**Navarrette: Pizza Patron doing customers a favor with its latest promotion**

**Ruben Navarrette, Washington Post Writers Group**

A pizza chain in the Southwest specializes in serving up controversy. And its latest promotion is certainly spicing up the culture wars.

That phrase refers to those recurring skirmishes where Spanish is seen as a threat to English-language dominance and where folks try to reconcile the country we used to be with the one we are now.

For those who fret that the United States is becoming too Latino, wait until they hear the news that the Dallas-based pizza chain, Pizza Patrón, is hosting a "Pizza Por Favor" event at each of its 104 restaurants. The chain operates in Texas, California, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado and other states. The rules are simple: On Tuesday, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., if you go into a Pizza Patrón and ask for a large pepperoni pizza in Spanish, you get the order for free. Company officials — who say the promotion is intended to strengthen the relationship with their core customers and highlight the brand's focus on the Hispanic community — predict they'll give away as many as 80,000 pizzas.

This could just be the appetizer. According to the company, Pizza Por Favor is the first of three marketing campaigns Pizza Patrón has planned for 2012 to celebrate the Hispanic immigrant community that makes up its primary consumer base. About 70 percent of the chain's customers are Spanish speakers.

While most Americans will probably respond to this promotion with a shrug or a yawn, others are angry about it. On local talk radio, and some of the national shows that discussed the promotion, some people even claimed the promotion is discriminating against non-Spanish speakers. That would be a twist, all right. Imagine this happening in a country where, just six decades ago, Mexican American students were punished for not speaking English in public schools.

Meanwhile, the controversy doesn't make any sense. A business can give away its product for free, and establish its own ground rules for it. Can't it?

An establishment can also accept whatever it wants as currency. In the states that line the U.S-Canada border, businesses will often take Canadian dollars. Nobody seems to care much about that. But in 2007, when Pizza Patrón launched another promotion — one where it took Mexican pesos in exchange for pizza — a lot of people couldn't stomach the concept. Store managers reported getting hate mail and even death threats.

Seriously, folks? Americans need to get a grip and keep their sense of perspective. It also wouldn't hurt to have a dose of consistency so that we don't succumb to situational ethics.

In 2006, Joseph Vento, owner of Geno's Steaks — a cheesesteak shop in a South Philadelphia neighborhood that is now home to many Asian and Latino immigrants — refused service to anyone who wouldn't order in English. Vento went so far as to hang signs in his restaurant telling customers: "This is America. When ordering, speak English."

Many people applauded, and business went up. I bet some of those same people are coming unhinged at the thought of a pizza chain appearing to reward customers who speak Spanish.

On the flipside, there were also many people who bristled when Geno's went English-only. And now, I bet many of those same folks have no trouble with what Pizza Patrón is baking up.

Other than the fact that, in one case, someone is denying service and, in the other, they're giving something away for free, what's the difference? Both of these stories are about personal freedom and the right of those individuals who own businesses to run them as they see fit as long as people are treated fairly. You can't call yourself "pro-business" — as in a "pro-business conservative" — and refuse to recognize this prerogative.

The stories are also about a concept that we need to do a better job of practicing in this country: tolerance. Change frightens some people, and cultural change terrifies them.

But change is also a part of this country and an American tradition. We should accept it. We should celebrate it. And if that's too much to ask of some folks, then at least let's stop fighting it in ways that divide people, create problems and fuel ethnic tensions.

Now that's an appetizing thought.

http://www.statesman.com/news/news/opinion/navarrette-pizza-patron-doing-customers-a-favor-wi/nRn8Y/