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Article published Apr 28, 2007

Rewriting the Ad Rules for Muslim-Americans

For years, few advertisers in the United States have dared to reach out to Muslims. Either they did not see much potential for sales or they feared a political backlash. And there were practical reasons: American Muslims come from so many ethnic backgrounds that their only common ground is their religion, a subject most marketers avoid.

That is beginning to change. Consumer companies and advertising executives are focusing on ways to use the cultural aspects of the Muslim religion to help sell their products.

Grocers and consumer product companies are considering ways to adapt their goods to Muslim rules, which forbid among other things, gelatin and pig fat, which is often used in cosmetics and cleaning products. Retailers are looking into providing more conservative skirts, even during the summer months, and mainstream advertisers are planning to place some commercials on the satellite channels that Muslims often watch.

Marketing to Muslims carries some risks. But advertising executives, used to dividing American consumers into every sort of category, say that ignoring this group — estimated to be about five million to eight million people, and growing fast — would be like missing the Hispanic market in the 1990s.

“I think Muslims have had to draw into themselves,” said Marian Salzman, executive vice president and chief marketing officer of JWT, a large advertising agency in the WPP Group that plans to encourage clients like Johnson & Johnson and Unilever to market to American Muslims. “It puts an increased burden on a marketer post-9/11 to say, ‘Look, we understand.’ ”

Companies in the Detroit area, where there is a dense population of Muslims, are leading the change. A McDonald’s there serves halal Chicken McNuggets; Walgreens has Arabic signs in its aisles. And now, Ikea, which recently opened a store in the suburb of Canton, Mich., that has had trouble attracting as many Muslim customers as it had hoped, has been touring local homes and talking to Muslims to figure out their needs.

The store there plans to sell decorations for Ramadan next fall and is adding halal meat to its restaurant menu, or meat that is prepared according to Islamic law. Catalogs in Arabic are being planned, and female Muslim employees are expected to be given an Ikea-branded hijab, to wear over their head if they wish.

Marketing to Muslims is, of course, mostly intended to increase sales, but advertising has also long been a mirror of changes in society.

Ms. Salzman pointed to ads in the 1960s that featured Jewish products like Levy’s rye bread, which, she said, helped bring that group more into mainstream advertising. She also noted that ads from companies like McDonald’s in the early 1990s portrayed busy mothers who admitted that they did not cook every night like their mothers did.

“Marketers have actually helped us to rewrite the rules about what we’re comfortable with,” she said.

Because the Census Bureau does not ask about religion, there is no authoritative count of Muslims in America. Some Muslim organizations provide estimates as high as 10 million. Others say it could be as low as three million.

Whatever the number, many Muslims have clustered in areas that include Orange County, Calif.; Houston; the state of Georgia; northern Virginia; New York City and Long Island; and the Detroit area.

Over the last few months, JWT conducted a large study of Muslims in the United States and Britain to determine whether they would be receptive to specialized advertising. There were 835 people in the United States study. Muslim Americans spend about \$170 billion on consumer products, JWT estimates; this figure is expected to grow rapidly as the population expands and younger Muslims build careers.

Ms. Salzman said the study found that Muslims were buying many standard products but that they felt excluded from mainstream advertising. In particular, she said, they wanted companies to recognize their holidays.

Ms. Salzman said JWT had little trouble surveying Muslims in Britain, but found it had to clarify at the start of each phone call in the United States that it was not calling from a government agency. Over the next few weeks, JWT plans to reach out to the chief executives of all of its major clients, including JetBlue, the Ford Motor Company and HSBC, to encourage them to market to Muslims in the United States and Britain.

“These advertisers have been in the Middle East and in the Far East Muslim countries for decades, so they’re already dealing with the Muslim market,” said Tayyibah Taylor, publisher and editor in chief of Azizah magazine, a Muslim-focused magazine in Atlanta. “They just haven’t been dealing with the Muslim marketer here at home.”

Almas Abbasi, a radiologist in Long Island who was one of the people interviewed by JWT, said she would be grateful for advertising that included Muslims.

“If Ramadan starts, and you see an ad in the newspaper saying, ‘Happy Ramadan, here’s a special in our store,’ everyone will run to that store,” she said.

Her daughter, Shaheen Magsi, a senior at the New York Institute of Technology in Old Westbury, N.Y., said her family turned off their cable television three years ago after seeing too many negative stereotypes about Muslims. She said she quickly grew tired of telling people at school that, no, she did not agree with Osama bin Laden.

“It’d be really good to say, ‘Oh, there’s a Muslim on TV, and they’re portraying something good other than Muslims killing people,’ ” she said.

Just what approach companies should take to reach Muslims is far from clear. The market is diverse, including African-Americans, South Asians, Caucasians and people from the Middle East, as well as people who are more or less conservative in their religious views. American Muslims disagree about whether the Muslim women in ads should wear the hijab, for instance. Nationwide Financial Services has already been advertising to people from Pakistan and India, who are often Muslim. But it prefers to focus on their country of origin, said Tariq Khan, Nationwide’s vice president of market development and diversity.

Still, religion is culturally relevant at times, he said, and Nationwide may run ads in print publications in June that feature Hindu and Muslim weddings.

Rizwan Jamil, director of beverages at Unilever in Pakistan, said Unilever often ran promotions there for Lipton tea and custard powders during Muslim holidays, using bright and festive packaging, and discounts. These sorts of gestures would appeal to a broad swath of Muslims in the United States, he said, without setting off discussions about religion.

“It’s just like when you’re advertising something for Christmas,” Mr. Jamil said. “You’re not talking about Christians or Christianity. You’re talking about Christmas, the event. I would be careful — to the extent that I used religion. I wouldn’t shout it out. I wouldn’t shout out to the world that ‘I’m talking to Muslims.’ ”

There is a genuine fear about how to market to Muslims — and whether to do so — at many big companies, executives at Muslim-focused media outlets and organizations said.

“United States companies don’t want to risk alienating their domestic consumers,” said Nasser Beydoun, chairman of the American Arab Chamber of Commerce in Dearborn, Mich., which is working with Ikea, Wal-Mart and Comcast to develop strategies to reach Muslim consumers. Other companies like Frito-Lay and Kodak have recently considered marketing to Muslims. Publishers of Muslim women’s magazines, like Azizah and Muslim Girl Magazine, said they had to dispel advertisers’ concerns that they would feature articles that were radical or political.

Bridges TV, a cable and satellite network, has changed its sales pitch to make advertisers more comfortable. When it was introduced in 2004, Bridges TV presented itself as a Muslim television network, but lately the network has been having better luck labeling itself as “bridging the West and East,” said Mohamed Numan-Ali, the network’s advertising manager. Brands like Ford, Lunesta and Lincoln have signed on as advertisers, he said.

On the other hand, some Muslim-focused media companies that are courting advertisers highlight religion as their strength. Executives at QTV, a new satellite network centered around the Koran, tell advertisers that the focus on religion is what keeps its viewers tuning in, often five times a day for prayer calls.

Companies that advertise on QTV should not worry about backlash, said Mahmood Ahmad, president of Digital Broadcasting Network Inc., which produces QTV, because “Fox News viewers are not watching QTV anyway.” He added, “QTV is the safest place to be because they won’t know.”

Advertising on satellite channels popular with Muslims and in the publications that focus on them would be inexpensive compared with mainstream media and might be highly effective because so few companies reach out to this group.

“People would flock to it,” said Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, a nonprofit group based in New York. “They would say ‘I can’t believe I’m being validated by Macy’s. I can’t believe I’m being validated by Whole Foods.’ ”

Even in mainstream advertising, companies may win over customers by including Muslims in some ads, said Razaq Baloch, a partner in Spicy Banana, an ad agency specializing in reaching customers from India and Pakistan.

Alia Fouz, a Palestinian-American who lives near the Ikea in Canton, said she never felt that ads were addressing her as a Muslim when she was growing up in Virginia. Sitting in the Ikea snack bar with her young son, she said ads that included American Muslims would grab her — and her son’s — attention.

“We should be included,” Ms. Fouz said. “We live here.”
