Ad Tech Needs More Women at the Top

Ad tech needs more women in leadership roles.

Every female executive in our field has had the experience of being the only woman seated at a professional dinner or on stage at an industry event. In technology businesses, there is a dearth of women in leadership and ad tech. The STEM field of advertising continues to suffer from a lack of diversity among women and, in particular, women of color.

The benefits of gender diversity are self-evident. Researchers find that companies with women on their boards outperform more male-dominated rivals with 66% better return on invested capital, 53% higher return on equity and a 42% increase in sales. Why would you not have an equal- or even overrepresentation of women on your leadership team, especially in advertising? Women make 75% of purchasing decisions and over index on many of the most popular apps and websites where marketers find customers.

In order to find women for leadership roles, companies need to be intentional about it. That means men have to be proactive allies. So many of the sectors in ad-tech – DSPs, measurement apps, technology vendors, and analytics tools, to name a few – are dominated by men in executive ranks. We need to systemically overcome the natural bias of sameness in order to make room for women to hold seats around the table as well.

The first step is to focus internally. Companies have a responsibility to consider all possible homegrown candidates in a very practical way. We need to consider who has the potential to be elevated. Sometimes, that means scouring the

talent pool, asking ourselves if someone can expand into a role. We should be willing to give internal employees a little longer than we otherwise might and to support them as they grow. There are usually great employees who are a few months shy of being ready for the next level and need that final growth push.

Let’s say you have three absolute “must-have” criteria for a senior position you’re filling. There’s a female candidate who checks two of the boxes, and you believe you can help her fill the gap on the third. Can you give her executive coaching, mentorship, and educational resources? Rather than write off an internal female candidate who might not check every box, imagine if more time was invested in mentorship, bolstering knowledge, skills, and opening paths to advancement for female candidates within the company.

Sometimes you do have to look externally. The more senior the role, the smaller the candidate pool, and in the high-pressure, fast-moving world of advertising technology it can be tempting to hire from resumes that come in most quickly. But being purposeful in creating a diverse leadership team requires an extra measure of commitment and more time dedicated to making the right hiring decision. Get buy-in from your executive team and add DEI volume targets for the number of candidates rather than focusing solely on time limits to hire. We need to purposefully and measurably hire women into senior roles, particularly women of color. Real change won’t happen until we hold ourselves accountable to those targets. Being intentional means leaving no stone unturned, internally or externally, when hiring for leadership positions.

Let’s also make industry events more inviting. Too often, tech conferences suffer from a culture of heavy drinking, golf outings, and, in Nevada, fervid gambling. That kind of atmosphere is designed to appeal to an exclusive group of professionals rather than an inclusive group of existing leaders and emerging talent. We ought to provide more group

activities everyone can enjoy, where attendees can share and learn together. Given what we know about the success of companies led by women, it’s safe to assume that networking opportunities created by women are likely to succeed at creating enjoyable experiences as well as an inclusive environment for diverse talent.

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