

How can marketers respond to cultural identity?

Is ethnicity a useful basis for segmentation? *Heather Maitland* explores the research

Many of us have targets for attracting visitors, audiences or participants from specific ethnic groups. But ethnicity is not a particularly useful basis for segmentation. Several pieces of research suggest that there are differences in the way different ethnic groups engage with the arts and museums but that other factors have an equally powerful influence. Among these are *Telling It Like It Is: Black and Minority Ethnic Engagement with London's Museums* (2004) in which Damian Tissier and Samir Singh Nathoo point out that, across all ethnic groups, managerial and professional groups are more than twice as likely to visit museums and galleries than other social groups and that 35–54 year olds are much more likely to visit than the over 75s and 16–24 year olds. Arts Council England's report *Focus on Cultural Diversity: Attendance, Participation and Attitudes* (2003) also identified a clear association between attending arts events and economic status and age regardless of respondents' ethnic origin.

COI Communications, the government's communication agency, has published research that helps marketers unpick the complicated relationship between age, ethnicity and cultural identity. You can download Philly Desai, Karen Roberts and Christine Roberts' summary report *Dreaming the Global Future – Identity, Culture and the Media in a Multi-cultural Age* at www.coi.gov.uk.

Their research shows that cultural identity is complex and infinitely variable. There are differences in cultural identity between communities, between generations and between individuals. To add to the complexity, individuals inhabit different aspects of their cultural identity in different situations. The factors that influence identity are nationality, ethnic and cultural origins, religion and regional and local identities.

Many of the people involved in the research from older generations felt that their formal nationality was less important than their ethnic and cultural origin. Many younger British-born people, though, had hybrid identities that embraced both their lifestyle and living

environment and their family and cultural background. When with their family, they participate in their parental culture which includes food, religion, language, family values and special occasions. When at work or at school or college, they participate in aspects of mainstream British culture. But this development of hybrid identities was not universal among young people. Those who felt marginalised tended also to feel distanced from their British nationality because of their experiences and perceptions of racism.

The majority of young people who referred to themselves as 'mixed race' tended to identify more strongly with one or other of their parents' ethnic origins rather than a mix of the two. This choice appeared to be influenced by the visibility of their ethnic origins, the relationship they have with their family, the cultural mix of their neighbourhood and friends, and their religion.

Research shows that cultural identity is complex and infinitely variable.

Of course, all of this has an impact on the way that people consume the media. The research reveals that members of the same family will consume different media in different ways at different times and in different rooms. All members of the family will switch to and fro between mainstream and specialist ethnic media in a single evening. The researchers relate different media to different kinds of identity by dividing up mainstream and specialist media and younger and older generations.

They suggest that there are mainstream media which represent a shared youth culture, commenting, 'When consuming media in this area, young people from ethnic minority communities are likely to identify less strongly as black, Asian, or Chinese and more as members of a single, multi-cultural youth

culture.' They suggest that marketers use positive images of ethnic minority young people but that messages targeted by ethnicity are not necessary and may even be rejected.

The researchers identify specialist ethnic media that appeal more to younger people, and reflect this group's tendency to hybridise their cultural identities. Here they recommend that marketers develop targeted strategies and messages that reflect both ethnic and generational identities.

When consuming specialist ethnic media that appeal more strongly to older generations, research respondents were more likely to identify with their cultural heritage and see themselves as members of a particular ethnic community. When using these communication channels, marketers need to develop highly targeted strategies and messages that reflect accurately a specific sense of ethnic identity. As these are the media that older generations are likely to encourage the rest of the family to consume with them, the researchers suggest that these are the media most suitable for messages aimed at the whole family or for issues affecting the entire community.

Specifically targeted messages are unlikely to be effective in the context of mainstream media preferred by the older generation. In these circumstances, consumers are most likely to see themselves as part of the mainstream population; however, the researchers suggest that positive representations of ethnic minority people will attract attention. Such representations need to be authentic and 'fleshed out', avoid stereotypes and show ethnic minorities as 'ordinary' consumers.

This research is important because it shows that if marketers understand how people's identities shift with circumstance, they can better identify the messages and media that will communicate effectively.



Heather Maitland
Consultant and Author
e hmaitland1@aol.com