

ARF Cultural Effectiveness Council Working Group: Avoiding Missteps in Multicultural Advertising

Our multi-faceted experience is the lens through which we see the world. If you're a brand looking to connect, you must understand how ethnic identity plays out in people's lives and how it connects to your brand.

This is a great time to focus on avoiding diversity missteps because, as U.S. demographics continue to evolve, many companies are prioritizing diversity and inclusion in their organizations, innovations, and marketing efforts. But with this greater focus on diversity and multicultural audiences, comes more opportunities for missteps, misunderstandings and miscommunication, e.g. assuming only Asian men can afford a product, while in fact Hispanics over-index as potential purchasers; or not realizing sooner that something basic like offering 40 shades of cosmetics fills a huge market gap.

What should we do?

- Have difficult conversations on these topics.
- Get face to face with your target audiences; conversations can transform our whole approach.
- Ensure your teams are diverse and/or include diverse perspectives.
- According to research presented by panelist Adriana Waterston, ; a third of Blacks, Hispanics and Asians and half of Whites say ads don't have to feature "people who look like me."Remember that it's not only multicultural audiences that expect diversity; almost half of millennials and younger are people of color... and the other half have grown up with diversity and expect it.
- Consider all aspects of multiculturalism, e.g. colorism. Within every dimension, we have as people there's a spectrum.
- Realize that the phenotype that's visible is just one aspect of a person, and perhaps not the part he/she connects with most strongly.
- Speak up at your company; you may be the only person in the room thinking what you're thinking and new perspective is valuable.
- Keep doing research because cultures are living organisms; as we live them we change them.
- Weave diversity & inclusion into your company's DNA, top down, with success metrics, resources and budget.

Multicultural marketing is complicated, it's nuanced, and the risk is companies will not engage or step back because they're afraid of making mistakes. Yet the effort (and risk) is undoubtedly worthwhile because it makes businesses more successful. And the more of it a company does, the more goodwill is created with multicultural audiences and general market audiences that expect diversity.