

Cracking the cultural codes of Latin America

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Although Latin American countries seem similar from afar, there are local cultural codes that require brands to make changes market by market.

Sometimes, surface similarities can hide big differences. That's certainly the case in Latin America when it comes to culture and behaviour. On the surface, the continent looks culturally similar, but dig a little deeper and you'll find significant nuances that demand planners adapt and evolve their messages from country to country.

Generally speaking, in Latin cultures, there is a strong separation between the general population and those in power. These are countries that have a preference for cooperation, modesty and quality of life rather than achievement, heroism and material rewards.

Consumers here tend to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity, stick with the brands they know and love, and are uncomfortable with unorthodox behaviour and ideas. In broad strokes, the region is characterised by loyalty, hierarchy and implicit order. We sometimes call this a 'Pyramid' culture.

Cultural dimensions and differences

Such homogeneity is unusual. In other regions, like Asia, we often see more diverse cultural models. Asian countries mix 'Pyramid' behaviour with other traits seemingly inconsistent with a hierarchical structure including consensus behaviour and always putting 'family first'.

In theory, Latin America's cultural similarities make it suited to hub-style operations, where work is controlled from a single office. There are no obvious reasons why campaigns cannot be shifted from country to country without much difficulty.

But by mapping the classic Hofstede dimensions of masculinity (which measures whether a country is 'tough' or 'tender') and indulgence (which measures the extent to which people indulge themselves) across the region, we can see three clear groups:

1. Exhibitionists

Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela are all highly masculine and indulgent, which makes them more exhibitionist, experimental and open to experiential experiences.

In these markets, brands can benefit from getting in touch with consumers directly or delivering innovative media experiences that truly touch them such as virtual or augmented reality.

2. Small Groups

Brazil is similarly indulgent but more feminine. This is a more subdued culture where experiential tendencies are often more powerful in small or closed groups.

Here, brands can benefit from leveraging existing clubs or societies to deliver experiences in environments where consumers feel most comfortable.

3. Restrainers

The final group encompasses Peru and Uruguay. These markets index as more feminine and more restrained than their neighbours. Consumers are sensitive and require a greater push from brands before they take action.

Brands might benefit by putting PR at the top of their list of priorities or accompanying experiential activity with a higher paid budget than in other markets.



Decoding Latin culture

These nuances underpin a diverse Latin American culture map that brands need to understand in order to market efficiently across the region. This includes recognising specific cultural attitudes – such as attitudes towards women, luxury, and health – that impact local shopping habits.

For example, in Argentina and Chile women are viewed as having a diverse role in society. But in more conservative countries, like Mexico and Central America, women are still seen primarily as housewives. That's useful information for marketers when defining target audiences.

Attitudes towards luxury are just as different. In Central America, a certain amount of bling

is regarded as a sign of success. But flaunting wealth is seen as vulgar in the southernmost countries of South America. We see similarly contrasting attitudes towards body image; understanding these differences can be vital for food and health sector brands.

In Argentina and Chile, women are viewed as having a diverse role in society

Promoting regional messages

Latin America's specific cultural attitudes can—and should—impact the way brands develop their content and speak to consumers across the region. The FMCG sector provides us with many examples of how brands can do this.

Take fabric softener, for example, a product targeted at women (specifically, mums). In Brazil, we know mum often buys on impulse. That makes her more likely to be persuaded by emotional messages than value-driven benefits. Here, brands can succeed with family-focused stories of protection and comfort rather than functional messages (how many washes mum can get out of a bottle).

In Mexico, however, women make more rational decisions. They are happy to try new products but typically look for qualified advice before making a purchase. Softener brands in this market can succeed with more value-driven or functional messages that highlight cleaning power.

In Mexico 98% of consumers use shampoo, but only 38% use conditioner

Brazil and Mexico also reveal contrasting cultural attitudes towards hair care.

In Mexico 98% of consumers use shampoo, but only 38% use conditioner. Cultural norms – perhaps a nod towards those exhibitionist characteristics – mean consumers worry more about the final look of their hair than its overall health. They just want to look good. Hair care brands should consider focusing on communicating value or products that offer simple benefits, like adding shine or preventing split ends.

In Brazil, on the other hand, around 88% of consumers use conditioners – and hair health matters. In this type of market, brands can place more focus on promoting treatments that offer specific health benefits such as repairing sun-damaged hair.

In Brazil, around 88% of consumers use conditioners

Recognising cultural sensitivities

Cultural influences also go beyond routine everyday shopping, as Hasbro's Nerf Blaster toy gun product illustrates. In some markets, including Mexico, the brand promotes the product directly to children through TV commercials showing kids playfully 'blasting' each other. That's fine in exhibitionist cultures, but in other markets this approach is inappropriate.

Mums in Peru – which has a more restrained culture – are particularly sensitive about the relationship between violence, guns, and kids. As a result, Hasbro focuses its message on another attribute of the Nerf Blaster: the precision and the skill it takes to master hitting a target.

These examples highlight just three of the ways brands can benefit from adopting a granular cultural approach in Latin America. Those wishing to gain a competitive advantage should

focus on cracking these cultural codes sooner rather than later.

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