



Misplaced marketing: Who do you hire when the advertising audience isn't you?

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Keywords Advertising, Minorities, Ethnic groups

Abstract Focuses on the importance of marketing from the customers' point of view when the target markets are in different demographic groups from those of the advertising agencies' staff or marketing managers. States that mass communications work must take place within a context of understanding the target audiences' subcultures; understanding does not require membership of those subcultures, but it does require empathy with them.

A chapter from the advertising copywriting textbook for my college class had the sexist title, "Is there a role for women in advertising?". In short, it answered yes because the business needs people to write copy for lingerie and cosmetics. Around this same time, Jerry Della Femina wrote television commercials for a feminine hygiene spray. When I graduated college and started interviewing for jobs, a group vice-president at one of the largest advertising agencies in the world told me that he could not understand why I submitted an application to his company because, "We don't have any Jewish accounts".

Managers myopically believing that their personal views are typical of their customers provide many examples of misplaced marketing. Successful advertising people know how to use consumer research data and they study the potential markets and how their target audience thinks. But when the US target markets are black or Hispanic, the usual business practice is to require that the advertising decisions be made by people who are in the same demographic group. This is not just misplaced marketing, but racist, since it presumes that all people who share physical traits think alike.

The people making day-to-day decisions at advertising agencies are usually well-paid, highly-educated executives, often aged 25 to 40 and living in urban areas. Rarely is it seen as a source of concern that they often are selling to people who are less affluent, not as well educated, older or younger than themselves, and who live outside the cities in which the agency is located. Yet when the target audience consists of African-Americans or Hispanic/Latino consumers, advertising people often turn the work over to an advertising agency whose owners and employees are members of that minority group. Even worse, with an implicit assumption that women and members of minority groups are incapable of applying a marketing orientation to different customers, these advertising people are seen as being only able to prepare advertising for people physically like themselves.

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Material for the article is drawn from chapter 13 of the author's book, *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing*, (Quorum Books, Westport, CT, 2001).



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An absurd license for hiring discrimination

If white executives can read data and create advertising for people unlike themselves, so can members of racial or ethnic minority groups. Every day, advertising that “works” is created by people grossly dissimilar from the audience. Blacks and Hispanic agency employees are equally capable of this.

Some people might see this arrangement as positive because it insures that some of the business from major marketing firms goes to minority-owned agencies. But it also has created a professional ghetto. As a general rule, these minority-owned shops are called “targeted agencies” in the business and often get work only involving minority targets. To make matters even worse, the targeted agencies often are not allowed to produce original work, but instead, are directed to rewrite the main campaign with a black or Hispanic “twist” (Copywriter, 1999).

And therein lies the real unstated “problem” of this arrangement. It gives an absurd license for hiring discrimination because the employer could state it needs employees that look like the primary purchasers of their clients’ products. The large advertising agencies increasingly have been criticized for their terrible record of hiring and promoting African-Americans (Thompson, 2000), but the minority-agency ghetto allows people who manage these “mainstream” offices to rationalize discriminatory practices for hiring or promotions: “Why would any black people apply for a job here? We don’t have any black-oriented accounts.”

While it is true that mass communications work must take place within a context of understanding the target audience’s subculture, understanding does not require membership, just empathy.

Spike Lee has attained great fame and success directing and producing movies. The subjects and lead characters usually have been black, but many of his movies have had wide appeal among members of different racial and ethnic groups. Years ago, he started an advertising agency, a creative boutique that he said would produce high quality advertising for “urban” (which is usually a business euphemism for “black”) audiences. But after years in the business, his hiring of two white men as account and creative managers prompted numerous “expert” comments in the trade press that these new hires meant that his agency might now be unable to produce persuasive commercials for urban consumers.

No one notes that Spike Lee was able to produce high-quality commercials for mainstream audiences even before he hired white men as account and creative managers. He did not lose his ability to communicate with blacks just because white people worked for him.

Stereotypes influence business perceptions and cause hiring discrimination

Without a doubt, stereotypes influence business perceptions and cause hiring discrimination. In one study, even the young college students’ feminist or general egalitarian views did not moderate the intrusion of stereotypes into how they evaluated fictitious job applicants (Sego, 1999). But in a business that constantly complains of difficulties in finding talented people, the continued demographic matching of writers and target audiences means a large pool of potential people are cut off from consideration.

Almost all marketing degree programs require that students take a course in research methods because all future managers must know how to read and use data. Every marketing course contains a significant section covering theories of consumer psychology, since that forms the basis for marketing decisions. Few marketing managers sell only to consumers exactly like themselves; many misplaced marketing mistakes come from managers who

presume they can act as surrogates for all potential customers instead of shifting focus to view the world from the consumers' points of view. There is nothing inherently wrong with a firm contracting out work to other people who might possess greater empathy with the target market. But it is strange that such special outside-supplier empathy is sought only with US subcultures of audiences who are not physically white.

The matching of black or Hispanic advertising managers and target audiences works only to the business' long-run detriment. Talented people work in a ghetto when mainstream work is kept out of minority-owned agencies and agencies end up discouraged from hiring minorities for everyday jobs.

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