

Say 'Hola' To The Underserved

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It will be interesting to see what comes from HipCricket's new foray into Hispanic media. In today's announcement, HipCricket forms a Hispanic mobile marketing network that includes Bustos, Lotus and Davidson, with over 50 radio and TV outlets involved. The deal lets brand advertisers buy into both local and national Hispanic audiences.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS I learned in covering the digital media beat back in the mid-'90s is that companies that serve ethnic niches early in the technology cycle will gain that population's deep brand loyalty. Underserved markets never forget the companies and brands that made the effort to address a particular group's identity and needs when the majority of big brands couldn't be bothered. I watched sites like AsianAvenue and BlackPlanet go ballistic in the late '90s, and there wasn't a bit of rocket science involved. These simply were among the few places designed and operated for Americans with specific cultural identities and experiences. AOL, too, made some great headway in the early 2000s with initiatives in the Hispanic community.

How odd that it has taken so long for a similar understanding to take hold in mobile, where all of the statistics suggest that both African-American and Hispanic populations are among the heaviest data and voice users. By some measures over 65% of Hispanic households have cell phones, and in many cases the handhelds are serving as a replacement for a home PC. These groups actually are ahead of the curve in mobile pick up, and I have to wonder why ambitious marketers aren't consulting these audiences about the shape mobile media is taking for them. These populations may very well be normalizing their relationship to the new portable media while the general audiences still try to figure out what they really want their phones to do. Why aren't more marketers deliberately playing here?

It will be interesting to see what comes from Hipcricket's new foray into Hispanic media. In today's announcement, Hipcricket forms a Hispanic mobile marketing network that includes Bustos, Lotus and Davidson, with over 50 radio and TV outlets involved. The deal lets brand advertisers buy into both local and national Hispanic audiences. Hipcricket already claims to have run over 17,000 mobile marketing campaigns over the years, and one of its specialties is text messaging in the radio station market. Eric Harber, president and COO, tells me they already have run some campaigns in Texas Hispanic markets. In one radio contest, listeners had to text in subliminal secret words when they were dropped on-air during the programming day. Typically, a station invites a mobile responder to join a VIP SMS club and begin an ongoing

dialogue. The Hipcricket system accommodates the bilingual nature of the Hispanic audience, as users can opt into English or Spanish versions. For the media companies as well, the back end management and sales tools are bilingual.

What is interesting to me about Hispanic and African-American audiences is that in mobile they represent the opposite of the old "digital divide" of the early Web. In 1999 we were talking about the gap in PC penetration in ethnic minority households. In mobile, the opposite may be true. Not only do we see more data usage among these groups but also more reliance on the handset as a primary digital device. Even without surveys, you can see this phenomenon at hugely popular social networking sites like MocoSpace, where the membership is incredibly active and predominantly young, Hispanic and African-American. The executives at MocoSpace once told me that they themselves did nothing to attract specific ethnic audiences. These were the communities that found and embraced the relatively sophisticated operations of a WAP-based social network.

These are the target groups that are reconnoitering the next terrain, like how much standard Web activity can migrate to mobile. These are the audiences that you should be targeting with what more complex WAP sites really can do. These are the audiences that might tell us a great deal about how effective mobile couponing may be.

Say *Hola* to the future of mobile.