

Marketing Multiethnic Communities

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Marketing Multiethnic Communities

Frank Benest

The 1990 Census confirms that America is witnessing an "explosion of diversity."¹ Diversity has become a dominant fact of everyday life, not only for core cities, but also for the suburbs and for outlying, semirural areas. As just one example of our growing pluralism, the community of Brea in Orange County, California, always had been a predominantly Anglo suburb of Los Angeles. A recent survey by the school district, however, indicates that 32 languages now are spoken in households served by the district.

Diversity has become a marketing issue for local government. In recent years, local government managers have realized that they must market their communities to retain existing residents and businesses, attract new population and economic development, stimulate tourism, and generally promote a positive community image. The marketing challenge is how to promote a multiethnic community when diversity is not valued.

Diversity often is perceived as a liability, not an asset; a weakness, not a strength. Most of the professional, as well as popular, literature advocates that we can no longer ignore diversity in the workplace or in the community. Authors indicate that we must plan to better cope with diversity and better "manage" differences. Some articles sound like primers on disaster preparedness, advocating that local governments prepare for diversity as if it were an earthquake.²

If we are to market multiethnic communities effectively, we first must change our mind-set regarding the notion of diversity. Following the lead of many premier corporations, local governments must come to recognize the value of diversity. Instead of tolerating or "managing" diversity, many

forward-thinking corporations (for example, Unisys, ITT Canon, AST Research) have embraced diversity as an asset in their efforts to compete locally, nationally, and internationally. These corporations have concluded that a multiethnic work-force helps a corporation better relate to a multiethnic customer base. For instance, multilingual employees of the Southern California Gas Company are assigned to new immigrants to explain how to use the services of the utility. Cultural isolation obviously is a liability. Corporations are finding that different languages, skills, ideas, world views, and sensitivities among their employees help them compete in the global marketplace.

Just like some corporations, local governments must challenge the conventional wisdom that differences are a weakness so that managers can use diversity as a strategic advantage. Many urban and suburban areas across North America, for example, are witnessing a tremendous influx of immigrants. While adjusting to the needs of these new arrivals poses a challenge to the established community and its local government, the new arrivals prove to be an economic asset. In fact, new arrivals to North America are a key element in our "global fitness" strategy. They help us to deal with our continuing labor shortage, and many of them offer scientific and engineering skills. Moreover, new arrivals are renewing North America's entrepreneurial spirit. Studies indicate that newcomers start many small businesses, creating new jobs and increasing national productivity.³

Many North Americans are concerned about non-English-speaking immigrants. Certainly one common language is necessary to help integrate all our diverse peoples, but the notion of "English Only" limits our global competitiveness. When immigrants learn English, while preserving their other lan-

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guages, they enhance our global fitness. "English Plus" is a strategic advantage.

From a marketing perspective, the key question is: How do we get those inside and outside our community to view our pluralistic, multiethnic, multilingual environment as an exciting, vibrant place to live, work, play, and do business? To address this marketing challenge, we need more than a "fluffy" advertising approach that simply shows people of different cultures living and working in harmony. Rather, our marketing approach must be a comprehensive strategy that includes these components:

- Understand the role of local government and its leaders
- Start at home
- Shape the dialogue
- Use food, song, dance, and history
- Focus on shared values
- Create positive multicultural interaction
- Empower people to solve problems
- Target audiences and target messages.

Understand the Role of Local Government and Its Leaders

Local governments are the primary sources of community services in most communities. Local government, however, is not merely a "service faucet" to be turned on or off depending on the amount of revenue that can be generated from residents and businesspeople. Today, local government also is responsible for helping promote positive community change, adding value to the community through economic development or other means, and enhancing community image. Local governments must confront ever-increasing diversity; bring together community leaders and other resources to solve inevitable problems and minimize strife as urban and suburban areas undergo change; use pluralism as a long-term benefit to enrich community life; and fully embrace diversity in the effort to market the community to the outside world.

As with most issues, leadership is key. Local government leaders—both elected and appointed—must recognize diversity as a challenge and respond positively to that challenge. They need to be role models for other government officials, as well as for residents and businesspeople. Modeling is the most powerful way of teaching, but, before local government leaders can coach and model positive behavior, they need to feel comfortable with ethnic and cultural differences. Since most local government officials are European-Americans, they need to step outside their traditional comfort zones. They must learn about different cultures and ethnic

groups, attend cultural festivals and visit the homes and businesses of the various ethnic groups in the community. Local government leaders must talk with, listen to, and, most important, develop positive relationships with all the groups that make up the culturally diverse community. Local government leaders cannot live and work in grand isolation and still expect to exert leadership in responding to the challenges of cultural diversity.

Start at Home

Local government leaders need to recognize that marketing must "start at home." Ethnic groups and multicultural communities first must feel good about themselves before they can promote themselves to the outside world. Celebrating culture, "selling" our history, and effectively solving our own community problems—all discussed below—are among the ways people of all cultures create a positive self-image.

Second, no community or local government can market a product that is broken. Starting at home also means "fixing up the product" wherever necessary. Such issues as crime,

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failing schools, graffiti, and poverty must be addressed before extensive external advertising campaigns can have any success. It is impossible to market community life in Memphis when a black child there is more likely than a black child in Jamaica to die during the first year of life.

Shape the Dialogue

To market a multiethnic, multicultural community successfully, we must take control of the dialogue and shape it. To be effective communicators, we first must use appropriate language and positive imagery. Obviously, the images associated with the "melting pot"—"blending" and "assimilation," for example—are uninspiring as well as inaccurate. The melting pot simply produces a bland sameness. Positive images and metaphors can help shape the dialogue. Managers

can talk about "mosaics," "gardens of many different flowers," "rainbow" workforces and communities, "new arrivals," and cultural "richness."

A good example of this communication strategy is Los Angeles County's effort to market itself as the "Global City" and "World Community." As part of this strategy, the county government for the past six years has sponsored Cultural Diversity Month. In addition to traditional proclamations and cultural displays and festivals, activities include billboards and public service announcements, last year featuring Archbishop Desmond Tutu; museum exhibitions; children's essay and art poster contests; human relations training; multicultural film series; university conferences—last year's event was entitled "Finding Common Ground"—and special programming by numerous television stations. The event is coordinated by the Human Relations Commission, which provides Los Angeles County communities a list of 40 ideas for participation.

In addition to promoting the richness of cultural diversity, local government can help recognize the contributions of ethnic groups to community life. As part of Cultural Diversity Month, the Los Angeles County Human Rela-

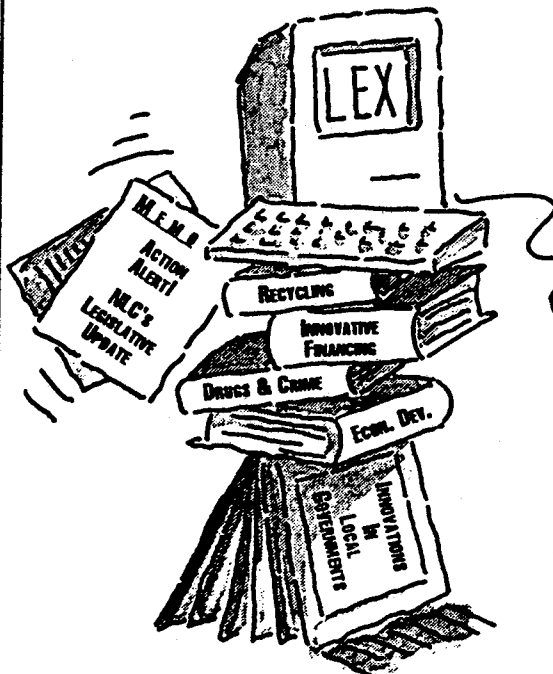
tions Commission sponsors an awards program recognizing such contributions. Moreover, *The Los Angeles Times* has run continuing columns, "Black Voices" and "Latino Voices," that profile Afro-Americans and Latin Americans in the county who are giving of themselves. The message is that everyone in a multiethnic community can contribute to the betterment of the total community.

How we define community problems is also a key communications issue. To the extent that crime, police harassment, welfare, and failing schools are defined as racial issues, local governments will find it extremely difficult to deal effectively with these problems. Local government leaders should not try to ignore race; however, it is easier to deal with such problems when they are defined by leaders as public safety, family support, or public education issues to be addressed by local government and, in fact, by the whole community. Effective leaders do not allow others to frame issues.

Use Food, Song, Dance, and History

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necessary strategy. The government of Arlington County, Virginia sponsors "national celebration days" for Chileans, Lithuanians, and Afghans, among others, and supports an active international club. The "Taste of Chicago," the "Latin American Festival" of San Diego, and the two-week-long "Los Angeles Festival" are examples of the way local government officials can promote appreciation for the vitality and richness of different cultures through food and the visual and performing arts.

These "cultural" strategies can go beyond "fun and games." The public art program sponsored by Brea, California, showcases sculpture from around the world and brings artists-in-residence to our community. Our current artist-in-residence is from Mexico. He sculpts and paints in a studio in the high school quad, interacting with students, discussing the Mexican culture and symbolism depicted in his art, and simply sharing his culture. Certainly, the literature readings and the student poster contest entitled "People in My Neighborhood," which are part of the Los Angeles County Cultural Diversity Month, build awareness.

"Selling history" also can be a part of an awareness-building effort. Afro-Americans

across the country, for example, are struggling to preserve the jazz clubs of Harlem, the one-room school houses of the rural South, and the Audubon Ballroom in New York City, the site of the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X. This past year, more than one million people of all ethnic backgrounds visited the Martin Luther King, Jr., historic site in Atlanta. Focusing on history is not merely a helpful tool in marketing ethnic groups and their cultures to external audiences; it is critical to promoting self-image.

Finally, art also can be a useful problem-solving strategy. One good example is the MacArthur Park Revitalization Project in Los Angeles. MacArthur Park was crime-ridden and attracted drug dealers and their customers. To address the problem, the city's Cultural Affairs Department involved the multiethnic community surrounding the park in a public art and beautification program. Six months into the program, police reports demonstrated a 49 percent drop in crime in the park.⁵

Focus on Shared Values

To the extent that festivals can attract people of different cultures to celebrate with other

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groups, cultural celebrations can serve as "integrators." They can help affirm our human connections and diminish ethnic, social, economic, and other differences that separate groups.

Unfortunately, people often dwell on the differences among groups, while ignoring the many similarities. All people seek fulfillment in life. Marketing efforts should demonstrate that people of all cultures pursue meaning, purpose, and joy. As Human Resources Trainer Clare Sharafinski has stated: "To acknowledge diversity is to acknowledge the subjective differences in the expression of common needs."⁶ *The Los Angeles Times*' "Black Voices" and "Latino Voices" are not simply a series of profiles of black and brown American role models. These people are like all people; they care about the same things that all people care about, no matter what their ethnic heritages might be. In a similar vein, Dayton, Ohio, has adopted the marketing campaign theme, "Dayton, City of Neighbors." The positive stories focus on common values: pride, family, work, security, love.

A visit to Little Saigon in Westminster, California, affords a memorable illustration of our common ground. The Asian Garden Mall there is a striking reconstruction of life in Southeast Asia; across its front entrance is draped a huge American flag.⁷

Create Positive, Multicultural Interaction

It is extremely difficult to market a multiethnic community if the community's ethnic and cultural groups do not interact positively. When whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians are isolated from each other, unsolved problems abound and strife is likely. Cultural isolation breeds misunderstanding—and worse.

To counteract isolation, the first approach is to devise activities that bring members of different ethnic groups together so they have the opportunity to interact positively. Traditionally, sports have brought together youth and adults from different cultures and ethnic groups. Farmers markets and cultural festivals also create a positive environment. Of course, most workplaces provide an opportunity for positive interaction among groups, if they have the proper leadership.

The second and more challenging approach is to design environments in which different kinds of people can listen to and learn from each other. Church leaders in Garden Grove, California, have sponsored joint religious services, bringing together European-Americans and new arrivals from Korea.⁸ The community leadership in San Marino, California, has sponsored intercultural dinners, bringing

together established Anglo residents and newly-arrived Chinese. The Birmingham Partnership in Birmingham, Alabama, matches whites and blacks, one-on-one, so they can get to know each other, learn from each other, and provide mutual support.⁹

Perhaps the most creative example of multicultural interaction is the "Living Room Dialogues" conducted by the Human Relations Commission of Orange County, California. In Costa Mesa, the commission helped create among Anglos and Latinos dialogue about overcrowded apartment complexes and the issue of day workers who congregate on street corners soliciting casual employment. In Garden Grove, the commission brought together established Anglo residents and Korean merchants to discuss the proliferation of business signs in the Korean language only. When the city council earlier had tried to legislate against Korean-only signs, the move was seen as racially biased. The "Living Room Dialogues" resulted in a voluntary effort to install bilingual signs that could be understood by the English-speaking majority and by city public safety personnel. The more positive climate in the community seems to have resulted in an increase in the number of European-Americans who shop in the Korean stores. Moreover, the Korean community in Garden Grove has reinforced positive relationships with the Anglo community through the newly-formed Korean Community Friendship Forum. The forum draws residents from diverse backgrounds to discuss mutual problems. It also has created "friendship awards" which the Korean community gives to European-Americans who have supported newly-arrived immigrants and promoted cultural understanding.¹⁰

Such efforts are not an attempt to ignore or gloss over differences or tensions. Conflict is part of life. We should acknowledge tension and learn from it. In many Southern California communities, for example, older and cheaper apartment complexes are overcrowded with newly-arrived immigrants. It is not uncommon for two or even three related families to live together. Outreach efforts by city staff and volunteers in the community of Brea have helped well-established residents look beyond their ethnocentric biases to understand that the extended family, rather than government, provides social and economic support for the new arrivals.¹¹

Empower People To Solve Community Problems

While farmers markets, intercultural dinners, and "living room dialogues" can promote positive interaction among ethnic groups, ultimately each group must get involved in

solving its own problems, alone or in partnership with others. The role of local government is to go beyond providing services and to reach out and support groups trying to improve community life. Since local government by itself cannot solve all problems, its leaders must empower people to help themselves.

From a marketing perspective, this "empowerment" approach has three advantages. First, it helps ethnic groups "fix up the product." Second, by effectively addressing housing, crime, drug, or other community problems, people of all ethnic groups can enhance their self-image. Again, a community cannot market itself to the outside world unless it feels good about itself. Finally, no community could have a better image to market than one reflecting involved, caring, and determined citizens of diverse ethnic groups, all wanting a better life and willing to work for it. Many cities attempt to market themselves through "quality of life" strategies. Quality of life, however, does not mean only premier parks, museums, and architecture; livability also involves the willingness and ability of all people to work together to solve problems.

To empower groups to help solve community problems, local government should promote leadership development, support self-help community organizing efforts, and use creative community participation approaches.

As in most areas of human endeavor, leadership is critical. Many communities have worked hard to promote multiethnic leadership. Birmingham, Alabama, for example, has tried to overcome the trauma of the 1960s civil rights conflict and to deal effectively with continuing economic and social problems. In 1982, the Chamber of Commerce, the local university, and various business leaders and public officials established "Leadership Birmingham." This leadership program helped identify and develop leaders in both white and black communities and encouraged problem solving in the areas of education, transportation, and economic development.¹² Similarly, the San Diego Community Leadership Program has helped develop Anglo and Latino leadership in order to address a variety of problems, including border and immigration issues.¹³ "Leadership Santa Barbara" in Santa Barbara, California, also provides an on-going education forum to develop and unite existing and aspiring leaders from all segments of the community to foster problem solving.¹⁴

In addition to fostering leadership development, local government officials can support emerging community organizations struggling to deal with tough-to-solve issues. One good model is Pasadena, California's "Neighbor-

hood Connections" Office, formed by the city council. This office maintains liaison with and provides various services to more than 70 neighborhood associations. Many of the neighborhoods these associations represent are areas in which a single ethnic group is concentrated as a result of housing patterns. The office provides technical assistance and "how to" guides to groups wishing to organize. It also supplies copy machines, computers, typewriters, and lettering machines for different groups. Moreover, staff identify emerging development and other issues affecting particular groups and suggest how they can advocate their views to the planning commission, the city council, and other policy-making bodies. Of course, any local government taking this support role eventually will deal with the potential conflict created by staff assistance to community groups that might oppose official government positions.

To empower groups to help solve community problems, local government should promote leadership development, support self-help community organizing efforts, and use creative community participation approaches.

Once viewed as adversaries, many strong-willed, aggressive community organizations now are perceived by local governments as part of the solution to problems. In Los Angeles, the Latino-dominated United Neighborhoods Organization (UNO) and East Valleys Organization (EVO), as well as the multiethnic South Central Organizing Committee (SCOC) are trying to improve schools, promote affordable housing, and "take back the parks" from gangs.

Finally, local government leaders can use well-planned community participation processes to involve diverse groups and foster better decision making and problem solving. If embraced and valued, diversity can generate creativity. If local government officials recognize, understand, and appreciate the different cultures in a community, cultural differences can be beneficial to all groups.¹⁵

A wonderful example of community problem solving that benefits from multicultural perspectives was described at the Pacific Rim symposium sponsored this year by ICMA. Tauranga, New Zealand, is a coastal community whose residents always have enjoyed the

bay. Unfortunately, the secondary-treated sewage effluent that was discharged into the bay provided nourishment for and promoted the growth of algae that then washed up and fouled the beaches. Although the treated effluent met all government standards, the voters were prepared to tax themselves in order to build and operate the tertiary-treatment sewage plant recommended by city engineers. The Maoris, the native island people of New Zealand, however, vehemently opposed the discharge of any treated effluent into the bay, because they attached a spiritual value to the waters surrounding their island. After a creative community participation process inviting suggestions from all segments of the community, the city of Tauranga adopted the Maori proposal to filter the treated effluent through marshlands. The solution protected the bay, promoted the ecology of the marshlands, and cost less money than other alternatives.

Urban problems no longer can be solved by applying a single set of solutions or by relying on a single cultural perspective. Instead of suppressing cultural differences, local government can integrate them. Everyone needs to be counted and to pursue meaning and purpose. Efforts to encourage public participation can capitalize on this motivation.

Target Audiences and Target Messages

In developing the marketing plan for a multiethnic community, managers must finetune their message to certain selected audiences. A community cannot externally market itself by "shot-gunning" an ill-defined or unfocused story to many groups. Local government leaders first must ask what kinds of residents, businesspeople, developers, and visitors are likely to be attracted to a pluralistic environment. Not all people would be comfortable in a multiethnic, multicultural community.

Once a culturally diverse community targets its likely audience, it must hone its message. That message must be simple and to the point. To potential residents, the community can promote its exciting, vibrant living experience. It also can market itself as a "community of communities" working together to solve the inevitable problems of community life. To visitors, it certainly can market the food, song, dance, and history of its multicultural residents. Businesses can be attracted by the community's large workforce that provides different skills, languages, and world views, all of which will help those businesses compete in the global marketplace.

Local government leaders must work with many community institutions so that the marketing effort is coordinated and messages do not conflict. The formal or informal marketing team must involve various city or county departments—for example, recreation, cultural affairs, public safety, economic development—as well as the Chamber of Commerce, the utilities, the university, the economic development corporation, and, of course, cultural institutions.

Failing . . . and Succeeding

"What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death."

Octavio Paz¹⁶

Life is plurality. Many communities are failing to solve problems and therefore to market themselves effectively because they attempt to "round off" the cultural edges of one ethnic group or another. Local government leaders must "manage by respect."¹⁷ One multiethnic city recently failed to recognize this premise. While promoting *Cinco de Mayo* and the heritage of its large Latino population, the city leadership proposed two ordinances that were aimed at new Latino arrivals: One proposed ordinance would regulate the number of pushcart vendors, providing licenses for only 22 out of an estimated 300 vendors. Most of the vendors are Spanish-speaking immigrants who serve local Latino neighborhoods and simply are trying to get a foothold in the local economy. A second ordinance limits the number of occupants permitted in a housing unit according to the square footage of the unit, thus outlawing overcrowded apartments. Because of opposition from Latino groups, these proposed regulations have been somewhat modified. The compromises, however, will neither minimize the negative publicity nor change the image of acrimony and multicultural conflict the controversy generated.

Using local government's policing power as the primary means of solving problems is not effective over the long term. Blunt policing powers should be used only as a last resort. Especially in a multiethnic community, creative problem solving which relies on involving all parties usually is more effective. It also supports the marketing effort. The problem involving day workers offers a good example. Many cities in Southern California have tried to legislate against the solicitation of employment by day workers. They also

have tried to use police forces to "push" day workers across their municipal boundary line. These police-power approaches have been unsuccessful. Brea, California, officials conducted extensive outreach both to well-established Anglo residents and to Latino immigrants and involved both groups in brainstorming solutions to the problem. As a result, the city now funds and operates Orange County's only "non-discriminatory" job center for day workers, serving undocumented as well as documented laborers. The program has removed day workers from the street corner, thus eliminating traffic safety problems and reducing complaints from residents and merchants intimidated by the gatherings of large numbers of Latino men. The center now serves more than 100 workers per day by matching them with contractors, residents, and other employers needing casual laborers.

Simply put, mishandling conflict between ethnic groups can give the community a black eye that cannot be covered over cosmetically as the community tries to build its image and market itself.

In summary, marketing a multiethnic community takes more than a slick advertising campaign. It requires effective community problem solving that addresses the following issues:

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To order, contact the ICMA Distribution Center, 1-800-745-8780. The price of the book is \$36, item number 40675.

- The multifaceted effort must include local government officials who actively take on the marketing challenge and who become comfortable with diversity.
- Marketing must start at home, "fixing up

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the product" as well as trying to promote it.

- Local leaders must shape the dialogue about community problems, using positive imagery and symbols.
- While communities can celebrate cultural differences, they also must focus on shared values.
- Local government leaders must design positive environments to overcome cultural and ethnic isolation and empower people to solve community problems.
- Finally, the marketing campaign must target its message to selected audiences.

Diversity is not a liability. If embraced, it is an asset that can enrich us and help market our pluralistic communities.

Successful marketing is not something that happens overnight. It requires a tenacious effort over the long haul.

Diversity is not a liability. If embraced, it is an asset that can enrich us and help market our pluralistic communities. PM

¹*Celebrating Our Diversity*, League of California Cities, Sacramento, California, 1990, p. 1.

²Clare Sharafinski, "Managing Diversity in the Workplace," an unpublished training outline, Tucson, Arizona, 1990.

³Julian Simon, *How Do Immigrants Affect Us Economically*, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 1985.

⁴Robert Hawkins, "Diversity and Municipal Openness," *Nation's Cities Weekly*, April 1, 1991.

⁵"In Los Angeles Curing Social Wounds With Excellence in Art," *Amenities*, National Council of Amenity Planners, Washington, D.C., March 15, 1989, p. 1.

⁶Sharafinski, "Managing Diversity in the Workplace."

⁷Dana Parsons, "New Cultures, New Tongues, New Vitality for County," *Los Angeles Times*, Orange County Edition, March 10, 1991.

⁸Marcida Dodson, "Korean Culture Connection," *Los Angeles Times*, Orange County Edition, January 9, 1991.

⁹Sheila Blair, "Leadership Birmingham: Integration through Coalition Building," *National Civic League*, November-December 1988, pp. 516-529.

¹⁰Dodson, "Korean Culture Connection."

Resources

Contact the resources listed below for more information about specific programs included in Dr. Benest's article.

- **Los Angeles County's Cultural Diversity Month:** Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, Public Information Office, 1184 Hall of Records, 320 W. Temple Street, Los Angeles, California 90012, 213/974-7609.
- **Brea's Public Art Program:** Community Services Department, Number One Civic Center Circle, Brea, California 92621, 714/990-7713.
- **"Dayton, City of Neighbors" Marketing Campaign:** Dayton Marketing Office, 101 W. Third Street, Dayton, Ohio 45402, 513/443-3750.
- **"Living Room Dialogues":** Orange County Human Relations Commission, 1300 S. Grand, Building B, Santa Ana, California 92705, 714/567-7470.
- **Pasadena's "Neighborhood Connections" Office:** Pasadena Communications Department, 2057 North Los Robles, #103, Pasadena, California 91104, 818-794-2934.

¹¹For general information on marketing multiethnic communities, contact the City-County Communications and Marketing Association, 409 Third Street, SW, Suite 206, Washington, D.C. 20024, 202/488-7100.

¹¹Frank Benest and Rusty Kennedy, "Confronting the Day Worker Dilemma," to be published by *Western City*.

¹²Blair, "Leadership Birmingham: Integration through Coalition Building."

¹³Roberta Miller, "Business as Usual is Not Enough," *National Civic Review*, November-December 1988, p. 550.

¹⁴*Celebrating Our Diversity*, League of California Cities, Sacramento, California, 1990, p. 11.

¹⁵*Place Makes a Difference—Social Equity and the American Community*, Partners for Livable Places, Washington, D.C., 1990, p. 29.

¹⁶Octavio Paz, as quoted in *The Harmony Report*, Western States Edition, November 1990, p. 1.

¹⁷Sharafinski, "Managing Diversity in the Workplace."