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Illustration: Kirk Lyttle

# The **Bold** and the **Bankable**

## *Nuestro Barrio Telenovela and Financial Education*

The Community Reinvestment Association of North Carolina, a community-based advocacy organization, is pioneering a creative use of media to communicate social messages. From the vantage point of Peter Skillern, CRA-NC's executive director, the recent revolution in communication technologies creates new opportunities for small organizations to communicate their messages broadly, including financial-education messages. Nuestro Barrio, CRA-NC's most recent project, is a case in point.

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The Nuestro Barrio telenovela, a 13-episode soap opera targeted to Latino immigrants, first aired on the WB network in North Carolina, making it the first Spanish-language show to air on an English network in the United States. It has since been broadcast on both nonprofit and for-profit channels in major markets nationwide. What is unique about Nuestro Barrio is not only that it was written and produced by CRA-NC (and not Univision or Telemundo), but also that it contains financial literacy content designed to educate Latino immigrants about financial services.

The episodes contained in the first season collectively cover many of the topics addressed in financial education and homeownership counseling courses. Unlike a course, however, the material is integrated into the storyline of the show's characters. For instance, one episode reveals a dark secret and hidden conflict between the two elder statesmen of the community. When one's restaurant is then burned to the ground, the other is the natural suspect, and the drama remains intense right up to the cliff-hanger ending. In the process, viewers also witness the businessman's foresight in having insurance coverage, which allows him to rebuild.

A plotline in a separate episode follows Javier, a younger member of the community, as he works to purchase a car and attract dates. The episode first follows Javier's interactions with a used car salesman of questionable intentions. After Javier purchases the vehicle, a robbery at his apartment eliminates his remaining savings. Relying on his friends for help, he is led to the bank to open savings and checking accounts and is forced to more closely examine the terms of his car loan.

## A Tailored Approach to Financial Education

Discussions of Latino immigrants and financial literacy have long recognized the need for tailored content and materials. Although the translation of materials into Spanish and other languages represents a necessary first step, the specific curricular needs of Latino

immigrants must also be addressed. Remittance transfers, documentation requirements, and more general information on the landscape of U.S. financial institutions must be included in any targeted program.

A conversation with Nuestro Barrio's creators reveals that the educational content is carefully developed with those specific needs in mind. However, the educational content is only one component of Nuestro Barrio's educational model. Nuestro Barrio's educational value depends just as much on its entertainment value and ability to attract viewers as on the information provided.

Put another way, success requires that Nuestro Barrio's storyline and production quality rival that of competing programming. The drama must be intense and the cliff-hangers must be heart wrenching. From the perspective of its creators, Nuestro Barrio's educational impact depends directly on its entertainment value to Latino immigrant viewers. After all, the financial content can only be absorbed by those individuals who view episodes.

Although it is difficult to calculate the precise number of Latino immigrants reached by Nuestro Barrio, early airings in North Carolina attracted approximately 6,000 viewers per episode. Focus group testing further corroborates Nuestro Barrio's ability to compete with other programming, highlighting viewers' identification with the characters.<sup>1</sup> In the words of one viewer, "En esa telenovela se ve uno, se ven cosas que uno esta pasando ahorita o a gente que uno conoce. / In this soap opera, you can see things that are happening now or to people that one knows."

The approach has motivated the development of similar social-marketing initiatives in Mexico, Tanzania, and elsewhere around the world. Developed by public health officials seeking to communicate to at-risk populations, successful projects include formats ranging from 30-second radio spots to multiple-episode soap operas similar to Nuestro Barrio.<sup>2</sup> Given the popularity of existing telenovelas among recent Latino immigrants, Nuestro Barrio's creators gambled that this model could be

transferred to financial education in the United States.

## Soap Opera Education

At first glance, this way of communicating financial content appears novel. However, Nuestro Barrio's approach is rooted firmly and intentionally in an ambitious educational model based on the Transtheoretical Model of Behavioral Change (TTM theory).

Borrowed from the public health literature, TTM theory structures the process of behavioral change, asserting that individuals move through five stages as they progress toward permanent behavioral change.<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest is the theory's recognition that individuals begin in *precontemplation*, a stage in which they lack recognition of the potential benefits of a given behavior.

In relaying the stories and experiences of its characters, Nuestro Barrio seeks to confront viewers with various financial choices and outcomes. Forcing them to consider characters' experiences, Nuestro Barrio seeks to move viewers into the *contemplation* stage—in which individuals actively compare their current behavior with potential alternatives. The idea is that ultimately they will move into the *preparation*, *action*, and *maintenance* stages, in which the behavior of interest is actually modified. In this way, the elder restaurateur's unexpected fire is intended to tap the worries of self-employed viewers, confronting them with the potential value of insurance.

Dilsey Davis, Nuestro Barrio's writer, producer, and director credits her graduate studies in public health for initially exposing her to TTM theory. Combining this educational background with broad experience in acting and theater, Davis joined CRA-NC intent on using her unique abilities to further CRA-NC's advocacy through media. Following several smaller projects, she and Peter Skillern turned their attention to the financial literacy needs of North Carolina's growing Latino population—and Nuestro Barrio was born.



## Nuestro Barrio's Relative Strengths

The most important TTM theory insight for the collaborators' purpose was its recognition that individuals begin in precontemplation. Because traditional financial education programs serve only those households that seek out program materials or instruction, it simply doesn't have the reach to meet the needs of many recent immigrants. Instead, the act of seeking out or participating in financial education reflects recognition of its value, a sign that the individual has probably already reached or surpassed the contemplation stage.

Nuestro Barrio attempts to reach out to the broader population, first convincing viewers of the value of financial education and literacy. For many Latino immigrants—as well as for many unbanked and underbanked households—this latter approach may be necessary to induce engagement with mainstream financial services. Moreover, engaging a viewer's interest in financial material may also make them more receptive to existing sources of financial education and information.

These expectations are supported by recent research conducted by the Center for Community Capital at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>4</sup> This author, collaborating with several other researchers, used a treatment/control group research design to examine what impact viewing *Nuestro Barrio* had on the financial knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of a sample of Latino immigrants.

The results are consistent with the effects intended by Davis and Skillern. *Nuestro Barrio* viewers are shown to have progressed further through TTM theory's five stages of change. Moreover, *Nuestro Barrio* viewers are more likely to exhibit characteristics associated with movement out of precontemplation, paying closer attention to friends and family when they talk about financial issues and seeking out information about financial products on their own.

## Expanding the Financial Education Toolbox

The research findings highlight the unique abilities of *Nuestro Barrio* relative to traditional financial education programs. If participants are already interested in learning about financial services, traditional financial education may be successful in conveying

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content efficiently, but such programs may not reach segments of the population that are of particular policy interest. By using entertainment to attract viewers, *Nuestro Barrio* offers a convincing mechanism for communicating financial literacy messages to a broad audience.

The implication is not that *Nuestro Barrio* and similar social-marketing initiatives should be viewed as replacements for traditional financial instruction, but rather that they may supplement the reach of existing programs. After all, viewers pushed out of precontemplation will be more receptive to traditional instruction, even if their initial interest in the material came from seeing Maria struggle to make ends meet after Frank shamelessly cheated with a flirtatious nurse.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In comparing *Nuestro Barrio* with other programming, 47 percent of respondents to a telephone survey indicated that they would always prefer *Nuestro Barrio*, and an additional 50 percent indicated that they would sometimes prefer *Nuestro Barrio*. Only 3 percent indicated a consistent preference for other programming.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Peter W. Vaughn and Everett M. Rogers, "A Staged Model of Communication Effects: Evidence from an Entertainment-Education Radio Soap Opera in Tanzania," *Journal of Health Communication* 5 (2000): 203-227; and Reginald Clifford, "The Social Imaginary of the Telenovela," *Television and News Media* 6 no.4 (2005): 360-369.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of TTM theory and its structure, see James Prochaska and John Norcross, "Stages of Change," *Psychotherapy* 38 no.4 (2001): 443-448; and James Prochaska, Carlo DiClemente, and John Norcross, "In Search of How People Change," *American Psychologist* 47 no.9 (1992): 1102-1114.

<sup>4</sup> The complete results of the *Nuestro Barrio* evaluation are presented in Jonathan Spader, Janneke Ratcliffe, Jorge Montoya, and Peter Skillern, "The Bold and the Bankable: How the *Nuestro Barrio* Telenovela Reaches Latino Immigrants with Financial Education," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 43 no.1 (2009): 56-79.

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