How to Impact Diversity When All Brands Are at Stake

As marketing professionals, we are uniquely positioned to shape how people think, see themselves and view the world. Marketing has the power to influence culture; this is a power we should not take lightly. Our storytelling exposes people to perspectives. We decide what stories get told. We decide what stories don't get told. We decide what voices to amplify.

In the weeks following the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, brands have recognized that silence is no longer an option when it comes to social justice and the lack of diversity across the industry. People's expectations for brands have evolved as consumers are aligning their values with their pocketbooks. With a convergence of growing challenges, we expect brands to respond with more than a hashtag or empty platitudes; we expect action. As we saw with brand messaging in the wake of the pandemic, making a statement just isn't enough. The expectation is a clear stance on social justice issues and a real commitment to action.

Data indicates that the expectations for brands to play a larger role in our lives will continue to grow. This places marketers in an environment with the potential for high-stakes impact on brand value. Even if your brand is not facing scrutiny, the urgency for shoring up your efforts on social justice and diversity, inclusion and equity is growing.

This movement represents an opportunity for proactive leadership: to be responsible with our influence before it's too late—before your stakeholders, employees, customers, leaders and investors begin to question your organization's commitment. In fact, 85% of consumers say they'll only

consider a brand if they trust the brand. Consumers know that brands have the power to effect change, and they place their trust in brands that use that power on their behalf. Brands must be ethical and invest in diverse teams while demonstrating a commitment to addressing issues that impact their stakeholders.

Here are three things marketing leaders should keep in mind at a time when the nation is having a long-overdue dialogue about social justice.

Get and stay educated

In this environment, everyone should be committed to continuous learning about diversity, inclusion and equity as a responsibility of the job: Own your missteps with a growth mindset. Acknowledge that your brand hasn't always gotten things right, and share your commitment going forward. Invest in ongoing cultural fluency, fully recognizing that there may be mistakes along the way.

The ultimate goal is to build DEI into the DNA of your marketing—and to have your actions reflect your brand's communicated commitments. In a recent study, 63% of people say brands representing diversity in ads are more authentic.

Ask: How do we start including the voices and experiences of marginalized audiences into brand marketing?

Look inward

There is a growing global conversation about social issues right now that places pressure on marketing leaders to respond.

Public declarations of a commitment to diversity and inclusion are hollow if your employees know they aren't true. Make no mistake—your customers and other stakeholders can distinguish between performative activism and substantive activism.

The journey starts with an internal conversation about the uncomfortable topics we so often avoid. For instance, Johnson & Johnson and Zoom published messages from their CEOs to employees. Doing this showed that while they do not have all the answers, they are committed to the journey. While these conversations are often uncomfortable, imperfect and messy, they are a good thing. There is no transformation without conversation.

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