

# Diversity in PR & Communications: The Role of Implicit Bias



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The [PR](#) and communications industry is focused on increasing diversity. But as Neil Foote, President of the [National Black Public Relations Society](#) (NBPRS), shared in a September 12<sup>th</sup> CommunicationsMatch/CommPRO Webinar – [Finding Agencies in a Diverse & Digital World](#) – it has a long way to go.

With all the talk focused on diversity in recent years, why hasn't more progress been made?

Hearts and minds are willing. And, I'd venture, that almost any leader at corporates and larger agencies would be able to cite steps they have taken to attract diverse candidates into the industry.

So why the mixed or failing report card?

Implicit bias is one reason according to webinar panelist, Jennefer Witter, CEO of [The Boreland Group](#).

Although this may make many uncomfortable, behaviors decision-makers may or may not be aware of make it less likely for diverse candidates or agencies to be hired or succeed.

As an example, she highlighted a study that found those with a

“black-sounding” name were far less likely to be asked for an interview than someone with a name perceived as “white.”

Once we acknowledge the potential role of implicit bias, each of us has to take a hard look in the mirror. We need to understand actions and behaviors that may be stacking the deck against the diversity many in the industry are seeking to foster.



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search, the way most companies find agencies – word of mouth – is a form of implicit bias. In [CommunicationsMatch’s 2017 Agency Search Report](#), 76% of respondents cited asking peers for recommendations and less than 20% said they use Google, LinkedIn or other tools to identify firms.

Given, more often than not the people we know tend to look like us, and senior PR leaders both at corporates and agencies are largely white and often male – relying on word of mouth to find firms or people is one way to maintain the status quo.

Unless companies look beyond who they or their peers know and actively seek out other qualified and diverse agencies and professionals, the talk about diversity will remain just that – talk.

We can add into this mix stereotyping. All too often black-owned or Hispanic-owned firms, for example, may only be considered when companies want to reach diverse audiences, which means that no matter how qualified they may be, they may not be considered for other projects.

There are many reasons for looking beyond who we or our peers know when it comes to finding agencies. Diversity is just one of them. As webinar panelist, Robert Udowitz, Principal of [RFP Associates](#), a search consulting firm, noted – a thorough and well-managed agency search and selection process generally results in stronger client-agency relationships.

Underscoring the value of stronger relationships, webinar panelist Tony Cheevers, head of Business Development at [Researchscape](#), discussed research that shows clients to be generally very satisfied with their agencies, but half open to the idea of switching firms.

Technology can be part of the diversity solution for the industry. An industry-wide search for agencies based on skillsets and capabilities can reduce some of the potential for implicit bias in a word-of-mouth-based approach to finding agencies.

Using CommunicationsMatch, for example, companies can search by industry and communications expertise, location and agency size, and add into the mix women and minority-owned firms and members of organizations such as the NBPRS.

Using search consultants, search tools or engaging with organizations with diverse membership are just some of the ways companies looking for agencies can find firms that meet their needs and ensure that diverse firms are part of the mix.

Having a rigorous, technology-enabled RFP process also provides companies with an efficient tool to evaluate agencies across a range of dimensions including diversity. We will soon be launching online RFQs and RFPs developed with RFP Associates to help do just this.

Change is difficult.

Overcoming our implicit biases requires self-awareness, and for us as individuals and institutions to recognize and change behaviors. It requires us to move beyond the ease of asking peers for agency recommendations and embracing search tools.

How will we know that we've made progress? The industry will look more like the country and less like a country club. We'll see far greater diversity in agency ownership and leadership. And, as part of every corporate agency search, diverse agencies will be part of the mix rather than relegated to searches for agencies to reach diverse audiences.

That would be a great outcome for all.

*CommunicationsMatch is a PR & communications agency search engine that helps companies find, shortlist and hire communications agencies and consultants by industry and communications expertise, location and size. The site has 5,000 agencies and consultant profiles in areas including: crisis communications, public relations, internal communications, government affairs, investor relations, content marketing, social media, SEO, website development, photography and video. Listing and Search are Free. Prior to founding CommunicationsMatch, Locke held senior corporate communications roles at Prudential Financial, Morgan Stanley and Deutsche Bank and founded communications consultancies.*