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 burly, 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 Pasta 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.

The question is why this ad was 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 the Olive Garden.

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

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 15 to 18 years old, it discovered that 78 percent associate Italian Americans with either criminal activities or blue-collar work. Meanwhile, a survey of American teenagers 13 to 18 recently conducted by the Response Analysis Corp. revealed that 74 percent of adult Americans believe most 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 recent 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 denim-clad, striped suit and a fedora, diet pills (Stacker 2) and even milk (the International Dairy Foods Association) and stuffed animals (Vermont Teddy Bear). Stereotypes like the elderly Pizza Hut couple ...

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.