

California Latinos and Environmental Issues: (Hold on! Don't buy in just yet!)

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The participation of Latinos in the U.S. consumer market has been growing along with their population growth. This group was estimated in 2006 to be around 13.1 million, just in California alone. At the same time, the urge to consume has spread like wildfire, cutting across cultures, ethnic groups and nationalities, and reaching Latinos in the U.S. as well. A variety of companies like Ford, Starbucks, Costco, Wal-Mart, and even local grocery stores like Safeway, are constantly appealing to Latino consumers on an everyday basis with aggressive market strategies. Why should paying attention to the growing number of Latinos matter, many might ask. The answer is that Latinos happen to be the largest ethnic group in California and throughout the U.S and can potentially affect the outcomes. Their numbers have captured the attention of politicians (at local, state and federal level) as well as the business world. For example, an article by Meredith Schwartz (2006) discusses important economic opportunities that are available to marketers interested in the Latino consumer and gives information about the future projected Latino buying power for 2003-2008. The article is designed to reach savvy entrepreneurs who might show interest in marketing their products to Latinos.

However, the seemingly uninterrupted voices of the consumer market have almost drowned out the voices of those concerned over a wide range of environment issues. Nevertheless, these silenced voices are finally speaking up and becoming louder. It is now clear that some multimillion-dollar amounts of consumer products (made mostly by Oligopolies) are being produced unsustainably, and are having a toll on our

planet's resources, including crucial human resources.

In California's Great Central Valley, these practices have been challenged by peaceful activists like Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW). In the early 1960's, Cesar Chavez raised serious and compelling concerns over the use of pesticides on grapes and other produce by growers. These concerns were confirmed some 20 years later in a study by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (published in 1985) reporting that each year around 801,000 workers (mostly Latinos) die from exposure to pesticides. These pesticides have been linked to both adult and child cancer and are also responsible for miscarriages, stillbirths and infant deformities. However, farm workers are still almost entirely excluded from the health and safety standards that cover most workers under the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act, as well as from the Fair Labor Standard Act. This is striking given that back in 1965, Cesar Chavez and the UFW succeeded in motivating consumers all over the country to boycott Delano grapes to address farm workers conditions. The boycott was successful. Cesar Chavez simply used the free-market tools of supply and demand to reduce the demand for grapes, and was able to bargain with the growers.

Environmental issues are still very much part of today's world and this is why it is important to recognize that as the number and market power of Latinos grow in California, like most Americans, they will become explicit targets of aggressive marketing tactics used to fuel the consumer market. All the while, our planet's natural resources are being consumed at unsustainable levels endangering

and threatening plants and animal species all over the world. It is important for Latinos to become aware that forests, in both Latin America and in the Pacific Northwest, provide raw materials for the production of market items at unsustainable rates. For example, natural forests in Latin America are depleted by deforestation to open up land to produce products (e.g. beef, biofuels, and pineapples) demanded by consumers in developed countries. These products are typically grown or raised almost entirely by a handful of corporate agribusinesses, using unsustainable methods that often deplete both land and people. Also, we continue our constant ritual of pumping CO₂ into the atmosphere by our current methods of transportation, resulting in global warming and increased air pollution. Global warming is caused when greenhouse gases are trapped in the earth's atmosphere. Greenhouse gases have increased by 70% from 1970 to 2004, and CO₂ emissions have increased by 28% from 1990 to 2004. In 2004, CO₂ emissions accounted for 77% of the total anthropogenic (human caused) greenhouse gases. However, the consumer market seems quite indifferent to the depletion of our natural resources. At the same time, advertisers have become experts at tuning in to Latino purchasing power, and have been successfully attracting Latino consumer interest in a variety of products produced largely by unsustainable practices.

There is an economic explanation involving the market forces of supply and demand as well as a dynamic of economic reasoning at play here, which consumer marketing firms constantly exploit. It is the economic concept of *diminishing marginal utility*. Diminishing marginal utility suggests that people generally tend to value an increasing range of market products. This is because the more people consume a product the less additional value that product gives them. New products are therefore often more

appealing and more highly desired by consumers. The market, which is motivated by self-interest, will have a profit incentive to provide highly desired items. The result has been the marketing of a wide variety of new products.

After the passing of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) we are seeing an increase of imported products from Latin America being marketed to U.S. consumers, including Latinos. Some products on grocery store shelves are consumable items like tostadas, tortillas, Mexican brands of soda pop, or Mexican beers like *Corona* and *Tecate*. There is also a recent proliferation in US stores of non-consumable items from Latin America like clothes, garden furniture, outdoor fountains, computers, and computer parts.

Historically, neighboring communities tend to borrow and exchange information or products. This has happened in U.S. towns like San Diego, California, which borders the Mexican town of Tijuana, where proximity and constant exposure have resulted in shared exchanges between Mexican and American cultures of food, language, music, art, and dance, to name only a few cultural areas. Historically, traders and merchants from both countries have transferred and exchanged their products in these border towns. (For example, during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, cattle from Mexico were exchanged for the supply of ammunition needed for the Revolution.) Today, with NAFTA, Mexican products are imported into the U.S. in even larger amounts at these border U.S. and Mexican cities. In exchange, American products are exported to Mexico along with the construction of American *maquiladoras* (American companies) in border cities like Tijuana, which employ mostly unskilled Mexican workers. Today, Mexican citizens cross the border on a daily basis to work or shop in San Diego and beyond, while U.S. citizens cross to the Mexican side to dine,

shop and pursue various other business, and entertainment activities in Mexico as well.

Furthermore, the economic boom of the late 1990s created jobs and economic opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers. Latinos in California, and throughout the U.S., as well as immigrants from neighboring Latin American countries like Mexico, found themselves, like many others in the U.S., with more job and investment opportunities, and more money. The consumer market quickly picked up on the new Latino-consumer niche. For example, in California, as in many other states across the U.S., businesses such as local Safeway stores, real estate companies like PMZ in Modesto, and even Hollywood movie promoters began to cater to the Latino market. The entertainment industry, for example, introduced movies by Latino film directors like Guillermo Del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*), and Alfonso Cuarón (in *Y Tú Mamá También*, and *Harry Potter in the Prisoner of Azkaban*) as well as TV comedy shows such as *George Lopez*, and *Ugly Betty*. However, the market has only one main goal in mind: to use marketing strategies to tap into the Latino market in the hope of profit.

For example, an article in the *New York Times* by Cynthia Gorney in September of 2007 described a marketing campaign aimed at Latinos by an advertising firm famous for its TV commercials. According to Gorney, this firm's first job was to identify and categorize Latinos by dividing them and profiling them into three consumer categories. First are the "Learners", those who are foreign born, who are most often renters with two to three children. Next are the "Straddlers", who are mostly young, blue-collar workers who tend to be bilingual. Last are the "Navigators" who are English dominant, have some college, speak some Spanish, and most likely own a home. Such marketing firms have a variety of client companies which range from food companies like Kraft Foods and fast

food restaurants like McDonalds, to auto companies like Ford and Chevrolet, and cell phone providers like T-Mobile. The list is long. However, what these advertisers all have in common is their use of clever cultural connections and the success they have achieved in selling their clients' product. The goals of these advertising firms are the same as those of the market as a whole - that is, to achieve what all businesses naturally seek to achieve: profit.

US-born Latinos and their Latino immigrant relatives are presently hearing two entirely different messages from the media in this country. The message from the business world appears to embrace and welcome Latinos, marketing to them in Spanish or English, or both. The second, newer message that Latinos are constantly hearing, one that is not so welcoming, is the political message from the government which stems from the current immigration reform debate that is presently taking place in Washington.

The current new message that Latinos are hearing was triggered by economic events at the start of the new millennium, when worries over an economic recession began percolating to the surface, following the end of the Dot.com boom and the departure of many American companies in search of cheaper labor in overseas markets. These events were quickly followed by September 11th, an event which left everyone in shock. The country was in for a change. Talk of immigration reform began to emerge again, enflaming new worries about border security. Latinos, especially undocumented immigrant Latinos, began feeling the pressure. For example, according to a study conducted by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Bendixen polling firm, Latino immigrants are now experiencing job discrimination to the point where four out of five Mexicans and Central Americans are finding it difficult to obtain jobs, according to a recent *Modesto Bee* article. 82% of Mexicans and 84% of

Central Americans are finding it difficult to land well-paying jobs due to documentation problems and lack of available jobs. Compounding the problem, the country is currently in an economic slow-down, facing war-spending issues and a real estate market decline, which has impacted other industries such as the home construction and housing-related retail businesses.

While difficult for many, this economic slowdown provides an opportunity for Latinos to reflect on important environmental issues that have both a direct and indirect impact on the issues discussed above. Economic slowdowns provide a chance to reexamine important social issues, such as migration and global warming, both of which are issues with worldwide implications. This might also be a good time to reflect on the impact consumer market activities are having on our natural resources. This impact might be indirectly triggering and contributing to some of the economical, social, and political issues in the global community. Environmental issues that seem quite complex and challenging could potentially be solved if they were addressed to promote world unity and understanding, and focused on more common goals, such as considering the application of sustainable environmental practices worldwide.

It is vital that we give due consideration to important issues spawned by consumerism. We are all connected, regardless of age, sex, background, or country. Latinos and non-Latinos should pause and consider the implications of the production and processing of the materials they purchase and consume, as well as the amount of energy it takes to deliver an item for purchase. Whether the purchased item is a house, a car, or beef from the local supermarket, Latinos should investigate the item's material origin: who made the material and by what means, where it was imported from, and how the item is transported to the marketplace. Consumers already know that the costs of food and

materials include expenses such as the cost of fuel, but we also need to be aware of the hidden costs to our environment when more CO₂ is pumped into the atmosphere by fuel emissions, spawning problems like global warming and poor health. Along with other identified consumer target groups, it is necessary for Latinos to become informed before purchasing high-emission vehicles. They should be aware of the high incentive for marketing practices specifically targeting Latino customers. Advertising firms have done their homework and know very well that Latinos, as well as anyone else in the country, identify with their cars. Owning a new car has always been very much part of the American dream for everyone, including Latinos.

Latinos should conduct more in-depth analysis on products they are looking to buy, and should also exploit the market forces of supply and demand to encourage marketing of environmentally friendlier items. In fact, Latinos are already taking the lead among Californians in their concern over global warming, as cited in a recent Public Policy Institute of California study. According to this study, Latinos rank first (45%), and notably higher than Blacks (36%), Whites (29%) and Asians (24%), in concern over air pollution, as well as ranking first (72%), compared to Blacks (66%), Whites (65%) and Asians (59%), in concern over the effects of global warming. This level of awareness concerning environmental issues should help Latinos investigate the facts about certain vehicles that burn enormous amounts of fossil fuel and have the potential to contribute substantially to the accumulation of CO₂ emissions in the atmosphere. Latinos have historical reasons for this sensitivity to the growing issues of global warming and air pollution. Latinos know that carbon emission is a part of Mexico's history: Mexico City has long had one of the worst air pollution problems in the world. For instance, on October 16, 1999, BBC News reported that Mexico City air

pollution levels had risen to dangerously high levels, three times the highest level considered safe by most countries, and that as a consequence city authorities took emergency action by ordering thousands of vehicles off the road and requiring factories to decrease production to 30% of normal. Use of protective facemasks is widespread in Mexico City. The negative consequences of ignoring air pollution and global warming are beyond imagining. Unfortunately, the whole world is now experiencing similar negative effects to those already felt in Mexico, resulting in record high global temperatures. There is simply no economic defense for exploiting our natural resources for short-term profits while foregoing long-term investment in preserving natural resources for future generations. Such practices can only promote environmental bankruptcy!

This is why Latinos should “*Hold on!*” before buying products harmful to our health or the environment. Latinos are already quite familiar with some of the problems. To ignore this knowledge and disregard the experiences of their immigrant peers will lead over time to even more health issues from air, water, and land pollution, inefficiency, zero or negative savings, wasteful energy practices, economic and environmental bankruptcy, and other unforeseen negative developments. These are urgent reasons for all Latinos to be skeptical about the consumer marketing strategies so aggressively thrust in their faces on a daily basis. Latinos should recognize marketing practices as a kind of propaganda based on extensive market research addressed to the new consumers big business has cynically and opportunistically set out to exploit.

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