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Take Off the Apron

Like recent Pizza Hut ad, ethnic stereotypes should be pulled

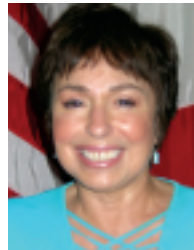
A recent Pizza Hut commercial presented an elderly Italian-American couple—the man, short and burley, sporting a wide-lapel, striped suit and a fedora, while the woman wore a dark dress and an apron. As the two marvel over the New Sicilian Pizza Lasagna, the man turns to his wife and asks, “Why you no make-a da pizza lika dat?”

Pizza Hut’s corporate offices in Dallas received a number of complaints, including one from the Sons of Italy, a nationwide organization for men and women of Italian descent. Consequently, Pizza Hut decided to permanently retire the commercial.

Why was this ad so offensive?

The answer is found in the Italian-American stereotypes that many ad agencies use to promote their clients’ products and services. Thanks to the popularity of *The Sopranos* and entertainment like it, most commercials that use Italian-American men portray them as gangsters, while Italian women are usually presented as elderly, overweight, unattractive housewives and grandmothers.

Commercials using Mafia imagery range from breath mints and lip balm (Wrigley’s Eclipse and Blistex), to herbicides (RoundUp), batteries (Eveready), diet pills (Stacker 2) and even milk (the International Dairy Foods Association) and stuffed animals (Vermont Teddy Bear). Stereotypes like the elderly Pizza Hut cou-



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The U.S. Justice Department estimates that less than .0025 percent of the nation’s estimated 16 million to 26 million Americans of Italian descent are involved in criminal activities.

And far from being largely blue-collar workers, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that 66 percent of the Italian Americans in the workforce are in such white collar jobs as physicians, attorneys, corporation executives, teachers, etc. Census data reveal that Italian Americans are the nation’s fifth-largest ethnic group. The average Italian American is 34

years old and married with one child. He (or she) has a higher level of education than the national average, holds a white-collar professional job and earns a median annual income of \$61,300—about \$11,000 more than the national median income.

So how do Italian Americans want to see themselves portrayed in commercials? To answer that question, the Sons of Italy conducted an informal Internet poll. Here’s what we learned: poll participants resent seeing commercials and print ads that present Italian Americans as uneducated people who live in marginalized, if colorful, urban neighborhoods or as violent men living on the fringe of society and its laws.

In general, the poll revealed that Italian Americans would like the U.S. ad industry to project them as young, successful people who have careers and who raise close-knit families. They cited a recent Bayer TV ad with an Italian American family running an upscale restaurant and a Sensodyne toothpaste ad featuring a dentist named Dr. Buonmarito as examples of what they want to see.

These ads realistically portray who Italian Americans really are. Madison Avenue should strive to be in touch with reality—and not just for this demographic subgroup, but for our country’s various minority and majority groups. What do Italian Americans want? Like Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men*, we want the truth. We can handle the truth, and so can the rest of America.

The stereotypes that commercials use help shape public opinion—with serious consequences.

ple have also been found in ads for Uncle Ben’s Pasta Bowl, Ragu pasta sauce, Alka-Seltzer, Rub-bermaid and the Olive Garden.

Why does this concern Italian Americans, and why should it concern everyone? Because the stereotypes that commercials use help shape public opinion—with serious consequences. The message, unfortunately, is coming through loud and clear. When pollster Zogby International surveyed American teenagers 13 to 18 years old, it discovered that 78 percent associate Italian Americans with either criminal activities or blue-collar work. Meanwhile, a survey by the Response Analysis Corp. revealed that 74 percent of adult Americans believe most Italian Americans have “some connection” to organized crime.

These perceptions are at odds with the facts.

For the Record:

An Oct. 23 Hotline should have included Publicis USA in Seattle as winning a global marketing assignment from HP’s imaging and printing division. A Nov. 6 story about Butterball’s Thanksgiving campaign should have named Leo Burnett in Chicago as the agency that created it.