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By: Belkist Padilla

Projective techniques: Do they work in the Hispanic market?

Editor's note: This article was written by Belkist E. Padilla while she was VP, qualitative research, at Strategy Research Corp.

I was talking with a young Mexican woman in a Los Angeles focus group about the importance of serving her family authentic Mexican meals. My client wanted to know how to position its canned and shelf-stable Mexican food product so that Mexican housewives like this woman would buy it. Sales of the Mexican line of products were dismal and we didn't understand why. Taste tests had

been very positive. Through the use of collage building, this Mexican woman gave us the answer. The collage revealed her guilt at not having the time to make authentic, homemade Mexican dishes like her grandmother used to make. She pointed out the love in an older Native-American woman's eyes (used to represent a Mexican grandmother), with graying braids and a pleasing smile to show how Mexican food is about nostalgia, bringing a piece of the homeland to a faraway country, and giving your family a nutritious, great-tasting meal filled with love.

We came to understand that giving them a product they could "nuke" in two minutes and tasted great wasn't the answer. With the help of this woman's collage and others from the research the client was able to successfully reposition the product with a primary focus on the product's authentic, like-grandma-used-to-make-taste. The strategy was to use a Mexican grandmother personality, not unlike the one in the collage, to be the spokesperson for the line of Mexican products. This was to emphasize the product's homemade taste and address the issue of guilt at using ready-made products. The message of the new strategy was that "our" Mexican grandma makes the products so you don't have to.

Excellent tool

Projective techniques -- the use of a picture, word, image or sentence to provide an environment that encourages the respondent to project his/her feelings and unconsciously express them in his or her response -- are an excellent tool to use among Hispanics.

Less direct and more inclined to defer to others, Hispanics can be a difficult segment to interview. In the previous example, respondents all claimed they made their Mexican dishes from scratch. The collages revealed that while this was their desire, and what they felt they should do, they were falling short of their own expectations.

As a group, Hispanics value family unity and the sharing of common goals and ideas. We see less value placed on independence, self-reliance, self-expression and singular thinking. How does one conduct qualitative research in

this segment and make sure that one is getting at the "real" reasons behind certain opinions or beliefs? This, of course, is a concern for any qualitative researcher but should be of particular interest to anyone conducting research among Hispanics.

Below are a few mini-case studies that show how projective techniques can be used among consumers in this target. There are many projective techniques -- these examples are but a few. The examples below are not based upon any one client or any proprietary information.

Case study: What is a healthy baby to a mom?

A baby products company wanted to understand what is of critical importance to mothers of young babies. After a series of focus groups we discovered, not surprisingly, that a baby's health is what is most important to a young mother. After many discussions we were perplexed with the questions, "What is a healthy baby?" Is a healthy baby the same for an Anglo mom vs. an Hispanic mom? What does a healthy baby look like and what does an unhealthy baby look like to Hispanic moms?

A study was designed for which we compiled video and static images of babies at different stages of development, at different levels of activity (sleeping, sitting, walking, running, crawling), in different moods and of different physiques (heavier babies and slimmer babies). Both Anglo moms and Hispanic moms viewed videos and stacks of baby pictures. They pointed out what healthy was and what healthy was not. The study revealed very interesting information: A healthy baby to an Anglo mother is not the same as a healthy baby for an Hispanic mom.

An Hispanic mom looks for a baby that is chubby, has rosy cheeks, looks into his mother's eyes and not the camera. What might be considered a fit, carefree baby for an American mother might be considered skinny and not well cared for by Hispanic moms. There were other bits of interesting information. Healthy Hispanic babies always wear shoes or at the very least socks - clean socks. Anglo moms thought that a barefoot baby was healthy, carefree and happy. Subsequent advertising development revealed that while the same strategy could be used for

both Anglo and Hispanic moms, the execution of the strategy was going to be very different for each segment. Babies in the subsequent Hispanic ads looked at their moms, not at the camera. They were chubby, more traditionally dressed and wore socks or baby shoes. The Anglo ads showed babies who were not necessarily always looking at their mom, they were in a diaper or light cotton shirt and were not necessarily wearing socks or shoes. While both campaigns showed a healthy baby, they did so in a manner appropriate for each culture.

Case study: Do Hispanic women only drink "umbrella drinks"?

When I initially brought up the topic of liquor and its consumption in a focus group with Hispanic women I got nervous giggles. Initially, respondents lived up to the idea that women consume primarily soft spirits and only in the strictest moderation. They were very reserved in their responses and talked about having the occasional glass of wine or the infrequent mixed drink. Those who ventured to explain that they also like the occasional shot of whisky or tequila were met with exaggerated shock by the rest of the group. For the most part, they felt uncomfortable about admitting that after work they might join their husbands for a drink.

However, the story was somewhat more complete after a picture-sort exercise. Respondents were asked to sort pictures that they associated with the different types of liquor they mentioned consuming. Pictures of open spaces, blue skies and bright primary colors depicted the feeling of Mexican women when they let go of their inhibitions and drink a shot -- or two -- of tequila. Pictures of the color red and a man's smile depicted their husbands' reactions at seeing their wives "unrestrained." A picture of a couple laughing and snuggling in bed showed that drinking socially makes their husbands romantic and makes them feel sexy. Pictures with brown hues, textured fine fabrics, and people dressed formally depicted the aspirations of Cuban women when drinking a Scotch on the rocks. To our surprise, another woman explained after showing a picture of a beach umbrella and tropical fruit, "This is what we're always served . . . a piña colada or strawberry daiquiri. It's insulting really. For

men it's a given that they'll have a Scotch on the rocks . . . we're not asked, we're given the 'umbrella drink!'"

Case study: What should a mall look like?

Each respondent was asked to build two collages. One to reflect how they currently view the mall, its merchandise mix and the kind of people who shop there. They were told to feel free to use any pictures and/or words that reflected their impression of the retail center -- from pictures of the types of people who shop there, to pictures of the types of merchandise sold, to pictures that reflected the retail center's appearance. The second collage was to reflect their "ideal" mall (which would show what changes or improvements had to be considered to best attract the Hispanic consumer).

The results were very interesting. The first set of collages showed that the mall was seen as being an older mall -- words like "old-fashioned" and "good standby" were written over the pictures. When probed on the pictures that represented the mall's merchandise, respondents agreed that there was nothing unusual or unique about the merchandise sold at the mall and that they would like to see more diverse, "interesting" merchandise. The second set of collages (which represented consumers' "ideal") provided a visual representation of what respondents meant by "more interesting merchandise."

This second set of collages also included pictures of families socializing together and with friends while taking a walk, or sitting at a café -- signaling the importance of eateries, places to congregate and good landscaping at the mall. Mexicans said that when they go to the mall they go with the entire family and the mall should have stores and businesses that appeal to the whole family. The information gathered also helped the advertising agency pinpoint the types of images their target would find inspirational and motivational.

Case study: What do Hispanic teenagers have to say?

Teenagers of any origin are not the most talkative people in the world. But projective techniques can be used to allow them to laugh, let their guard down and reveal some of their opinions. Projective techniques can be used quite successfully to tackle issues such as teen smoking,

abortion, safe sex, and gang violence. But they shouldn't be reserved to tackle sensitive topics and nothing else. I recently had Hispanic teens draw stick people as a way to find out how to reposition a fruit drink. Groups of teens were asked to make a stick person on each of two sheets of paper. They were given magic markers, glue, pictures and crayons to use. The first stick person was to show what they are like and what is important to them. The second stick person was to reveal what the fruit drink would be if it were a person.

The stick fruit-drink-person revealed that the fruit drink was like a friend one outgrows. It dressed in child's clothes and hadn't discovered the opposite sex. The stick-person of the teenager wore the "best" Nike shoes because it made them fast. They also drank sports drinks because it made them fast like the shoes. However, the pictures also revealed that they don't always have the money to buy expensive sports drinks so they drink water. When probed the teens explained that they wanted a drink that promised energy, strength and speed when playing any sport but that was also thirst-quenching when they were simply thirsty. It also revealed that fruit drinks are not "kids' stuff" but that an on-the-go smaller bottle that they could throw in their back packs or gym bags might increase consumption. These findings were key in developing advertising that repositioned the product for active, on-the-go teens.

Less-guarded answers

As with any consumer group, the moderator's ability to establish trust and a feeling of unconditional regard is key. But as with other segments of the population, projective techniques can be quite useful in obtaining less-guarded answers by allowing Hispanic respondents to disagree in a manner that is more consistent with their culture - in an indirect and non-confrontational fashion. It also allows us to understand what they really do versus what they say they do.