

# Pizza promotion met with death threats

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**DALLAS, Texas** (AP) -- A pizza chain has been hit with death threats and hate mail after offering to accept Mexican pesos, becoming another flashpoint in the nation's debate over immigrants.

"This is the United States of America, not the United States of Mexico," one e-mail read. "Quit catering to the damn illegal Mexicans," demanded another.

Dallas-based Pizza Patron said it was not trying to inject itself into a larger political debate about illegal immigration when it posted signs this week saying "Aceptamos pesos" -- or "We accept pesos" -- at its 59 stores across Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada and California.

Pizza Patron spokesman Andy Gamm said the company was just trying to sell more pizza to its customers, 60 percent of whom are Hispanic.

Wal-Mart, H-E-B supermarkets and other American businesses in towns along the Mexican border accept pesos. And some businesses in New York and Minnesota communities along the northern border accept Canadian dollars.

The difference here is that many of the pizza joints are far from the border, in places like Dallas, more than 400 miles away, and Denver, more than 700 miles away.

"If people would understand that the majority of our customers are Hispanic, then it might make more sense for a company to sell pizza for pesos," Gamm said. "It doesn't make sense in Connecticut. And it doesn't make sense in North Dakota or in Maine. But it makes perfect sense here in Dallas, in Phoenix, in Denver -- areas far from the border that have significant Hispanic populations."

The company said it has received hundreds of e-mails, some supportive, most critical.

While praising the pesos plan as an innovative way to appeal to Hispanics, a partner in the nation's largest Hispanic public relations firm said a backlash was inevitable.

"Right now there's a lot of anti-immigrant rhetoric going around that could make them a lightning rod," said Patricia Perez, a partner at Valencia, Perez & Echeveste in Los Angeles, California.

Pizza Patron proclaims on its Web site that "to serve the Hispanic community is our passion." Its restaurants are in mostly Hispanic neighborhoods, and each manager must be bilingual and live nearby, said Pizza Patron founder Antonio Swad, who is part-Italian, part-Lebanese.

The take-home menus are in both English and Spanish, and the dishes include the La Mexicana pizza, with spicy chorizo sausage; La Barbacoa pizza, topped with spicy pulled pork; and chicken wings flavored with lime, peppers and garlic con queso.

Many Pizza Patron customers have pesos "sitting in their sock drawers or in their wallets," Gamm said. "We're talking small amounts, where it would be inconvenient to stop and exchange on the way back -- maybe 10 or 20 dollars' worth of pesos."

The promotion will run through the end of February and then be re-evaluated, Swad said.

In the first week, payments in pesos have accounted for about 10 percent of business at the five restaurants operated by the corporation, Pizza Patron said. The others are franchised, and the company will not get reports until the end of the week.

The company has set a conversion rate of 12 pesos per dollar, which is slightly higher than the official rate of about 11 pesos per dollar. Any change is given in U.S. currency.

At a Pizza Patron in Dallas, Veronica Verges bought a pizza Wednesday for her son Nathan's fourth birthday. She paid with pesos her father brought home two weeks ago after a trip to see family in Mexico.

She said she is an occasional Pizza Patron customer, but came that day because she could pay with pesos. Her father wasn't going to use them because he had no plans to go back to Mexico anytime soon.

"I would mostly think a restaurant would do this in a border town," she said. "But it got me over here."