

Cross-Cultural Advertising Agency Focused on Digital



Jose Villa
President

About Sensis

Sensis, a cross-cultural advertising agency with digital at its core.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Mr. Villa, what was the vision when Sensis started and where are you today?

Mr. Villa: When Sensis started our vision was different. We were very much focused on the Hispanic market; specifically the digital Hispanic market that would help brands reach Hispanics online. Over the years that vision has evolved and expanded as the market has changed and become more cross-cultural.

CEOCFO: What do you focus on today in general?

Mr. Villa: We focus on helping companies, brands and organizations market their products and services. However, we do that at the intersection of two very important trends. One is the digitization of life in the United States as digital has become more and more part of everyday life. Advertising has evolved to be much more digital. Therefore we have always been focused on digital here. The other big trend is the increasing diversification of the populations. We are increasingly becoming a minority majority country. Our vision is for helping organizations more effectively market to this much more diverse population. Therefore, it is at the intersection of diversification and the digitization of society. That is where we really have a strong capability for helping organizations better market their products and services.

CEOCFO: Would you give us an example of a typical engagement, where your skills and focus come in and something a little more outside of the box?

Mr. Villa: We have a regional client here in Southern California; the air quality management district. They are the state agency that is responsible for maintaining air quality in Southern California. That used to be a very big issue in the 1980s and 1990s. They hired us to develop an ad campaign. They are trying to get consumers to burn less fire during certain times of the year when air quality gets really low. There, in Southern California, their target audience is Southern Californians and when you look at the demographics you know that more than half of their target is Hispanic, another quarter is African American and Asian. Really, only one quarter is traditional Caucasian. Therefore, they did not have the resources to hire four or five different ad agencies with expertise in just one of those markets. They needed someone who could help them develop messaging in a strategy that would cut across and would resonate with all of what is the very diverse population of Southern California. They needed someone who could develop advertising, buy media and help them to make sure that their message reached across and crossed over from general to ethnic markets. Last year we developed an ad campaign for them for the program that is called "Check before You Burn". We did a couple of innovative things. We developed messaging that was designed to work well both in English and in Spanish. The concept was developed, already thinking about how it would work in the Hispanic community, but it was in English. The advertising was all done in English. We developed TV advertisements, outdoor and radio, which were designed to reach across these diverse audiences. Then we developed a media plan. Again, there were limited resources, so they could not afford to do Spanish only advertising. Therefore, we had to buy media in a way that we reached Hispanics in addition to the general market. Therefore, we bought a lot of media where there was over indexing of Hispanic and ethnic audiences. Therefore, for instance, we bought radio, but we focused on radio stations that had a very high index of Hispanic and African American, those were two of our key audiences, and then still reach the general market. It was providing them efficiency and relevancy in a very diverse market.

CEOCFO: Are there so many differences between populations?

Mr. Villa: As marketers we are always trying to find the differences. Often those differences are where you can make a connection with the consumer. Those differences are not just about ethnicity. It is based on lifestyle and it is based on where you live, geography, your age, what you do for a living, what you are passionate about in terms of the things that

you like to do with you free time; these are all things that make us different. One of the things that we try to do is help our client find those commonalities that cut across those. Therefore, in the case of ethnicity you are right. There are definitely differences when it comes to language. However, there is a lot of commonality. There is a lot where we can help our clients figure out, "Where are the places where this particular organization or brand's product or service can connect emotionally that is consistent across these different audiences?" Find the commonality as opposed to just leveraging the differences. That is one of the things that we are very good at helping our clients figure out and still make it relevant. Still make it live in a way that it may be expressed in an ad that may be targeted to a Mexican American audience; it is the same idea. The idea is building off of a common insight, but it might be executed slightly different when we are targeting a Mexican American verses a Caucasian person living in the Mid West. Therefore, there is opportunity to find the commonalities and then take advantage of the differences to be more effective.

CEOCFO: *What might you look at in determining where a campaign will ultimately go that other agencies might not understand is relevant?*

Mr. Villa: I guess it is an element that is sort of related to ethnicity. However, one of the things that we look at and spend a lot more time thinking about than most of our colleagues in the industry are points of what we call tension. It is something that we are big believers in at the agency in terms of how we all struggle with things that we either want to do and do not do. I believe in this, but then I do behavior that is the opposite of that. When it comes to ethnicity, so much of the minority populations in the country is much more assimilated now than it used to be. For instance, over six percent of the Hispanic population in the United States was born here. Therefore, it is not a population of immigrants anymore. People that were born here that are very much Americans live I two worlds. They have grown up with certain traditions that are outside the sort of mainstream. That creates some points of tension in their lives and they way that they live their lives. It is one of the things that we spend a lot of time thinking about and trying to identify. That is because those places where those tensions happen are usually very fertile ground for marketers. That is what we try to do. We try to find those places and try to insert our message or take advantage of those points of tension to be more relevant to folks. With such a large population in the United States that kind of lives in multiple cultures, that is a very interesting place to try to really take advantage of that and look at that more than our competitors.

"Marketing is at the forefront of how you grow your business. For companies that want to grow in this new world, you need a new type of ad agency and that is what Sensis is."

- Jose Villa

CEOCFO: *Does it make a difference in an advertising approach if someone is documented or undocumented?*

Mr. Villa: There are some very practical considerations. For instance, we have clients in the higher education space where they are selling products that involve financial aid, for instance, and that becomes a very practical challenge. That is because if you are not here legally you typically cannot get financial aid and things like that. We have health care clients who are targeting populations for services and you cannot qualify for certain insurance programs unless you are here legally. Therefore, there are some very practical concerns. Therefore, we have had to sometimes target folks to make sure that they are legal permanent residents and they have the status that will qualify for some of those programs and products that the clients are pushing. However, at the level of an individual and how they are living their life, there is something that we talk about in advertising a lot of ethnic advertising; it is around enculturation. It is how assimilated you are into the mainstream culture. There is a similar correlation between how long you have been in the country and how assimilated you are. That is really important for marketers. That is because you are more likely to be living, for instance, in two worlds if you are more assimilated, verses if you are not assimilated and you are a recent immigrant. A large percentage of the people that are not documented and any of them are more recent immigrants tend to be living in one world; the world of their home country, much less than assimilating. It is an indicator of other things, to answer your question. However, they are people, they are here, they are consuming, they are important. From a purely economic perspective they are here consuming quite a bit, whether they are legal or not. I do not think that many companies will tell you, "We are specifically targeting illegals," but they are definitely not excluding them, because they have dollars to spend.

CEOCFO: *Your site indicates a wide range of organizations that utilized Sensis. Given the choice, are there particular types of campaigns or services you prefer?*

Mr. Villa: We have a preference towards not being industry specific. There are some advertising agencies that tend to focus on certain industries or verticals or categories. We like the diversity of challenges and working with clients in a wide range of industries. I guess it ties into the thing that we are a very diverse company and we have people from all over the world and different ethnic backgrounds. It just fits our general vibe that we just like. We find a lot of stimulus and value out of diversity, proudly speaking. Therefore, we like to have diverse minds. Everyone would like to have clients that have unlimited budgets in our business. Therefore, I would be lying to you if I did not tell you that I love a clients' large advertising budgets. However, I truly believe that as an agency we are really stimulated and drawn to clients who have to outsmart their competition verses outspend them. That is very much a mantra here. We really believe in that and we really love working with clients who have that challenge, which is many of them. In most categories, most of the brands or

organizations are not the leader. Therefore, you cannot just outspend your competition in terms of just spending more advertising dollars. You have got to outsmart them. We like working with those types of clients. It gives us that challenge.

CEOCFO: *How do you assess what you need to look at with new technologies and what you need to keep on the radar screen?*

Mr. Villa: Starting with the technology question, it is dizzying, the speed and velocity at which technological changes are coming into our business and affecting the way that people behave and the media they consume. It is hard for us. We are supposed to be the experts in it. We would be lying if we said that we know everything that is going on and we know all about everything. It is a challenge. We do our best to keep up with technology. We have a very strong technology team at the agency. Therefore, we build a lot of apps and websites. We definitely lean on them to make sure that we are aware of what is going on. The good news is that there is a lot of tools and curation going on out there about what is happening technologically and staying on top of it. We spend a lot of time speaking with vendors who come in and share with us new technology that they have developed that can help us and our clients. We are always inviting folks in here to share with us the new products and services that they are offering. That is because that is one of our important roles as an agency; to be aware of what it is the marketplace to share it with our clients. However, it is like drinking from a fire hose! It is impossible to keep up with it. You do your best. That is on the technology side. In terms of trends, that is a big part of our business. It is being aware of trends and hopefully identifying them early on. That is because those are huge opportunities for clients to be ahead of a trend to take advantage of something that is bubbling up in popular culture. We have a strategy team of strategic planners here whose job it is to uncover consumer insight. They are really very much the ones who are supposed to be the curators of trends in the marketplace for our clients and the work that we do. We like to believe that we are constantly looking around and just paying attention to what is going on around us. Therefore, we consider ourselves students of what is going on, paying attention to what people are wearing and how they are eating and what they are doing. Even though I run the agency and I do not spend a lot of time day to day on client work, I find myself doing the same thing. I am constantly paying attention to the things that I see around me. That is the way we stay on top of trends here and sharing it with the rest of the agency. We spend a lot of time writing and sharing our thoughts. We maintain two blogs at the agency. That is one of the places where we publish our thinking and what we are noticing in terms of trends in the marketplace to help our clients.

CEOCFO: *What is ahead for Sensis? What might be different in a year down the road?*

Mr. Villa: We have been growing slowly but steadily, which is good. We have adapted to this new sort of reality of a new marketplace where the economy is growing slowly. A year from now we will continue to grow and build our client base. One of the things that we try to do is also to offer a lot of innovative new services that are not traditional of many ad agencies. Therefore, I think in a year from now we will be having another innovative service. We also are starting to offer products to our clients. I would like to see us expanding that in a year from now. That is the trajectory that we are on.

CEOCFO: *What kinds of innovative services? Would you give us an example?*

Mr. Villa: This year we launched a new service called Sensis CMO. It is basically an outsourced CMO capability. In one particular area, CPG, Consumer Packaged Goods, there had been an explosion of small brands! If you go to a local health food store and you look at all of the brands in the aisles, many of them did not exist a year ago or even a couple of years ago. Many of these are newer companies, they are startups and they do not have the sophisticated marketing function that you would have at a Proctor & Gamble or a Unilever. We think that there is an interesting opportunity to help some of these folks that have innovative new products with more sophisticated marketing strategy work. Therefore, not just the creation of an advertising campaign, but more on the execution side and more on the strategy side, helping these brands. How are they looking at the marketplace? Who is helping them to identify who their target audiences are? To help them to determine what the proper media spend and marketing spend should be to increase ROI and things like that. The kinds of capabilities that are in house at large consumer product packed goods companies. They have large marketing departments. These upstart brands cannot afford to hire a CMO. Therefore, we have started offering this outsourced CMO service. We currently have four clients that we are working with and we are finding that there is a huge need for it. It is an interesting compliment extension to our traditional advertising service. That is one example.

CEOCFO: *Why pick Sensis out of the crowd?*

Mr. Villa: That is because I think that Sensis has a very innovative model that is in line with the future of the country. The country is changing very rapidly. Those changes are impacting every part of business, particularly marketing and advertising. We firmly believe, even though we are biased, that marketing is at the forefront of how you grow your business. For companies that want to grow in this new world, you need a new type of ad agency and that is what Sensis is.



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