

Climbing Aboard the Latino Bandwagon

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NEW YORK - Hallmark Cards is marketing 2,500 greeting cards for Hispanics, nearly double the number of a year ago, while Blockbuster has posted bilingual signs and stocked video rentals in Spanish in nearly a quarter of its stores.

Kmart has a fashion line named for the Mexican pop star Thalía, a bid to woo young consumers. And Sears, Roebuck and Co. plans to unveil Lucy Pereda, a line of dressy women's clothing bearing the name of the Cuban-born TV lifestyle personality.

With overall retail sales languishing, store owners are hoping to give their business a boost by pursuing the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population: Hispanics.

Many merchants have sought out the Hispanic customer for years. But the overall industry found after the release of the 2000 census that it had underestimated the size of the Hispanic population, which surged 58 percent to 35.3 million during the 1990s. The nation's Hispanics represented an opportunity for retail sales growth.

"The census was very key," said Deidre Parkes, a company spokeswoman at Hallmark. "We knew we needed to increase our efforts."

But which strategies will work with Hispanics remains to be seen.

David Wolfe, creative director at the Doneger Group, a buying office in New York, believes that much of this spring's fashion trends, including the explosion of bright colors and lots of ruffles, is the result of the Latino influence on the American mainstream.

"It is colorful and flamboyant and sexy ... exactly the opposite of the minimalist fashion that killed fashion in the 1990s," Wolfe said.

In a testament to Latino power, the fashion line JLo by Jennifer Lopez, named after the entertainer, is among the standouts in teen departments of major stores.

"This was never geared toward Hispanics, but the fact that J.Lo is of Hispanic descent has helped," said Denise Seegal, chief executive officer and president of Sweetface Fashion Co., which produces the line.

Some experts in Hispanic marketing are still wary of retailers' efforts, saying they need to pay attention to the differences within the Hispanic population, including their nations of origin and the parts of the United States where they live.

"Some of them (retailers) get it, and some don't," said Aida Levitan, president of the Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies, which works with U.S. companies to help promote products to Hispanics.

Cathy Areu Jones, a 32-year-old Vienna, Va., resident and publisher of Catalina, a lifestyle magazine geared to Hispanic women, believes "companies are just throwing spaghetti to the wall. They think that one size fits all."

Jones said the new fashions need to address Hispanic consumers' different body shapes, and the designs and advertising shouldn't perpetuate the stereotype of a

sultry-looking Latina.

"I have a hard time finding clothes for myself," said Jones, who said she has to have her clothes tailored at the waist, but needs clothes that are more forgiving at the hips. All she sees in the stores, she said, is "the American cut."

And she doesn't wear the latest trends in fashion, like the ruffles and bright colors, because she believes they perpetuate the Hispanic stereotype.

Major retailers, including Kmart, said they are working hard to get the fit right. Retailers also noted they have done extensive research to find out the preferences of Hispanic consumers.

For example, J.C. Penney Co. Inc. is the dominant retailer for an apparel line aimed at Hispanic men called Havanera, which offers relaxed clothing featuring drawstring pants and embroidered detail, produced by Perry Ellis. The product reflects research that shows that segment is keen on rich details in their apparel, said Christi Byrd Smith, a Penney spokeswoman.

Blockbuster has studied its Hispanic customers in different parts of the country and tailored its stores to meet their tastes.

At stake for retailers is Hispanics' immense buying power, expected to balloon to \$926.1 billion in 2007, up dramatically from about \$580 billion in 2002, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia.

That far exceeds the growth rate in buying power of non-Hispanic consumers.

Source: The Arizona Republic