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WHAT DO ITALIAN AMERICANS WANT?

By Dona De Sanctis

About two years ago, the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice (CSJ), the anti-defamation arm of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), published a report on Italian American stereotypes in advertising.

The samples were taken from commercials and print ads collected by the CSJ with assistance from other Italian American organizations including UNICO National, the Italian American One Voice Coalition and Italian American Pride.

Not surprisingly, the report found that Italian American men were invariably presented as uneducated, dishonest and/or violent while the women were usually elderly, overweight housewives and mothers.

“Advertising agencies use the Mafia to sell everything from breath mints and milk to Internet search engines and teddy bears,” the report concluded. “Why do we care? Because ads shape public opinion – with serious consequences.”

To prove that these stereotypes were not a figment of our collective Italian American imagination (or paranoia), the report reprinted a newspaper column by *Hartford Courant* business reporter Matthew Kauffman (“Rub Out Those Ads That Spoof The Mob,” May 28, 2003) in which he noted Madison Avenue’s “seemingly irresistible desire to paint [Italian Americans] as silk-suit-wearing, pinky-ring-waving, New Joisey-talking galoots with a penchant for violence.”

“The next time you’re tempted to reach for the well-worn image of the Italian mobster,” Kauffman advised marketers, “think about the message you’re sending to

customers.” [For a free copy of the CSJ report, send a large (9 x 12), stamped, self-addressed envelope with \$1.50 in stamps to: CSJ Advertising Report, 219 E Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20002 or download it for free at www.osia.org at Studies in Culture, “Reports and Research.”]

OSIA then sent the report to key advertising media, ad agencies and copywriters’ professional societies to open up a dialogue. The response was negligible with one exception: Cynthia Frisby, a professor of advertising at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, who found the report “amazing and revealing.”

An expert on advertising’s use of ethnic stereotypes and herself a member of a minority, Prof. Frisby said that until she saw the report she had “never given much thought to the area of Italian American stereotypes.”

OSIA found *that* statement “amazing and revealing.” It underscored our contention that the stereotyping of Italian Americans is so pervasive and accepted in our society that even an African American professor who studies Madison Avenue had not noticed it.

WHAT DO WE WANT?

“How would Italian Americans like to see themselves portrayed in commercials?” Professor Frisby wanted to know.

To answer that question, OSIA conducted an informal Internet poll that asked Italian Americans to suggest the kind of advertising they would like to see that involved people of Italian descent. Here’s what we learned.

Poll participants expressed great distress over commercials and advertisements 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.

To help Madison Avenue present a more realistic and respectful image of Italian Americans, poll participants suggested that commercials use characters with recognizable professions and equally recognizable Italian names to sell products and services that are not connected to Italy or being Italian.

As examples they offered: “When Dr. Parisi's daughter gets a fever, he reaches for Children's Tylenol” or “When Gina Pennacchio gets home late from her law practice, she reaches for Perdue chicken tenders in her freezer” or “If Joe Santangelo overdoes it playing tennis, Ben Gay saves the day.”

A particularly novel idea involved using commercials that tap into Italian American history. For example: “Mario” tells “Giovanni” about the new cell phone he just purchased. During the conversation he mentions Antonio Meucci was one of the inventors of the telephone.

To eradicate the usual stereotypes, they also would like to see commercials in which Italian American women are presented as young, educated professionals instead of the “grandmothers-in-black cooking something” stereotype.

They also suggested commercials in which children who look Italian learn something unusual from a relative: a mother teaching a son how to sew or a father teaching his daughter how to drive a nail.

LET’S GET REAL!

When a commercial calls for a strong Italian theme or flavor, Italian Americans would like to see a more authentic interpretation of “Italianità.”

For example, instead of having Italian American characters speak ungrammatical English with strong New York accents or broken English with comical Italian accents, participants suggested having commercials use standard Italian with English subtitles.

And they suggested as background music in commercials classical Italian music from opera instead of mafia themes or mandolins playing “O Sole Mio.” They gave high marks to the Barilla Pasta commercials that use Andrea Bocelli singing romantic ballads in Italian.

The poll also revealed that Italian Americans would prefer to see celebrities of Italian heritage in sports, entertainment, business, etc. promote a product instead of characters based on fictitious “Hollywood movie-type gangsters.”

CONCLUSION

In general, the poll revealed that Italian Americans would like to see the image of themselves projected by the U.S. advertising industry as upscale, successful and modern people who are fully integrated into American society, who lead productive lives and who raise close-knit families while maintaining their Italian heritage.

Ironically, that “image” is far closer to reality than the stereotypes so prevalent today.

U.S. Census Bureau data from the Year 2000 report reveals that 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 job in a profession and earns a median annual income of \$61,300—about \$11,000 more than the national median income.

That is who we are, but it is not how we are perceived. So what do we want? We want the truth! We can handle the truth and ... so can the rest of America.

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