

Do You Really Need a Diverse Staff to Provide Media or Community Outreach to Specific Racial Ethnic Groups?

The question at hand is whether diversity in the workforce is necessary in order to accomplish the goals or the outreach that corporations have set for themselves. In order to answer this question I think that one needs to look at the history and the evolution of corporate diversity. Personally I believe that to debate this question in this day and time is inappropriate when we look at the diversity that exists in our society. How can we think that it is acceptable to operate a business without reflecting the reality of the world we live in? But nonetheless it is a question that continues to arise. Therefore, it must be tackled.

Diversity has always existed. This country was built upon the lands, agriculture, language, customs, and philosophy of indigenous peoples, and expanded by immigrants of diverse backgrounds who brought with them their own languages, cultures, histories, food, music, philosophies, and religions. Despite the fact that at different times of U.S. history we've had different groups of people who have struggled to have their presence and existence acknowledged, all of these people and communities are very much a part of the grain of this society.

In every major city there is a Chinatown or a little Italy, and in almost every community there are Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Pacific-Americans, Middle Easterns, Eastern Indians, and so on. All of these individuals are human beings who live here, shop here, go to church and school here, and all are also consumers. It only makes good business sense for a company that is trying to market to all segments of our society to reflect the diversity of society.

While this may be the logical way of looking at this situation, however, it has been necessary to mandate inclusion through the civil rights movement of the 1960's, in order to begin changing mainstream attitudes, workforce practices, the right to vote, access to education, and so on. Unfortunately, despite legal victories for inclusion, there are barriers still to full participation in society by all citizens.

Looking at today's trend of outreach to multicultural markets, that emerged from the changing demographics; we see two massive demographic trends, confirmed by the 2000 Census:

- By 2005, (next year) one in three U.S. Americans will be either Black, Latino, or Asian-Pacific-American. Not just in California but across the USA.
- By 2050, these three ethnic groups will be in the majority of US residents, representing **55 percent** of the U.S. American population.

These numbers show that doing business as usual is no longer possible. Everywhere policies and practices must take into account the increased diversity of the U.S. population. Most large corporations have already recognized the significance of this demographic trend. That's why addressing diversity has become a corporate imperative.

Using this demographic information, the business community has begun to examine its practices to ensure that marketing to the mainstream doesn't mean ignoring particular racial and ethnic markets. Why is this important? Well here are a few billion reasons. U.S. minority buying power, according to Selig Center for Economic Growth in Atlanta, Georgia, shows that in 2003:

- Asians, spent \$344 billion
- Blacks \$688 billion
- Latinos, \$653 billion, and
- Natives/Alaskans \$45, billion

In addition, U.S. gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) adult population buying power in 2003 was \$485 billion according to Witeck-Combs Communications and MarketResearch.com.

By 2007, the combined buying power of people of color will be more than **\$2 TRILLION**, outpacing the White consumer by more than 80%, according to Black Enterprise Magazine.

In essence, it just makes good business sense to have diversity in the workforce; it goes beyond the social and political ramifications. Clearly, it's about what makes sense in order to be effective in the Marketing and PR efforts of any company.

Norma Colunga, Kaiser Permanente District Sales Manager of Medicare products in San Diego and Orange County, says that her division markets to all seniors 65 years of age and over. There is a high population of Mexican-Americans in both cities and a high population of Vietnamese in Orange County. Colunga strongly believes in hiring professionals of varied backgrounds because they can help companies be on target with the communities they serve.

“Translating commercial language to another is not going to result in success,” says Colunga. “It’s the message that you develop in order to touch the person’s values and emotions. As human beings we all gravitate towards what we are comfortable with and if you are trying to market to Latinos or Blacks, how can you come up with a message that is going to appeal to that market if you are not from that population?” Colunga adds that without personnel who truly know the communities, messages may be developed with little or inappropriate information or from “stereotypes that carry with you.”

Colunga also says this is a complex issue because even within the Latino community there is diversity. “When I worked as Marketing Director for Mercy Hospital in San Diego we developed the Hispano Care initiative and created marketing collateral that was translated by a Puerto Rican. The language and use of words were different than the words used by Mexicans. People think that translating Spanish is easy and could be understood by all Latinos. But that is not the case because the use of particular words has different meanings. It would be similar to U.S. English vs. British English.”

Sharon Parker, a diversity consultant in higher education agrees. She notes that colleges and universities are striving to become inclusive, multicultural environments that serve to prepare all students for citizenship in a diverse society.

“Doing so is not simply a matter of recruiting students of color. It involves having the faculty and staff who can effectively interact with those students, who understand their needs, based on facts not stereotypes. It involves having courses through which students can learn about the various ways people view the world and how that impacts their values, behaviors, and thinking. It means having discussions in classrooms where students can safely and productively explore the meaning of diversity in today’s society. As well, it includes the one-to-one interactions among students, faculty and staff, in and out of class. Also encompassed in this effort are the topics of scholarly research, how research is conducted, and how it is analyzed. Equally important is the reputation of an institution with regard to diversity. What do communities of color think about a particular college or university? What has been their history in relating to that institution? How has the institution shown its commitment to such communities?”

I applaud PRSA’s recent launch “Advancing Diversity,” a national initiative that brings together various elements to promote multiculturalism in the public relations industry and business community. The organization has also collaborated with a strong network of experts to speak about the important role diversity plays in corporate America, and who have already taken part in numerous PRSA programs. According to Rosanna Fiske, APR, chair of PRSA’s National Diversity Committee, there is no other national communications, media or marketing organization that has committed the resources, the expertise and the leadership that PRSA has provided to make diversity a substantive part of the organization’s present and future.

In addition, the initiative positions PRSA as the leading organization to provide professional development, career opportunities and networking for professionals who want to communicate with diverse audiences and who are strongly committed to change their organization to ensure that diversity is at the core of its work. In this regard, PRSA is definitely a great resource for all us. As a Board Member of PRSA’s-SF Chapter Diversity Committee, I am enthusiastic about being part of an organization that believes in inclusion, reflecting the reality of our world and society we live in, and most importantly respecting our diversity!

By Victoria Sánchez-De Alba, President of De Alba Communications (www.dealba.net), provides Media and Public Relations consultation to a wide range of industries and service areas, which generates mainstream, Spanish and other multi-ethnic media coverage for her clients. For more information she may be reached at (650) 557-5711.

Victoria is PRSA-San Francisco Chapter, Board Member of Diversity Committee and 2005 VP elect of Programs and Hospitality.