

Representation Matters! So Do it Right

You turn on the TV and in between your favorite show, what do you see? A commercial. You drive down the highway, look up and what do you see? A billboard. You flip the pages of your magazine you read on your lunch break and in between each story? Yep, an advertisement. And most see only that: an ad. But I don't. Nine times out of ten if there's a face of color attached to the ad, it's usually accompanied with a side of misrepresentation and a sprinkle of misunderstanding.

Lets face it, if you're a minority, there's a high chance that you've either been completely stereotyped within an advertisement...or not represented at all. In a world where ethnic minorities are quickly becoming the majority, it is often frightening to see how many times we are inaccurately represented in public-facing communications. Only 19% of the ads that we are served on a regular basis feature an individual of a minority group, including single parents, disabled people and the LGBT community. That number gets even smaller when you focus solely on ethnic minorities.¹ With so many ads missing the mark, we are often faced with questions like: "Where were the ethnically diverse individuals when these advertisements were being made?" or "How can we improve the way ethnic minorities are represented in advertising?"

The way in which ethnic minorities are represented within advertisements and commercials restricts their identity to a one-dimensional model and categorizes ethnic groups into specific stereotypes that are considered to be representative of their cultural identity. It is simply the easy way out. And by doing so, the perpetuation of both discriminatory views and racial epithets remain.

"Minority group members have been numerically underrepresented in the media and when minorities are present, they are often portrayed in stereotypical or marginalized roles relative to their white counterparts which can perpetuate a negative image about minorities."² As noted by countless research, minorities do not get as much screen time as our white counterparts, and when they do, they usually play a role that fits into a one-dimensional social construct. It's interesting to see that while the vision of ads may change, the roles minorities play tend to stay the same. The one-dimensional portrayal of ethnic minorities has become the 'norm' in advertising and not many have been able to break away from the typical roles given to certain ethnic groups.³

¹ Charlotte Rogers et al., "Just 19% of people in ads are from minority groups," January 30, 2017, accessed May 19, 2017, <https://www.marketingweek.com/2016/12/06/lloyds-diversity-report/>.

² Gregory J. Hoplamazian and Osei Appiah, "Viewer Responses to Character Race and Social Status in Advertising: Blacks See Color, Whites See Class," *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising* 34, no. 1 (2013); doi:10.1080/10641734.2013.754709.

³ Catherine Kehoe, "Reflecting Modern Britain?," Reflecting Modern Britain?, <http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/globalassets/documents/our-group/responsibility/inclusion--diversity/lloyds-banking-group-reflecting-modern-britain-singles.pdf>.

As members of the ad world, it is our job to no longer take the lazy route, and help change the narrative of minorities featured in our advertising efforts. And trust me, we know this is not an easy task. Ethnicity is one of those topics that no one truly ever likes to touch, but we as advertisers need to make it our goal to step out of our comfort zones. Taking the lazy way out just won't cut it anymore, and it doesn't have to. We have boundless opportunities to feature ethnic minorities in a different light and we need to do our part to insert these new narratives in any way possible.

It's time for change, and I'm not talking about some new gadget or technology. When developing an ad, I propose the need for dialogue within focus groups between ethnically diverse individuals, to help capture the voices of our minority audiences. By bringing in minority-based focus groups, we give our advertisements a test-run, one that can ensure the people we are representing in our campaigns are both accurate and truthful. By giving our minority audience a voice, we can prevent the excuse of, "Well I didn't know it would be taken that way," or "How was I suppose to know that?"

Immersing minority groups in the advertising process with dialogues and focus groups, helps to bridge the gap of understanding and work to eliminate cultural ignorance. Dialogue is crucial, and you would be surprised at how many mistakes could be avoided, if we stopped taking shortcuts and simply asked. It's important to remember that if you have power, you already have more influence, and as social influencers we need to work together to help provide new personas for the groups that are underserved in advertising.

I think it's time we revisit the basics of public relations and ethics: The TARES Test.⁴ Before we create and develop ads, we need to consider the truthfulness of the messages. Instead of basing our views and ideas on a stereotype, we should use focus groups to truly get down to the granular. In addition, we need to ensure that we are using our voice and power to speak upon certain topics in the most authentic way possible. If we don't have the platform or true interest in topics related to ethnic minorities, then we have no business discussing it. Authenticity is everything, and trust me, people can tell when you're faking it. In addition, we need to produce content that represents individuals in the most sincere and genuine way possible. If we've made mistakes in the past, the best way to regain respect is to produce something that others can be proud of or relate to. We must also remember that the persuadee is the most important person to consider within the creative process, and respect is owed to them as much as we'd like to receive it. Take a moment to remove your 'veil of ignorance' and help find a course of action that will be both fair and equitable to minority parties. Finally, we hold a social responsibility to represent ethnic minorities to help the common good as a whole, so let's own up to the task.

It is our job to correct this issue and stop enforcing stereotypes that do not do our minority audience members justice. We must remember the impact that the work we

⁴ Baker, Sherry, and David L. Martinson. "The TARES Test: Five Principles for Ethical Persuasion." *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 16, no. 2-3 (2001): 148-75. doi:10.1080/08900523.2001.9679610.

produce has, and do our best to help show each and every individual in the best, most truthful light possible.

I can't begin to tell you how many times I've been mislabeled and misrepresented off of ethnicity and cultural heritage alone. Every time I tell someone I'm Jamaican, I'm automatically Bob Marley's grand daughter who smokes weed everyday, restricting my vocabulary to 'Yeah Mon'. But where does this come from? While many can say that this view may be due to the fact Bob Marley is one of the biggest talents to come out of Jamaica, and totally had an affinity for plants, it is also due to the stereotypical personas we are often given in advertising. We are far too often minimized down to dreadlock-toting, jerk chicken-eating fortune tellers with an accent that isn't Jamaican at all. And these representations do not go unnoticed. I can't help but to blame the media for the way we are represented because they continue to push this narrative. It also doesn't help that instead of using actual Jamaicans to be characters in their commercials and advertisements, they usually just pay someone to fake the funk. And no, I also don't run track.

Having dreadlocks doesn't make you a Rastafarian and putting jerk seasoning on your homemade barbecue wings doesn't make them Jamaican. We already have to deal with enough cultural appropriation as it is. Hi Drake. And I know, as anyone would be, I am very protective of my culture and always want the best of my country to be shown. But that doesn't mean I don't want it to be real. Sure, many Jamaicans smoke weed, and sure many of us have Usain Bolt-like abilities, but there is so much more. Until the ad world has more exposure to all that ethnic minorities have to offer, we will never be anything more than the one-dimensional character created for us.

We need to use more of our budget dollars on arranging focus groups to ensure that new conversations take place, and less on snagging international locations to help push our messages. Every time we push through an ad or commercial that does not accurately represent ethnic minorities, we lose out on consumers. Lets stop ignoring the buying power of minorities groups and truly find the best way to represent the populations that have a huge influence on how successful our brand is. As noted in the Multicultural Economy Report, the rising trend in minority buying power signals an opportunity for tailored marketing.⁵ We need to use these stats and make sense of them. We need to take the time to understand cultures and ethnicities and step away from the typical. Most importantly we need to remember, just as quick as your advertisement pops up on a billboard and goes away, so can your audience and even bigger, your reputation, when you don't serve them well.

⁵ Matt Weeks, "UGA Today," Minorities energize U.S. consumer market, according to UGA Multicultural Economy report, September 30, 2014, , accessed May 20, 2017, <http://news.uga.edu/releases/article/multicultural-economy-report-2014/>.

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