‘We Are the Target Audience’: How Essence, R29, and Afropunk Co-create With Their Communities

For the social media strategists at publishers Essence, Refinery29, and AfroPunk, audiences are just as much collaborators as consumers.

At ADWEEK’s Social Media Week in New York, Kory Jarvis of Essence, Cortni Spearman of Refinery29, and Leslie Vargas of Afropunk detailed how their companies have built editorial and community strategies based entirely around feedback loops with their audiences.

“We are the target audience,” said Jarvis, head of social for Essence, explaining how embedded the community voice is in every aspect of their output. “All I have to do is open up X, check the family group chat, or look at Slack, and I’m immediately plugged into the community.”

This kind of direct audience feedback informs everything from the tone of Instagram posts to the decision of whether or not to engage on divisive political issues.

“They’re very honest with us,” said Vargas, social media manager of the Afropunk and Essence festivals. “They’re not afraid to tell us where we need to step up—and I always see that as an opportunity to grow.”

Being so receptive to feedback has its downsides, and social

media leaders have to balance their instinct to listen to the community with the awareness that they have a broader editorial mission to serve, according to Spearman, director of social at Refinery29.

So, when a post sparks controversy, operators need to employ a flexible approach that takes into consideration the context of the content and the outlook of the publisher.

“Not everything deserves a response,” Spearman said. “Some things we acknowledge, some things we apologize for, and some things we let go.”

And as broader political and economic tensions grow more acute, social media operators’ roles as moderators have become both more challenging and more important, according to Vargas.

“Sometimes you have to go into the comments and say, ‘We will not tolerate misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, racism, colorism,’” she said.

Importantly, feedback is not just corrective—it is also generative. The publishers use real-time audience reactions to gauge what is working in order to shape future content. The result is a dynamic, evolving relationship between platform and community.

The panelists described the value of using these kinds of community conversations as editorial inspiration, drawing on everything from TikTok trends to group chat debates. These experiences keep the social content grounded in specifics, which ultimately helps it resonate with their audiences.

This responsive approach has helped the publishers maintain trust amid shifts in the social media landscape. Even as algorithms change, the strength of that connection keeps Refinery29, Essence, and Afropunk tuned in to what their

audience is looking for.

“Our audience wants to see themselves,” Jarvis said. “And we make sure they do.”

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