

## Universal Diversity

By Andrew Freeman, President, Andrew Freeman & Company

Diversity is no longer a lofty idea for the future and wishful thinking. Nor is it something affecting select regions of the country. From vendors to guests, staff to neighbors, diversity is here, it is now, it is universal. Revising existing strategies and tactics and implementing new ones to accommodate true diversity and inclusion in your restaurant is not only socially responsible, it is just good business.

You may be in a place where diversity is taken for granted or where it hasn't yet become prevalent. Recent statistics should give you some idea of the changing make-up in the United States' population. Based on the 2000 U.S. Census, numbers show that whites made up 69% of the American population, Latinos and African Americans each made up 13%, and Asian Americans accounted for the remaining 4%. By the year 2050, predictions indicate whites will make up only 50% of the population, while Latinos will grow to 24%, African Americans will grow to 15%, and Asian Americans will double to 8% of the population.

These numbers are made all the more significant when the same predictions indicate that the U.S. population will grow from 280 million in 2000 to 420 million people by 2050, with women continuing to outnumber men. Immigration plays a major factor in this growth, especially the Latino and Asian American, contributing 35% and 60% to their population's growth respectively.

It has also been long recognized that Americans are getting older. By 2030, it is anticipated that one in five Americans will be 65 or older. This remains about the same as it is today for white/non-Latinos, but the projections show a much lower ratio for African Americans (one in seven), Asian Americans (one in six) and Latinos (one in ten).

The years 2030 and 2050 seems a long ways off, so how do these statistics affect your restaurant's operations and marketing efforts today? They are already affected: As a point of comparison, the 1950 U.S. Census showed that whites made up almost 89% of the population, African Americans accounted for almost 11% and all other races were less than 1%. The rapid change in the make-up of the American population is clearly a steady trend and looks to continue what is already well underway, which means that the typical "one size fits all" way of operating and marketing a business is no longer an effective way of running a business.

Simultaneous to these rapid population changes are the equally steady changes in technology and communications. Fortunately, today's increasingly sophisticated technology and the widening spread of Internet use make it easier to research information about potential markets, organize and share this information in a way that's useful and effective, and then confidently target a very select group of customers in a much more personal way. Much like your niche marketing strategies and tactics, you may find your efforts are focused on a select population of customers, but they are much more qualified and loyal, generating greater revenue for you at a lesser cost.

Also like niche marketing, it is essential to **be prepared** before you venture into attracting a certain population. However, your preparation must be fundamental and authentic to what your restaurant is about and even more so, to the community within your restaurant. It is not enough to add potstickers to your menu and claim you have a marketing plan in place to reach the Asian American market.

Before you begin marketing efforts to a growing Latino population or making sales pitches to an expanding Asian American population because you don't want to miss out on the latest business trend, review your restaurant's community from more of a human resources perspective. Look at your staff: Are you already a diverse community? Are there a variety of backgrounds and cultures, different ages and both genders represented on your staff? Is there diversity, not only in the backgrounds, but also in the different departments, positions and strategic levels in your restaurant? Are you familiar with the cultures within cultures of your staff (for example, "Asian American" includes a multitude of possibilities – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese or Vietnamese, among others)?

Then look at your guests and ask the same kinds of questions: Do you know the communities and cultures represented by your guests? Do you know where they come from? Are they predominantly one background or a mix? Do you know the languages they speak, the traditions and customs they follow, the foods they eat? Do they fall into different economic levels or social classes that impact how they travel? Is your staff available to translate for your non-English-speaking guests?

Your vendors are equally important in this diversity equation: Do you know the communities and cultures represented by your vendors? Do you make a point of buying from a wide variety of vendors? How do they do business with you? Is their style more of a handshake or a verbal deal or do they prefer a formal contract? Do they like to negotiate or is price already set?

Finally, take a look at your neighborhood: What is the mix of people like? Not just the businesses that surround yours, but the owners and staff of those businesses. Has it changed since you began working at the restaurant? Did your neighbors come to the United States from another country or were they born here? Do you notice their customs and habits? Do you understand their language? Do you make an effort to say hello or other simple phrases in their native language?

In answering all of the questions about your staff, guests, vendors and neighbors, the information that comes to light will provide you what you need to know in determining how diverse your restaurant is. Assessing these questions is critical, along with the next step, which is still internal: Determine and establish a high level of openness and acceptance. For example, you may decide you want to foster diversity within your restaurant by creating some type of committee devoted to helping the staff understand what diversity really means, bringing awareness about the many cultures and backgrounds represented by the restaurant's staff, and taking the time to celebrate the differences. You may also see opportunities for diversity within departments by transferring, promoting or hiring people with complementary backgrounds and experiences. Many of your efforts will be grass-roots and done ad hoc or in the moment rather than laid out in a grand, formal plan.

Once you are confident that you "walk the talk" and a high level of openness around diversity is fully integrated into your restaurant's operations, you can begin to look outside for how to share this with your surrounding community as well as your guests. If you want diversity to work for you:

- Be authentic: This cannot be stressed enough. If you are hosting a Chinese New Year's celebration but no one on your staff is Chinese, your efforts will appear confusing and false at best.
- Get involved in the community: Every key manager of your restaurant should be actively involved in some sort of community group and building a relationship with that group. People will recommend your restaurant and guests will return to your restaurant based on their connection to your team, not the restaurant itself.
- Pursue organizations like the Multicultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance (MFHA). Attend meetings or conferences to learn from human resources and marketing perspectives what diversity really means and how it can be applied to business.
- Research advertising and promotions in vehicles that make sense for your business. Translate your key sales materials into the languages of the market segments you want to reach. Create promotions that appeal to the market segments you want to reach.
- Take advantage of more sophisticated technology and increased use of the Internet to collect, organize and share information about the target markets you want to reach and how best to accommodate them.

Typical niche practices apply to diversity awareness. As with any niche market, make sure that any programs you put in place are well researched, the menu items and services you incorporate make sense to your customers and to your brand, and that you understand the buying and behavioral patterns of the group you are targeting.

Clearly, a majority of the work in developing strategies and tactics to appeal to a diverse population consists of understanding and honoring the diverse population immediately surrounding you. Ultimately, you want to create and foster an environment that is as open, diverse and far-reaching as the customers who stay at your restaurant. These efforts are not just a feel-good thing. Yes, doing so will translate into an enriching experience for your team and your guests, but they will also build your business.

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