



Cultural fluency: Brands' silver bullet for relevance and growth

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INFUSION
by castells

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Liz Castells-Heard says we are in the era of “culturenomics.”

That’s more than a slogan. It’s a demographic and economic reality. Multicultural consumers are now the engine of U.S. growth—driving population, household formation and cultural influence at historic levels—and their influence is growing exponentially. They’re redefining what brands create, how stories are told and which products win. In other words, they’re not riding the wave. They are the wave.

“Culture is the growth engine,” says Castells-Heard, founder of INFUSION by Castells, a Los Angeles-based cultural marketing agency working with national brands. “From music to fashion to food, what was once ‘Multicultural’ now drives the mainstream. It’s all about culture, and marketers who ignore that ignore growth for their brands.”

The math is unambiguous: 43% of the U.S. population is Multicultural, a sector including Hispanics, Blacks, Asian-Americans, and multiracial Americans. Collectively, their share is projected to reach 48% by 2030. This isn’t just population growth—it’s cultural gravity. Multiculturals already make up the majority in key economic centers like Los Angeles (74%), New York (69%), Miami (86%) and Dallas (68%), and drive 100% of total U.S. population, job and household growth. Their economic impact is undeniable: U.S. Hispanics alone generated \$3.7 trillion in 2024 GDP, larger than the economies of France or India.

When it comes to modern marketing, “Culture isn’t context—it’s the core,” says Castells-Heard.

Every marketer knows the importance of understanding their audience—not just demographics, but what drives them, what they value and how they move through the world. That kind of deep knowledge is what 73% of consumers now expect from companies, according to Forbes Agency Council. For brands, the challenge is keeping up with who the audience has become. Multiculturals are no longer peripheral—they are the pulse of modern America. But many companies and agencies still have gaps in their cultural knowledge.

The story isn’t about absorbing Multiculturals into the general market. It’s about cultural fluency: the ability to navigate,

interpret and act on cultural context with authenticity and insight. That’s the real differentiator in today’s marketplace.

It’s a steep learning curve for some marketers, who may assume that bilingual audiences can be best reached through mass campaigns or that cultural identity weakens over time. In fact, younger Hispanics often call themselves “200%ers”—100% Hispanic + 100% American. “There’s still many misconceptions among marketers—that as bilinguals they’re effectively reached by general market efforts, or they don’t keep their culture,” says Castells-Heard. “However, culture has never been stronger. You don’t just embrace it, you’re vocal about it. It is your superpower—the lens you see the world through.”

The data leaves little room for doubt: 87% of Multiculturals say culture defines who they are, and 92% say it shapes their daily life—from values and behavior to media choices and family dynamics. That influence doesn’t stop at Multicultural households. Two-thirds of non-Hispanic White Americans say the rising Multicultural majority is reshaping American values for the better and influencing their own brand decisions. (Experian Simmons, Direct Digital Holdings, Horowitz.)

Digital platforms have only deepened these cultural connections, creating spaces where Multicultural voices shape trends in real time. Hispanics and Black Americans are among



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the most active digital users, fueling an explosion of culture-first creators, influencers and content communities. "Cultural ties and pride are amplified by access to platforms and information," says Leticia Juárez, partner at INFUSION.

For years, some marketers regarded translation and diverse casting as primary boxes to check for Multicultural campaigns. Today, audiences want much more than just visibility—they want true cultural fluency. "Beyond representation, it's about understanding and resonance today," says Juárez. "For a campaign to impact, it must feel for us, with us, by us—a signal that the brand truly gets the audience—and cares for its customers. That requires embedding Multiculturals' needs, insights and impact in everything you do."

That authenticity starts with strategy, not afterthought. Max Gallegos, head of field marketing for CJ Foodville USA—the North American subsidiary of Korea-based CJ Group—and former head of U.S. of cultural strategy and field marketing engagement for McDonald's USA, as well as a longtime INFUSION collaborator, calls it the "secret sauce" for success. "It starts with cultural insights about the consumer, then building strategy from there, always anchored to the emotional connection we're trying to forge with the consumer," he says.

How to Connect in a Real Way

The strongest Multicultural marketing doesn't just check off brand campaign line items—it shows up consistently through meaningful storytelling, social activations and experiences that speak directly to diverse communities. But as the INFUSION team notes, real impact only happens when campaigns align with cultural priorities, passions and platforms. The stakes are high: 65% of all consumers—and 85% of Multiculturals—still say they feel unseen in advertising. That gap represents both a missed opportunity and a mandate for brands to close the cultural fluency divide.

"A few companies with long-standing commitment have gotten cultural marketing right, and evolved with consumers' needs," says Castells-Heard, citing McDonald's, Toyota and Procter & Gamble as prime examples. "But the reality is, most haven't. Maybe 10% of Fortune 500 brands have figured it out."

To close that gap, Castells-Heard and her team emphasize starting with cultural fluency at the strategic core, not layering it on after the fact. They offer a clear playbook for marketers and agencies looking to make meaningful and effective connections with Multicultural audiences:

- **Start from the ground up.** It's all about strategic integration, according to Castells-Heard: "I'm not just talking about campaigns, but also analytics, opportunity sizing, resource allocation, research and planning to marketing—and across operations, products, offers, customer service and experience too."

Juárez tells a story about changing direction on a McDonald's Quarter Pounder marketing campaign: "Since this is not a top product among Hispanics, we recommended the Big Mac instead," she recalls. "Starting from that insight, we built out a larger strategy." That strategy included a new segmentation model, targeted daypart messaging and a holistic bilingual campaign. "You have to know the goal early on. Then Multicultural efforts can align where it's appropriate and deviate when needed. The best brands integrate culture from the start—not as an afterthought."

- **Don't make assumptions or stereotype.** "Start with humility. Lead with curiosity and listen first," says Castells-Heard. Understanding real audience behaviors—not generalizations—is what shapes effective strategy. For example, Hispanics are the top digital and mobile users across age groups; Black audiences over-index in entertainment, live TV and emerging tech; and Asian consumers lead broadband. These behavioral differences can inform everything from creative development to media planning.

- **Understand the basics.** Do the due diligence. Partnering with cultural experts helps marketers know when—and how—differences matter. Juárez points to Hispanic multigenerational households as an example: "It's not just showing a family with abuela in tow." In these homes, collective dynamics drive needs and decisions, whether the purchase is a mobile plan, a car, or dinner out. That reality must shape messaging, targeting and product strategy.

Cultural nuance can be the difference between a campaign that lands and one that backfires. Castells-Heard recalls when McDonald's launched a ":30 drive-thru guarantee." Her agency warned it could alienate Hispanic customers who place a premium on familiarity, trust and connection over speed—and it did. "Great service means being seen, respected, understood. The relationship matters as much as the food," she says. Personalized outreach may take more time, but it drives deeper loyalty and lifetime value.

"To truly connect," Castells-Heard advises, "weigh all consumers' behavior and needs through the marketing 5Ps [product, price, place, promotion, people]. Use commonalities and differences to set the right strategy by initiative—and an impactful mix of creative approaches." Universal work taps shared human truths; transcultural work draws on insights with cross-cultural appeal; and unique work is tailored to one audience's specific needs.

- **Build with communities, not just for them.** Gallegos emphasizes co-creation as a best practice—working with cultural insiders including agencies, influencers, community leaders and even employee groups. "Too often we talk at people, but building with them is critical," he says.

Juárez notes that audiences want to see themselves reflected in the process, not just the output. "Our Spectrum client, for example, partnered with singer Ozuna to deliver a virtual reggaetón concert during COVID and co-created activations with



The Power of Authenticity

(Getty Images)

comedians Tony Baker and KevOnStage—from a meta-comedy show to a TikTok challenge that reached more than 200 million views. T-Mobile's collaboration with "SNL" comedian Marcelo Hernández also illustrates how pairing Spanish and transcultural English content with authentic cultural cues resonates powerfully with bicultural Hispanics, and pairing him with Kenan Thompson in Universal ads extends to broad appeal.

• **Go local to stay relevant.** Tailoring messaging and media strategies to a market's cultural orientation amplifies impact. That might mean Black-led activations in Atlanta, Hispanic-majority campaigns in L.A., Miami and Texas, or nuanced Multicultural efforts in New York and San Francisco. Castells-Heard underscores that Black, Asian and Hispanic consumers are not monolithic. For example, Caribbean Hispanics love espresso and baseball, Mexican Americans prefer brewed coffee and fútbol and Tejanos lean toward American football.

Even language carries powerful nuance. For "I really like this," Hispanics might say "I love this," "Me encanta," or "Qué vibe," while Black audiences may say "That's dope" or "This hits," Castells-Heard notes. Details like these make campaigns feel real, not generic.

• **Don't confuse language with culture.** "They are two different things," says Castells-Heard. Two-thirds of Hispanics are fully bilingual, and 80% speak Spanish at home. But translation alone does not equal connection. U.S. Spanish is uniquely shaped by 25+ countries of origin, bilingual lifestyle, regionality and idioms, nuances such as tone, syntax and formality, plus category terms and brand voice.

As Juárez notes, mainstream humor often falls flat without cultural adaptation. That's why transculturalizations or at least proper transcreations—not word-for-word translations—are essential to express the English intent naturally, and in ways that resonate across diverse Hispanic audiences. "That's what makes it ring true," Castells-Heard adds.

• **Media strategy is cultural strategy.** To truly connect, brands must align their media mix with Multicultural lives, passions and habits. Audio remains underleveraged—from radio and podcasts to DJs and streaming—and interactive platforms like YouTube co-viewing, TikTok and gaming offer rich cultural engagement opportunities. For instance, Hispanic audiences stream fútbol while texting in Spanglish, FaceTiming and listening to Bad Bunny.

A Spanish-only silo misses bicultural audiences, while English-only plans with diverse casts miss depth and connection. Spanish isn't fading—it's evolving: 83% of Hispanic audiences ages 13–49 watch Spanish content, and 40% of teen SVOD viewing time is in Spanish. "Spanish builds trust. English broadens reach. You need both across digital, traditional, CX, creators, collabs and community—to mirror how Hispanics fluidly live across platforms, cultures and languages," Castells-Heard says.

The bottom line is simple: authenticity wins. "No matter what the message, the language or the medium, winning brands must feel real," Castells-Heard states.

Gallegos agrees. "The biggest challenge is to avoid tokenism. It's really easy for brands to address Multicultural with

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Liz Castells-Heard, Founder, INFUSION by Castells

surface-level gestures,” he replies. “The hard part is really committing to the budgets and integrating it into the core brand strategy, then building that relationship with communities.”

• **Authenticity must extend to technology, too.** AI is a vastly powerful marketing tool—from planning and targeting to creative execution. But left unchecked, it can amplify stereotypes, language misfires and cultural blind spots. It can scale bias. “AI can’t feel, empathize, code-switch, make a 200%er laugh or know a Mexican in L.A. from Sonora,” emphasizes Castells-Heard. “AI without human oversight is like GPS with no map. You may move faster, but head in the wrong direction.”

To use AI effectively, INFUSION advises brands to start with verified, inclusive data; minimize outdated datasets; stress test models; and build multidimensional cultural personas that go beyond surface demographics. Most importantly, always keep humans in the loop. That means trained cultural strategists, analysts, account managers, creatives, producers, digital, media, operations, tech and AI specialists leading the process end to end.

Castells-Heard points to what she calls “the essential 3Cs”: Cultural fluency, Cultivated experience and Consumer intimacy. These are what keep AI systems culturally grounded—transforming blind spots into meaningful connection and measurable ROI.

Authenticity Builds Loyalty

“Multiculturals are fiercely loyal to brands that they trust who understand them,” says INFUSION Chief Creative Officer Rod Ribeiro. Cultural authenticity is subtle and layered—it lives inside content, context, experiences, and what matters most to communities. When brands get it right, they earn not just reach, but permission to occasionally make mistakes. “If you’ve built that trust, they’ll give you grace,” Ribeiro says.

Juárez adds that younger Multiculturals, especially Millennials and Gen Z, are vocal and unapologetic about demanding brands reflect their bicultural, multidimensional lives. “There’s a lot of power to their social voice—and if they don’t feel seen, they’ll take their business elsewhere,” she says.

Castells-Heard is still amazed how cultural identity has only deepened over time. “Ask a White non-Hispanic person how they identify, they’ll name their age, life stage, profession or economic status,” she exclaims. “Ask a Multicultural? They’ll say their race and ethnicity. Culture is their DNA. It shapes how they live, move, connect, express, shop, celebrate and value everything—family, food, faith, taboos, fandoms, games, rituals and digital life. Culture is the code under every strategy.”

When brands get it right, the results speak for themselves. Hispanic-led and culture-powered campaigns are propelling some of the biggest brand wins in the market. Modelo dethroned Budweiser by owning half of the U.S. Hispanic market with everyday-hero storytelling and regional nuance. T-Mobile outpaced AT&T and Verizon in subscriber growth through bicultural strategy. Toyota dominates L.A. with deep, in-culture platforms, community and social activations.

These aren’t outliers—they’re the new blueprint.

Culture Is the Growth Code

“Authentic marketing tells people: this brand sees me, values me, reflects me,” Castells-Heard says. “Cultural fluency builds relevance, connection—and business.”

In an era defined by efficiency pressures, AI disruption, economic uncertainty and cultural flashpoints, the brands embedding cultural fluency are the ones turning relevance into sustained growth. Multiculturals aren’t a niche—they’re digital superconsumers fueling demand and future-proofing business. They are America’s engine for growth.

“Brands that invest win; those who retreat lose share as the ‘total market’ approach proved, and those that ignore culture invite obsolescence,” Castells-Heard summarizes. “General agencies bring scale. Cultural agencies like us fill the gap—bringing the depth of knowledge, experience, frameworks, nuance and authenticity needed. Culture can’t be dismissed, automated, or whitewashed.”

“Elevate culture, build trust—and your brand.”

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About INFUSION by Castells

INFUSION by Castells is a leading cultural agency delivering ROI-Powered Ideas® that drive brand value, breakthrough results, and award-winning impact since 1998. Led by Stanford MBA Liz Castells-Heard, partner Leticia Juárez, and CCO Rod Ribeiro, our diverse, AI-powered team brings bold strategy, cultural fluency, and authentic storytelling to life—across digital-first campaigns for Spectrum, Toyota, McDonald's and more. Our Transculturation™ model unlocks cultural gaps and growth across the 5Ps and consumer journey. We partner with clients and agencies—leveraging unique needs and shared truths across CRM, digital, social, and real-world touchpoints. Our cultural fluency drives real insights, real connection and real growth.

Visit www.infusionbycastells.com for more information.

