

Latino or Hispanic Panic: Which Term Should We Use?

By Edward Retta and Cynthia Brink

With the meteoric rise of Hispanics in the USA as consumers, customers, partners, and employees, one of the most common questions asked by our clients over the last ten years is, **which term do we use?**

Most people ask this question because they don't want to offend their target audience. Special interest groups such as employee resource organizations and marketers want to find the term of broadest appeal. Others, especially those involved in legal, education, healthcare or government want to know which "official" terms they should be using. They have heard of other terms like *Chicano*, *Mejicano*, *Boricua*, *La Raza*, *Neoriqueno* and many other labels to refer to Latin Americans.

My Minnesota-born grandmother always called Hispanics "*Spanish People*".
-Cynthia Brink

75% do not prefer either term

A simple guideline for engaging people is to call them what they want to be called. According to research by the Pew Hispanic Center, only 25% of both first and second-generation Latinos report using *Latino* or *Hispanic* as the primary term to express their identity. Pew found that most Latinos in the US identify themselves first by their country of origin, or that of their parents.

Hispanic

The term *Hispanic* as used in the USA, was coined by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 1970s to describe people of Spanish-speaking origin. It is not a term that originated from within the culture. Primarily people who have been formed and educated in the USA use Hispanic. They are accustomed to the term by education or by family custom. Latin American nationals, recent immigrants to this country, will not self-identify as *Hispanic*.

Hispanic Controversy

"We would *never* call ourselves Hispanic." says Clara Borja Hinojosa, a Mexican national and Founding Director of the Mexico Institute in Dallas. Clara's preference is Mexican. Hispanic to her is simply a USA term. To some, *Hispanic* is all-inclusive, referring simply to language heritage. They feel it is a term meant to unify all Latin peoples. But to others it just doesn't connect. For critics, the word is associated either with the Spanish conquest of the natives or with the US government, and is therefore distasteful.

"I am not Hispanic. I am not part of the culture of the wounded,"

-Manuel Aboud,
Mexican national and
TV executive

"I am not Hispanic. I am not part of the culture of the wounded," said Manuel Aboud a TV executive in Los Angeles. "I'm a Mexican. I have an MBA." To Aboud, a *Hispanic* was someone else. Someone on the fringes. Someone less educated than himself, someone struggling within US society, a marginalized person.

"The term *Hispanic* emphasizes the wanting to be part of America and wanting to have a bigger piece of the economic pie," says sociologist Edward Murguia of Texas A&M University. "It (sic) is not as concerned as the term *Latino* with preserving language and culture."

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Latino

Latino most often refers to people of Latin American descent, as distinct from Spanish descent (people from Spain). We hear this term used frequently in South America to describe people on the continent as a whole, including Portuguese-speaking Brazilians. (Brazilians consider themselves Latinos, but they do not call themselves Hispanic, as they do not speak Spanish.) *Latino* is more tied to national origin and not to language. *Latino* is more likely to be used by first or second-generation Latin Americans who have closer cultural ties to Latin America than to the USA.

Latino Controversy

Some American-born Hispanics feel the term *Latino* is “too ethnic.” Most people who are third generation American-born and do not speak Spanish, would likely not self identify as Latinos. To them, *Latino* is a term for foreigners. Yet those same “foreigners” think *Latino* is a more inclusive term.

“I wouldn’t classify *Latino* as offensive to my (US-born) cousins, but it is not a term they identify with in any way.”

-Edward Retta

Considerable debate went into the name selection of the Latino Cultural Center of Dallas. As founders, our diverse group chose *Latino* as our inclusive term for all Hispanics and Latinos. The Dallas Symphony Orchestra recently changed the name of its annual Gala from the *Hispanic Concert* to the *Festival Latino*, as *Latino* was deemed to be more inclusive.

Like size, region matters.

In the U.S., these two terms tend to be used differently by region. The demographics of local Latino populations differ in regions of the USA. There are many more Cubans in Florida and more Mexicans in Texas and California. New York and New Jersey have many Puerto Ricans. According to Murguia, “Generally speaking, the pan-ethnic term used in New York and California is *Latino* while the pan-ethnic term used more often in Texas and Arizona is *Hispanic*.”

In Texas, a Pew Hispanic Center poll found that 45% of Latinos prefer the term *Hispanic* and 8% prefer *Latino*. Note this leaves 47% of Latinos in Texas who prefer neither term. In the other four most populous Latino states - California, New Jersey, Florida and New York – the Pew poll found that people are more likely to prefer “Latino”.

Generation and assimilation matter too.

As occurs with all immigrant groups to the USA, people feel more American and less ethnic with each successive generation. First generation Latinos are much more likely to use the name of their country of origin (68%) than are second-generation Latinos (38%). So, first generation immigrants prefer to be called Colombian or Mexican, but their children and grandchildren may prefer other terms.

Hispanic Magazine did a survey a few years ago and amazingly found that people preferred the term Hispanic over Latino. Perhaps that is due to the fact that the magazine is an English language publication and therefore would reflect the tastes of more assimilated or Americanized people.

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So... what term should we use?

Unfortunately, there is no “one size fits all” answer.

- When in doubt, ask! Do not assume and do not risk using the wrong term. Most Latino people are pleased by inquiry because it shows interest in their cultures.
- It is best to target the term to the audience. If this is difficult or impossible, here are two suggested rules of thumb: use *Hispanic* if the majority of your audience is English dominant and assimilated; use *Latino* if they are Spanish dominant or recent immigrants. Our opinion is that Latino is broader and connects better overall. We use the coupling “Hispanic / Latino” together wherever possible.
- Being Hispanic or Latino is a matter of cultural identity, heritage, language and national origin. It is not a racial category. Latinos can range from blond and blue-eyed to African in physical features.
- Be careful about assuming any Latino is Mexican! Although a majority of Latinos in the US are Mexican (70% in Texas), to non-Mexicans this assumption is tiresome and annoying.
- The term “Mexican” is a source of pride for people from Mexico. It has a rich history and legacy. Some clients have asked, “Can we use it safely?” The answer: absolutely yes, as long as the person being referred to is actually Mexican. The same goes for terms of other nationalities.
- The term Chicano is a special case. Chicano Studies is now an established academic field of study at major universities in the USA. The term is still regarded by others as negative and linked to a political ideology and activism by marginalized groups. It is bound to segments of Mexican-Americans and thus not related to other Latino groups. We recommend that you stay away from the term Chicano, unless your audience self-identifies that way. If they do, it is also a source of pride.
- For help, or for a glossary of terms, see www.crossculturecommunications.com

While working in Africa, in Spanish-speaking Equatorial Guinea, I mistakenly referred to the locals as *Guineos* – a type of banana - instead of the correct *Guineanos*.

-Edward Retta

Celia, now a healthcare executive, emigrated from Panama to Texas during high school. Her high school labeled her a “Black Mexican.” Though she did have African heritage and spoke fluent Spanish, Celia had never lived in Mexico and did not have any Mexican ancestors. The marketplace today demands that we be better informed and not make these kinds of mistakes.

Edward Retta, a native Texan, has traveled and worked in 14 countries in Latin America. Cynthia Brink is a bi-lingual, professional cross-cultural consultant.