumers, marketers are actually extending a personal invitation to these consumers. For instance, in marketing their services, all three major long distance telephone companies have designed unique calling programs for consumers of different nationalities, advertised in ethnic media, staffed operators of native languages, used ethnic cultural appeals and promoted important ethnic holidays. Although the size of a particular ethnic group may seem small by industry standard, fierce competition and market share considerations make the customized approach and accurate micro-marketing worthwhile.

On the other hand, one cannot ignore the trade-off between standardization and customization, since each strategy has its benefits and disadvantages. Target marketing can help reach a specific group of consumers. But marketers need to consider the added cost and the marginal benefit in terms of unit sales when preparing to zoom in on ethnic consumers (Rao and Kurtz 1993). Since there is no absolute division between standardization and adaptation, there are other alternatives to consider. Although ethnic consumers may be different from one another, they also share many other aspects of life such as age, income, education, religion and level of acculturation, which are sometimes more important determining factors of consumption. In this case, firms can explore the merits of counter-segmentation and stitch-niche marketing. As indicated in the strategy of "global marketing," a firm can market successfully across ethnic groups by emphasizing the common characteristics among them. For instance, in addition to "Yuppies," there are also black urban professionals ("Buppies"), Hispanic and Asian American Yuppies. In this case, age, geography and profession are more important in determining product preferences and advertising responses than ethnic background. Integrated marketing to the same age group or social class across ethnic background has gained much popularity recently.

As international marketers "plan globally and act locally," a domestic firm needs to specify its overall objective for all consumers and adapt its marketing strategy to ethnic groups in implementation and execution. By "thinking nationally and acting locally," domestic marketers can capture the overall market trend while remaining

competitive in selected market segments. For instance, while focusing on the middle level market, JC Penny has recently started African American boutiques in selected stores based on the demography of the store area. A growing number of companies have been integrating their ethnic marketing efforts into individual brand groups. This "total brand" approach allows more consistency in program execution and help improve credibility. An ongoing McDonald's print advertisement campaign for Hispanics offers different vignettes that position the burger chain as a community fixture. Firms might choose "prototype" campaign using the same ad with only translation and necessary idiomatic changes or "pattern" advertising in which the overall campaign is designed with some adaptation in content and execution for ethnic minority markets (Rao and Kurtz 1993). In summary, successful marketing to ethnic consumers requires extensive research, careful planning, meaningful strategy and effective execution.

## DISCUSSION

### Contribution of the Research

The present research has made several contributions to the understanding of marketing in a multi-ethnic environment. First, it provides a historical review of perspectives of marketing to ethnic minorities, including past marketing practices and current transitions in marketing research of ethnic consumers. This integrative review can help marketers examine the critical issues, their own perspective on marketing to ethnic consumers, and adjust their perspective if necessary. Secondly, it provides a framework of alternative strategies for marketing to consumers of diverse ethnic background. By adapting a framework from international marketing, it has integrated many different concepts to foster a better understanding of ethnic consumer behavior, particularly product preferences and communication. This framework compares four distinctive approaches to marketing to ethnic consumers - standardized marketing, product adaptation, advertising adaptation and ethnic marketing - and discusses the optimal environment for adopting each strategy. It is robust and adaptive enough to encompass various concepts of consumer behavior and the marketing mix. Thirdly, this research has integrated previous research and examined the impact of several important factors including ethnicity, acculturation, advertising response and media use patterns. Ethnic variations in this area clearly has an impact on the selection and application of an optimal marketing strategy (summarized in Table 1).

This research also attempts to address the complexity and delicacy of marketing to ethnic consumers. Market-specific factors such as competition and other alternative

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strategies including counter-segmentation, multi-ethnic marketing and pattern advertising are explored. It also addresses the possible pitfalls of ethnic marketing and some of controversial yet rarely debated or researched issues, such as the fear of associating a product with

minority consumers and segmentation based on genetic and biological factors. This research is also aimed at stimulating further studies that systematically test the proposed strategies.

**TABLE 1**  
**ETHNIC FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE MARKETING: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Factors	Impact on Marketing	Selected References
Racial and Ethnic Background	Consumers of different racial or ethnic background may have unique needs and preferences and can be used in general segmentation. Factors such as ethnicity and acculturation should also be considered.	Durand, Teel, Jr. and Bearden (1979); Gerlich and Gopalan (1993); Donthu and Cherian (1994); Cui (1995)
Language	Language is the vehicle of communication for accessing ethnic consumers. Messages created in ethnic languages help relating products to the needs of ethnic consumers and improving advertising effectiveness.	Webster (1992); Deshpande and Stayman (1994); Koslow, Shamdasani and Touchstone (1994); Lynn (1995)
Religion and Customs	To many ethnic consumers, religion is a central part of their life, dictating many aspects of consumption from product types, decision making, to time and places of shopping.	Hirschman (1981); Hernandez and Kaufman (1991); Delener (1994)
Ethnicity and Acculturation	The degree of ethnic identification or level of acculturation will impact ethnic consumers' preference to products and advertising that emphasize their cultural heritage, media usage patterns and responses to various promotional methods.	Choe (1987); Hernandez & Kaufman (1991); Green (1992); Webster (1992); Wooten (1992); Cui and Powell (1993); Donthu & Cherian (1994)
Values, Attitudes and Perception	Because various cultures place different values on things and have different assumptions about behaviors, consumer product preferences and consumption patterns may vary across cultures.	Valencia (1989); Lee & Delener (1991)
Advertising and Promotion	Ethnic consumers show variant levels of responsiveness to different media, advertising appeals and promotion methods.	Durand, Teel, Jr. & Bearden (1979); Hernandez & Kaufman (1991)
Genetics and Biology	Scientific research may help firms identify unique needs among ethnic minorities. A beneficial product or service is always welcome. Marketing based on pseudo-science is likely to be met with charges of ethnocentrism and racism or even boycott.	Feiner & Morgan (1987); Cui (1995)
Institutional Completeness and Media Availability	Ethnic communities differ in institutional completeness due to population size, history, location and cohesiveness, etc., and largely determines the availability of ethnic media.	Breton (1964); Inglis Gudykunst (1982)

Note: The references are only selected examples of existing research, thus are not exhaustive. Please also see J. R. Smith (1993). "A Selected Bibliography on Marketing to African Americans and Hispanics Since the Late 1970s," in Robert L. King (ed.), *Minority Marketing: Research Perspectives for the 1990s*, the Academy of Marketing Science, 59-62.

## Limitations and Suggestions

The presented framework is rather simplistic and may not represent all the possible scenarios or alternatives. It is intended for providing general guidelines in formulating a company's strategy for reaching consumers of diverse background, not for solving a particular marketing problem. Due to space limitation and lack of systematic research in this area, the research could not examine the effectiveness of any specific strategy, the unique contribution of each factor examined here or the possible interaction among these factors. Please refer to the references and summary in Table 1 for research on specific issues.

Measurements of various concepts proposed here need to be refined. Future research in this area needs to elaborate the theory and empirically test the proposed strategies using comparative or parallel studies. Further studies are also necessary to systematically investigate how the cultural factors interact with the marketing mix variables in affecting the formulation and execution of various marketing strategies. Cultural diversity can potentially serve as a means for broadening the marketing concept, empowering marketing practice, education and research.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Ethnic diversity is important for marketing consumer goods and services. Firms seeking to explore ethnic consumer markets or to strengthen their current marketing programs ought to devise a comprehensive plan for the multi-ethnic market. This process should start with examining, and adjusting if necessary, a company's current perspective on marketing to ethnic minorities. It should address the philosophical questions as well as realistic concerns. The company can then study its product(s) and relationship with ethnic consumers, and its current marketing strategy and programs. In order to avoid marketing blunders, certain characteristics like language, culture and religion must be studied before a marketing plan can be developed (Rao and Kurtz 1993; Delener 1994; Lynn 1995). In essence, successful marketing to ethnic consumers requires extensive research, understanding of consumers' needs and wants, and constant monitoring. Routine analysis, evaluation and interpretation of the external environment will enable marketers to make accurate sales forecasts and take advantage of changing demographics (Rao and Kurtz 1993).

Successful marketing to ethnic consumers takes long term planning and development of an overall strategy. As the

business community embraces and implements the concept of total quality management, understanding of ethnic consumers and the multicultural concept is especially relevant. Marketing to ethnic consumers should be considered an issue of total quality management and strategic planning. If a company wants to gain a competitive advantage in ethnic markets, it ought to integrate diversity into the company's overall planning and each step of its marketing management process. Although some consider it unnecessary, recruitment of minorities should be an integral part of this process. Many companies have adopted the diversity policy in their human resources management and provided company wide diversity training. Special personnel should be assigned to oversee and manage a firm's marketing activities geared towards ethnic consumers and coordinate these activities with the firm's overall marketing objective. Multicultural marketing is much easier to implement if the diversity outside the organization is mirrored by the diversity within it, and if companies recruit from the ethnic consumers to which they market (Reid 1994). Sporadic, symbolic and feeble attempt at diversity will not produce lasting results. Marketers need to make long-term commitment based on sincere interest and devote adequate resources to these efforts (Rao and Kurtz 1993)

It is also necessary that marketers understand and appreciate the complexity and delicacy of marketing to ethnic consumers. While ethnic consumers welcome the increased attention, firms certainly do not want to make the impression that they are only interested in the disposable income of these consumers. It is important that firms show genuine and long term interest in the well-being of ethnic consumers. This can be achieved, as some corporations have done, by investing in ethnic communities, supporting their charities, businesses and organizations, by promoting their culture (religion, ethnic holidays and performing arts, etc.), and essentially by establishing and maintaining a continuous relationship with the group. Although marketing is largely an economic activity, firms ought to consider its social, political and ethical consequences. Companies should avoid any biases, how inadvertent they seem to be, such as insensitive humor and redlining ethnic communities. Corrective advertising and public relations efforts should follow any mistakes. In conclusion, customer satisfaction and long-term positive relationship with ethnic consumers ultimately make companies successful in these markets and will carry them well into the next century.

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