

June 5, 2020

Bob Liodice
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To Bob Liodice and the ANA Board:

As the latest deaths of African-American men and women at the hands of law enforcement ignite deep-seated social unrest, many corporations are experiencing inertia regarding how to respond to the African-American community. While most recognize the old adage If you are not a part of the solution you are a part of the problem, what we often fall short of recognizing is that If you do not see yourself in the problem, you will not find the solution. As an African-American man and leader of an independently owned agency, I have had the fortune and privilege of being in the advertising industry since 2000. And I have been a witness to countless band-aid solutions that never amounted to a committed effort to hold our engagement with African-Americans to the same KPIs that we, as an industry, put against the remit of other audiences.

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I know that the reason so many of you are struggling to connect with African-American communities in this moment in history is because you've never been proactive in truly understanding these communities at their core. Years of chasing the "multicultural," "total market," and "diversity" buzzwords have not fostered a commitment to embody the lived experiences of the African-American audience. Hence, when hard times fall upon us, discerning a way to authentically relate gets very hard. But, that dynamic can be changed in strategic ways.

It starts with a focus on insights that uncover data specific to the African-American experience. It's no secret that many of the popular tropes of modern society come from Black music, style, and vernacular. And that influence expands beyond the surface. Nielsen reported that African-American spending power reached \$1.2 trillion in 2019 and is continuing an upward climb. My push is an understanding of the African-American consumer's motivations, pain points, and needs as their own emerging and trendsetting market. That means incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data focused specifically on the diversity of their experiences, as a consistent part of your marketing research and creative development.

As the rate of change intensifies, your brand purpose can provide the blueprint for authentic engagement. Viewing the unique values of your brand and offerings through the lens of the African-American experience ensures that you have valid entry points for real connection and impact. And the subsequent strategies should be a differentiated part of your year-long marketing mix—not just contextualized to a Black History Month campaign or a piggyback off of a Black cultural moment. You will be called out, and "cancel culture" has measurable ramifications.

And these strategies have to live and breathe inside your company. Does your workforce reflect the diversity of the market? In this age, a buzz-worthy brand message can be enhanced or overshadowed by the hands who made it. Today, I saw a corporation's social media post met with the response, "Thank You for the Black Lives Matter graphic. May I please see a picture of your leadership team and company board?" You have to integrate your understanding of the African-American consumer into how you build out your internal teams before you move to external executions. We have passed the point where post-grievance press statements and social media posts excuse culturally tone-deaf brand campaigns or instantly provide a proverbial seat at the table.

With the privilege of profiting from the purchasing power and influence of the African-American community comes the responsibility to understand it. This commitment to understanding makes your entire organization proactive rather than reactive in the complex social, cultural, and market context within which these communities exist. It ensures that you are not "surprised" by the distressing circumstances that African-Americans too often find themselves in nor desensitized to the need for action. And it preempts the challenge of how to connect in times like this because, given the recent events, there is going to be a permanent shift in how these matters are addressed moving forward as an industry and as leaders of marketing organizations.

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I am calling on you to have an ongoing strategy specific to African-American communities. It's time to commit to understanding. In doing so, you will not only break through inertia, but also affect responses that are more meaningful in both their immediacy and their lasting impact.

With Respect and Gratitude,

Steve Stoute