

By Fearing Wokeness, Marketers Are Hitting the Snooze Button on Growth

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America is celebrating its 250th anniversary this year. Between the speeches about 1776, the stubborn fight for independence, and building a new nation, we must recognize the vital role inclusion played then and still plays today.

Before we were the United States, we were 13 colonies with different dialects, agriculture, economic, and social norms. They decided to come together, combining their differences as an asset to push out a tyrannical monarchy in favor of representative democracy. Then as now, this nation's greatness belongs to its diverse population—the very audience media budgets are supposed to capture.

Yet the corporate pledges of 2020 have quietly vanished without the same fanfare and press releases that had heralded their arrival. It is clear now that funding diverse-owned media was driven by temporary sympathy rather than a structural business model. But sympathy is a fleeting foundation; it has no contracts or renewals, and quickly evaporates when the political climate shifts.

Those brands were never truly doing business with us. At best, they were doing temporary penance. Which has now expired.

Sympathy is for cards. The moral case for inclusion remains solid. But within a corporation, it's as unreliable as the weather in April, shifting with the storms and vanishing with clear skies.

Corporations rely on comfortable profitability rather than durability, so we must shift the focus from a moral plea to a rigorous economic argument.

Good thing the math supports the same conclusion.

The multicultural market is worth \$5.3 trillion. Despite this immense scale, the advertising sector allocates less than 2% of its total budgets to diverse-owned media platforms. These outlets hold the trust of the fastest-growing consumer segments. Instead of working toward the ANA's 6.5% benchmark established for 2025, the industry spent the entire year locked in debates over whether such targets should even exist.

Under normal market conditions, a gap this wide between market potential and actual funding would be seized upon as a classic arbitrage opportunity. Instead, having been stamped with the "diversity" label, this highly lucrative audience segment is cast aside as a political liability rather than valued for what it actually is: the single most underpriced connection in the modern media landscape.

The industry is conflating DEI with any marketing spend that targets diverse communities. DEI is strictly an HR and workforce imperative, designed to ensure internal staffing mirrors the broader population. Whatever your political stance, that internal representation matters.

On the flip side, investing in multicultural media is pure marketing. A diverse consumer base is not a social cause; it

is a vital market. Marketers must focus strictly on the numbers: reach, resonance, and ROI. When chief marketing officers scale back multicultural ad buys under the guise of “DEI being under fire,” they commit a fundamental category error. It allows external ideological skirmishes to quietly override media plans and disregard actual spreadsheets.

We saw this play out in 2025, where the market graded these choices in real time. Facing identical external pressures, two major retailers chose entirely different paths. In January 2025, Target capitulated by rolling back its DEI-focused initiatives in hiring and its supply chain, triggering an 11-week freefall in foot traffic; its now-former CEO later conceded on an earnings call that retreating directly caused the revenue decline and wiped out billions in market value.

Conversely, Costco stood its ground by handing the choice to its shareholders, who resoundingly rejected an anti-DEI proposal with over 98% of the vote. The very week its competitor’s traffic plummeted, this steadfast retailer experienced a surge in foot traffic. Two identical situations, but diametrically opposed decisions and results.

Ultimately, both “woke” and “anti-woke” are shallow, reactionary ideologies. Being truly awake is an active discipline. It means deeply understanding who your audience is, what they consume, who they trust, and where they will stand two decades from now. The brands that eagerly paraded their “values” in 2020 only to drop them in 2025 were merely sleepwalking, then hit the snooze button on their own consumer base.

For half a decade, marketers were told to fear wokeness. Few bothered to actually wake up.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Thomas Paine’s Common Sense mobilized a reluctant nation toward revolution by masterfully balancing commercial interests with moral duty. Now, as it was

then, America's true strength is rooted in all of its people, including those currently excluded from media plans.

I challenge marketers to summon the very quality Paine championed: courage, which is currently in desperately short supply. Now that ethical responsibility and business intelligence have finally converged, the sole remaining ingredient is simply the raw nerve to act.

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