In San Francisco, Agencies Confront Their Failed Promise of Racial Diversity

San Francisco's creative agencies pride themselves on the progress they've made in terms of gender balance and LGBTQ inclusion, but the agency experience is far different for Black agency professionals in the city.

From the high cost of living and gentrification to the tendency to recruit through traditional talent pipelines rather than look actively in more diverse Bay Area communities, talent of color and inclusivity advocates tell Adweek San Francisco faces a confluence of many issues that limit possibilities for minority talent in creative industries. Those who do find agency opportunities say they often face microaggressions and unconscious bias in the workplace.

> *I don't think we've done enough.*
>
> *Jeff Goodby, co-founder, Goodby Silverstein & Partners*

As 2020 has continued, since the deaths of Black Americans George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, to be a moment of truth and reckoning for racially homogeneous industries like advertising, some leaders in the San Francisco agency scene have become more self-aware and vocal about the need for change.

"I don't think we've done enough," says Goodby Silverstein & Partners co-founder Jeff Goodby.

Several agencies are attempting to address the issue with expanded recruitment efforts in areas such as Oakland and an

ongoing evaluation of workplace inclusivity, but diversity advocates and Black employees in the city tell Adweek progress remains hampered by the lack of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the city's tech-focused industries.

"The reason a lot of issues with DEI are amplified [in the Bay Area] is that it's very heavily male-populated and white," says Cheryl Ingram, founder and CEO of DEI consultancy Inclusology. "The prevalence of microaggressions, the prevalence of unconscious bias—all of those things do tend to be amplified in the Bay Area because of the lack of visible diversity and people in powerful positions."

Ingram called San Francisco "one of the most prevalent places" for "gentrification and systemic oppression." One result, she said, is that minority talents who aspire to work in the ad industry are often too underpaid to afford living in San Francisco.

While the average cost of rent in San Francisco has declined during the Covid-19 pandemic, rent costs in less expensive areas of the city have actually increased year over year, according to news site SFGate.

While some agency executives admit they have been too sluggish, as individual agencies and as an industry, to address the ongoing lack of racial equality, skepticism lingers among minority talents who say they've had little cause for hope that the situation will improve anytime soon.

Unwelcoming environments

Adweek spoke with four advertising professionals of color who shared their experiences with microaggressions, unconscious bias and systemic racism, which they say are commonplace at San Francisco agencies. These sources spoke to Adweek on the condition of anonymity, with some citing fear of retaliation or firing.

One creative described experiences at various San Francisco shops with subtle racism and unwelcoming work environments, including one instance when a building manager threatened to call the police on him when he exited the restroom—despite the two having met before.

> *I think a lot of it is based in white flight and white fragility. Oakland is right across the bridge, but you don't go into those spaces in order to recruit.*
>
> *Cheryl Ingram, founder and CEO, Inclusology*

Another employee at a San Francisco agency recounted a story about a white agency founder using the N-word at a company event and justifying his use of the word by saying: "It's OK. I have Black friends."

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