

Seizing a Moment for Multicultural Marketing

Finding opportunities amid Black Lives tumult and the COVID pandemic

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Black pain is not an ad campaign, multicultural marketing scholar Phil McKenzie likes to say, “but there’s always an opportunity to engage.”

McKenzie and several marketing executives in Arkansas and beyond said last week that intense media engagement during the Black Lives Matter movement and the COVID crisis offers a chance for all kinds of companies — from corporate giants to small white-owned businesses — to reach new customers.

“It’s not just good business, it’s smart business,” said Pam Jones, president and lead strategist at Culturally Connected Communications in Little Rock. Jones noted that as minority audiences are growing, adding buying power and looking for corporate support on social issues.

“The African American community tends to be loyal,” she said. “And now is the right time to engage by not just marketing, but by supporting the community. We’re going to remember the folks who supported Black Lives Matter, and those who spoke against it. Brands who are wanting to grow their customer bases should be reaching out now, but it’s beyond just the marketing; it’s your messaging.”

That messaging should be authentic, culturally appropriate and part of a coordinated effort by companies to raise their game in embracing systemwide diversity and inclusion across the board, and into the boardroom, said Myron Jackson, CEO of The Design Group in Little Rock.

“It’s a phenomenal time to extend your messaging, when you think in terms of Black and brown consumers,” said Jackson, an evangelist of multicultural marketing for years. “We didn’t just show up after the death of George Floyd; we’ve always been a part of the American marketplace. We’ve spent a lot of time helping corporate clients and white decision-makers at companies understand that.



Myron Jackson

‘Build Authenticity’

“But you can’t just decide to plunge in, launch a social justice ad campaign and say, hey, we’ve done our part,” Jackson continued. “You have to build relationships, build authenticity, and then when it’s appropriate, you message what value your product or service could offer consumers.”

Real corporate commitment involves



Pam Jones, president of Culturally Connected Communications in Little Rock, says that reaching out to minority consumers these days “is not just good business, it’s smart business.” C3, as the agency is known, has offices in the Gans Building on Second Street. [PHOTO BY KERRY PRICHARD]

more than messaging, Jackson said. Marketing should be only a small part of transforming corporate workforces to reflect society at large, a way of making companies more responsive to all consumers.

“There’s never a bad time to appropriately market to the diversity that exists in the marketplace, but we’ve really challenged many of our clients to truly embrace inclusion throughout their organizations. We ask about the overall makeup of the workforce. Does it reflect the diversity of the marketplace? How about your C-suite leadership? Are all your executives white males? Do you have some type of diversity supplier program? Are the companies you do business with inclusive?”

That’s why firms like The Design Group exist, he said, to help companies convey this commitment, as well as their wares and services, to potential customers. Companies should devote more of their advertising budgets to audiences of color generally, and get guidance on how media consumption is changing, he said.

“At one point clients felt comfortable just buying urban-format radio, thinking that alone would reach the black community, and likewise with Spanish-language radio,” he said. “But the reality now is you have to include social; you have to include digital. And where digital and social were once just a nice addition, now they’re becoming an integral part of

the overall marketing mix.”

Firms like Culturally Connected Communications and The Design Group offer companies a special perspective on communicating authentically at a time when people of color command \$1.3 trillion in buying power, said Wil Shelton, CEO of Wil Power Integrated Marketing of Los Angeles. A former hair stylist, Shelton devised a career touting movies, music and products through posters, promotional swag and word of mouth in minority barbershops and salons nationwide.

Not So Minority

“In the next 30 years, three groups are going to drive 90% of consumer growth,” Shelton said. “And those groups are African American, Asian and Latino.”

The term “minority” isn’t even ideal these days. In many American cities, Black and Asian people collectively outnumber whites, said Lisa Skriloff, president of Multicultural Marketing Resources Inc. “Every time the Census comes up, there’s a lot of attention on who is the multicultural population. It’s not a niche. African American, Hispanic and Asian American populations are actually the majority in cities like Miami, New York, Los Angeles and key cities in the Midwest.

“A lot more people are realizing they need to make sure their messages are

resonating with that audience,” said Skriloff, whose multicultural.com offers free listings of minority-owned ad agencies and research firms specializing in these markets, as well as speakers on diversity and inclusion.

Jones, of Culturally Connected Communications, said that in the current recession, with so many employees working from home and everyone consuming more media, it’s important for companies to increase their shares in all markets. “A lot of companies have lost client base due to unemployment,” she said. “And when you’ve lost customers, you need to look wherever you can to gain new ones, and that means showing support in these communities.”

Jackson agreed. “Companies need to try to source volume out of all the available market segments these days. We’ve seen organizations misspend 100% of their marketing dollars devoted to a small subset of the population just because they didn’t understand the consumers. They didn’t understand them culturally.”

One modern way to engage is through podcasts, Jones said, mentioning “Blackbelt Voices,” hosted by Adena White, Kara Wilkins and Katrina Dupens and based out of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. “I think it’s a missed market for a lot of companies, podcasts. I listen to ‘The Read,’ which talks about social issues and current events. There are a lot of podcasts that do very well with minority audiences.”

‘This Moment’

McKenzie, an anthropologist by training who is taking over as executive director of Diversity.org, is pushing corporations to target their media buys “specifically where these customers are.” And he points out that Black and minority consumers have traditionally led trends in fashion, music and pop culture.

“We’re seeing recognition that African Americans have always had a rich cultural perspective, and that they’ve often been leaders in identifying and pushing trends forward. What we’d like to see now is a reallocation of how companies spend their media dollars.”

Jones said she hopes that the Black Lives Matter movement, re-energized last week by the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin, will continue to resonate. “We’ve gone through situations like this before, rising up and everything,” she said. “But I really think you’re going to start seeing the tide shift. I don’t think this will be three months of Black Lives Matter and then back to business as usual.” ■