

I'm Still Latina the Other 11 Months...

By: Veronica Cool ⌚ September 24, 2017



Early in my career, as a bank management trainee, I sat in the lunch room taking a break with another young teller. As we munched on our food she looked at me and said, "Is Mexico beautiful?"

I was confused, but responded "that being such a large country, I was certain it was beautiful."

She then asked "if it was hard to speak Mexican."

Pause. ... Very pregnant pause.

Now, I was completely lost. And a bit offended, until I realized she was not being offensive but was simply ignorant. I often share this story as the segue to discuss the intricacies of the Latino culture, especially now, during Hispanic Heritage Month.

And of course, people wonder why these commemorative months even exists, such as Black History Month, Women's History Month, Irish-American Heritage Month, LGBT Pride Month. Seriously, we can technically commemorate every characteristic of our humanity. Pet Lover's Month, Mothers Acknowledgment Quarter (who else is with me on creating this one?) Scientist Appreciation Week. ...

These commemorative periods began as marked recognition periods established by presidents to raise awareness on issues, populations and causes that may not be on the radar for the mainstream community. It's absolutely a forced period of attention. It's like a mandatory meeting at work or getting vaccinated. It has to be done.

I appreciate the forced obligation to acknowledge an underserved group or cause, if it's genuine and not a pandering process. For instance, National Breast Cancer Awareness, where the world turns pink. Has it helped cancer research? Are we donating more dollars? Are we close to curing cancer? The impact is debatable, but the benefits cannot be ignored. Mammogram screenings are on the rise and women (and men!) are conducting more breast self-exams. So the promotional efforts of National Breast Cancer Awareness month in October, are effective, by these measures.

Other commemorations

Then we turn to the ethnic or race-centered commemorative periods that have been trivialized or commercialized by marketers or decision-makers. Case in point: Hispanic Heritage Month, where retailers emphasize tacos, tortillas, tequila and Coronas. With random piñatas and sombreros peppered in to “commemorate” Hispanic contributions. As a Latina from the Dominican Republic, these gestures feel OK — if authentic and continuous throughout the rest of the year. Because I am still Hispanic the other 11 months of the year. Just like my Irish and black friends remain Irish and black, respectively, for the rest of the year.

These commemorative periods are meant to be a catalyst, a kickstarter, a beginning. It’s an opportunity to spark interest, awareness and engagement in your organization. These ethnic or racial groups are absolutely part of American culture, but they are not homogenous or monolithic. There is a wealth of difference, diversity and complexity to their heritage and customs.

Not clear? Let me share:

- Hispanics come from 22 countries.
- Spanish is the primary language, but every country (and region within each country) has very distinct idioms, slangs and phrases. In college, I lived in the International House with students from Afghanistan, Germany, India, Denmark, Ecuador and Spain. As Spanish-speaking students, we agreed to speak to each other in English, because we couldn’t understand each other well at all!
- Race/Ethnicity: Latinos are white, black, Asian and mulatto. We are a group of people that have been influenced by the migration patterns of history. For instance, I have Lebanese, African, Dominican, Spaniard and indigenous blood.
- Religion: Generally speaking, Latinos are Catholic, but we have Jews and agnostics as well.
- Literacy: Many Latinos are well-read and educated with advanced degrees, especially because of the proximity to the embassies, higher education and scientific institutions in the region. But many Latinos also have low literacy levels.
- Technology: Latinos are exceedingly tech-savvy, but a significant portion struggle with accessing the internet and other electronics.
- And probably most different amongst Latinos is the food. Dominicans love plantains, Mexicans enjoy their tortillas, Salvadorans live off their pupusas and, of course, being in the U.S. we are exposed to it all, with new culinary fusion movements blending all of these delicious cuisines.

Amigos, Hispanic Heritage Month is here, Sept. 15-Oct. 15, and I recommend you leverage this period as a catalyst to learn and engage. Attend a festival, eat at a new restaurant, do a tour of the Smithsonian Latino Virtual Museum. And continue to incorporate these activities the rest of the year.

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