

Understanding Canada's tech-savvy migrants

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AARTI BHASKARAN, DIRECTOR, RESEARCH & INSIGHTS, MEDIACOM CANAD 24 MAY 2017

Technology is helping migrants feel more connected to home than ever before. Aarti Bhaskaran explains how brands in Canada are finding new ways to reach consumers caught between cultures.

In a world where many countries are putting up fences and walls, Canada has remained resolutely open to incomers. Annual migration now accounts for one percent of the current population of 36 million. And data from Statistics Canada (Canada's national statistical agency) notes that in the 2011 census, 20.6 percent of the population – nearly 7 million people – were foreign-born. That's the highest number since 1931.

In the 1930s, more than 50 percent of foreign-born Canadians came from the British Isles. Today this complex society has become home for thousands of people from Eastern Asia,

China, Southern Asia and Southeast Asia, among others.

As a result, the cultural makeup of the country is changing. Twenty percent of Canada's population is regarded as minorities – people for whom English is not the first language. In the two biggest cities, Vancouver and Toronto, the minority population rises to around 50 percent.

This is creating a huge challenge for brands seeking to connect with consumers outside of the established English- and French-speaking Canada. Rather than juggle messages between two distinct cultures (which was challenging enough), brands have to understand a mosaic of different beliefs and behaviours. Their goal is to find the right mix of messaging, media and content that appeals to Canada's diverse population.



Canada's cultural makeup

Canada's overall culture is defined in Geert Hofstede's original cultural dimensions study by its strong scores for individualism and indulgence. It is a country with a lack of hierarchy and an expectation that everyone will strive to attain high standards of performance in all endeavours. The French-speaking population is particularly distinct, with a more formal, hierarchical and emotionally expressive culture than its English-speaking counterparts.

But Canada's new arrivals come with alternative cultural backgrounds. These vary wildly, but what's critical is that technology is enabling them to hold on to their beliefs for much longer than previous waves of immigrants.

Technologies such as Skype and digital news feeds, along with the growth of mobile data usage in recent years, make it easy for migrants to stay in touch with the culture and news from home. And this is affecting the way they assimilate. The process of integration no longer works as it once did – or, at least, how brands and politicians imagined that it used to work.

The mindset of the modern migrant is increasingly influenced by the culture of his or her birth country, not the adopted one. And brand affiliations are shaped by their experiences from their home culture long after arrival.

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Brand tactics

Faced with this challenge, brands in Canada are typically pursuing one of three paths to connect with migrants, although no brand has yet cracked the challenge.

Some are simply sending messages into the vibrant ethnic media landscape, using translated versions of their English or French copy. This approach means having a separate line in the plan to reach out to these groups.

Others are adopting a more sophisticated approach, targeting festivals and events that are relevant to individual cultures. Pepsi, for example, has appealed to the huge South Asian community by sponsoring the ICC Cricket World Cup in Canada and several other markets. Pepsi has backed this up with ticket contests and on-the-ground activations in Toronto, building enduring connections with this group.

The most sophisticated strategies tailor messages to the ethnic background of a specific audience. For example, household cleaning brand Clorox featured a South Asian woman impressing her mother-in-law with the cleanliness of her house, a culturally accepted norm in that part of the world.

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Connecting with migrants

Immigrants with money and qualifications – a key requirement for entry – have been singled out by brands offering high-value products and services. These include banks such as CIBC and Royal Bank of Canada and brands from the automotive and telco sectors. FMCG or CPG companies have been slower to reach out specifically to these communities.

Unsurprisingly, the key targets for many are incomers from China and South Asia. These people are highly skilled with high net worth and are more digitally savvy than the average Canadian.

The cultural mosaic created by Canada's new citizens doesn't just end with the first generation. Technology and talk of home can make the second-generation distinct as well. In many ways, these Canadian-born migrants are even more important for brands.

After all, young tech-savvy audiences not only retain their links to home but make an effort to connect with mainstream Canadian culture. In the future, brands would do well to recognise this group as an important piece of Canada's population puzzle.

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