

Three ways for brands to reach Indian Americans in a nuanced, relevant way

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Datawrkz, a digital-media planning and buying shop, has identified several ways that brands can enhance their marketing efforts targeted at Indian Americans.

- Advertisers must consider factors including language and cultural relevance as they formulate media strategies.
- Occasion marketing can be a powerful way to reach Indian American consumers, but only if approached with the requisite level of nuance.
- Tapping into the widespread love of cricket can help marketers engage around deep passion points.

Why it matters

The Indian American community is a growing audience for marketers, but this audience is frequently not approached with the necessary level of nuance. Gaining a deeper understanding of consumers, both at the commercial and cultural level, is an essential starting point.

Takeaways

- Marketers often approach the Indian American audience using a one-size-fits-all strategy, rather than appreciating the enormous diversity within this community.
- Balanced media plans will include a broad spectrum of partners that include national and regional titles, as well as content produced in a variety of languages.
- Understanding events of importance to different groups within the Indian American community, as well as broader passion points like cricket, can help form the basis of a marketing calendar.

Marketers interested in reaching Indian Americans must acknowledge the enormous diversity within this audience, instead of relying on one-size-fits all thinking.

“Agencies and brands tend to think of the Asian and Indian space in the US as being monolithic. But the truth is really far from that classification or that categorization,” explained Senthil Govindan, the president of Datawrkz, a digital-media planning and buying shop with offices in Austin, Texas, as well as Bangalore, India, and Singapore.

“And as you approach your planning for next year,” he counseled delegates at the Asian American Advertising Federation’s (3AF) 2020 Asian Marketing Summit, “start thinking about this more as multiple different building blocks within the Asian and Indian communities in the US, rather than looking at it as one overall budget.”

In guiding marketers on how to deepen connections with the estimated four million Indian Americans living in the United States, Govindan insisted that:

- Language and culture have an impact on the response to advertising;
- Occasion marketing is a powerful, but nuanced, opportunity; and
- The love of cricket can be a unifying force.

Language and culture have an impact on the response to advertising

The country of India has 22 official languages. In reality, however, over 120 languages are spoken. Geographically, the nation also is split into 28 states and eight union territories, adding a further layer of complexity.

“So, you have multiple languages that are spoken in India; you have multiple sub-cultures; certain phrases; certain ways of expressing yourself; and different times of the year that might be more special to you,” Govindan said.

Running a campaign across India as a whole, he noted, would be like trying to do the same for the entire European Union – a regional bloc that includes nations as diverse as Malta, Germany, France, and Lithuania. For the same reason, attempts at reaching Indian Americans, said Govindan, cannot be premised on an undifferentiated approach.

In formulating strategies to engage Indian Americans, he continued, marketers should treat “each of these blocks a little bit differently,” depending on the regional, linguistic, and cultural background of the granular audience they want to connect with.

Govindan used language as a case in point. “Yes, there is an English overlay, where almost all Indian Americans will speak English and will be familiar with, and go to, websites that are English-based.” However, to gain a full audience overview, “you also have a whole bunch of regional pockets that you need to look at.”

Previous research from the 3AF, for example, found that:

- 43% of Indian Americans engaged better with advertising shown alongside culturally relevant content;
- 48% of first-generation Indian Americans logged higher engagement with these ‘in-culture’ ads;
- 51% of Indian Americans preferred ads in their own language to ads in English;
- 60% of foreign-born Indians living in the US agreed with the same statement; and

- 45% of Indian Americans are more likely to pay attention when ads include celebrities or people with Indian or Asian origins.

Occasion marketing is a powerful, but nuanced, opportunity

Another essential consideration when targeting Indian Americans involves the various celebrations and religious festivals that are important in India and among diaspora communities in the US. Such as:

- Raksha Bandhan – August 22nd, 2021 – is mainly celebrated by Hindu-speakers;
- Ganesh Chaturthi – September 10th, 2021 – is primarily observed by three groups: Gujarati speakers, a language with origins in the western state of Gujarat, but spoken in other states, too; Marathi speakers, who are located in different areas across India; and Kannada speakers, a language that dominates in the region of Karnataka, and is spoken by groups in states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh; and
- Onam – 12–23 August, 2021 – which is a focus for Malayalam speakers, led by the state of Kerala, but also a prominent feature in places like Lakshadweep and Puducherry.

Govindan specifically referenced Dussehra, an autumn event that marks the end of the nine-day Navaratri festival celebrated in many areas. However, other parts of India, such as West Bengal, commemorate Durga Puja over a similar time period. “This is actually their most important time of the year,” he noted.

“When Asian American marketers think about India, I think the festival that comes to mind the most is Diwali. But Dussehra, or Durga Puja in Bengal, is probably going to be more important to people from that part of India who might have relocated to the US,” Govindan said.

“So [those differences] are something that you always need to keep in mind.”

Research by Datawrkz in 2018 covered that year’s holiday period and the 26 days before the festivities began. Specifically, it analyzed the online behavior of Indian Americans when it came to viewing content from national and regional publishers in India and found increases of more than:

- 53% in average clickthrough rates, with this figure standing at 61% for regional players and 46% for national media brands;
- 26% in clickthrough rates for regional publishers when compared to national publishers;
- 24% in page views for regional publishers measured against their national counterparts; and
- 72% in clickthrough rates for Bengali publishers, the highest rates for the media brands assessed.

The love of cricket can be a unifying force

A widespread passion point that cuts across Indian cultural and linguistic divides is the love of cricket, and especially the Indian Premier League (IPL), an annual competition that runs between March and May every year, and features eight teams from different cities and states in the country.

This all-action, star-studded version of the sport is a draw for viewers throughout India, and also for Indian Americans, who are eager to see teams like the Chennai Super Kings, Delhi Capitals, Kolkata Knight Riders and Rajasthan Royals battle for supremacy.

“The one thing that brings Indians together like nothing else is cricket,” Govindan said.

In studying consumers’ digital habits around the 2019 IPL, Datawrkz looked at the sports pages for digital publishers in India and three neighboring, cricket-loving countries – Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – by comparing the 47 days of the tournament with the same period before it began.

This analysis found that for members of the South Asian community (with connections back to any of the four aforementioned countries) living in the US:

- Page views increased by 40% throughout the tournament;
- Spikes on this metric rose by up to 70% when a given country was playing;
- On average, the cost per thousand increased by 20% during the event; and
- This figure expanded to as much as 30% for a game-day for a specific nation.

“Even more than festivals, this is probably the time when you can get eyeballs and you can get attention,” Govindan said of the IPL.

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