

Making Time for Diversity in Public Relations



Simon Erskine Locke, Founder & CEO, CommunicationsMatch™

Erika Sanchez, President, Hispanic Public Relations Association's New York Chapter

Tracey Wood Mendelsohn, President & CEO, Black Public Relations Society-New York Inc.

Research shows that diverse companies tend to perform more strongly than those that are not. Diversity starts with people. Business success comes from incorporating it into ideas, the images in visual messaging, the outlets where companies advertise, and the events they sponsor.

Companies' actions, the people they hire, and their ratings as the best places for diverse professionals to work, are keys to building brand engagement and loyalty with diverse audiences that drives business results. And, since diverse teams produce more authentic communication and reduce the risk of cultural missteps, diverse companies are not only more likely to succeed, but less likely to fail.

In our industry, with its ongoing focus on diversity and inclusion, few would argue with the idea of the value of diversity when it comes to effectively engaging with

audiences.

Yet despite the talk and how long the issue has been at the front and center of discussion, progress on diversity is limited. We are seeing agencies and corporate communications departments leading the way and executives being hired for diversity initiatives. But the industry is falling short when it comes to hiring and retaining diverse professionals because, on many fronts, it is delivering decidedly mixed messages.

Since diversity is “important” for the industry, wouldn’t it be reasonable to expect diverse professionals and agencies to be part of the mix for every hire, as well as agency and consultant search?

At the recent Institute for Public Relations Bridge Conference in Washington, D.C., Dr. Denise Hill, assistant professor of communications at Elon University’s School of Communications, noted that the common response of companies and agencies to questions about why they are not more diverse is “it’s hard to find diverse professionals.” Her retort – “There are outstanding diverse professionals in the industry; you are not looking hard enough.”

In a new spin on hiring, we hear industry leaders arguing an impediment to diversity is that competition for qualified candidates is high. Echoing Dr. Hill, the net is not being cast far and wide enough. Companies need to commit to investing the time required to find prospective candidates. They are out there.

There’s no doubt that time is an issue for all of us. In the “I have to get a press release drafted today or risk losing the client” versus “I need to take more time to identify diverse people for my business or agency” conundrum, the immediate goal tends to win every time.

Over the long run, taking the time to build a talented,

diverse team will improve efficiency by ensuring client campaigns are as impactful as possible with today's highly engaged audiences. Investing in diversity will help avoid the type of one-size-fits-all approach that simply doesn't resonate or backfires because of a lack of audience awareness.

Given our human propensity for short-term thinking, and the challenge of overcoming inertia because issues seem too big to address or too far in the future to think about, taking a cue from behavioral science, it may be helpful to frame diversity in terms of why it matters now and set achievable goals.

Here are three immediate reasons to make diversity a priority today:

- The diversity of agencies (and companies) is becoming more important to clients' hiring decisions
- Metrics to measure the diversity of agencies will become part of the agency selection process
- The challenge of engaging audiences and the consequences of getting communications wrong are greater ever. Companies can't afford to not have diverse people in the room who understand how messages will be received across different communities and generations. (Watch this short video on the importance of diversity in PR).

And, here are three simple steps companies and agencies can take to start the journey:

- For every professional hire or agency or consultant search, include multiple diverse candidates in the search.
- Reach out to the National Black Public Relations Society (NBPRS) and the Hispanic Public Relations Association, the chapters and affiliates of HPRA and BPRS in New York and other cities, as well as other associations representing diverse members to access job boards and opportunities for engagement with diverse candidates and

agencies.

- As CommunicationsMatch continues to add HPRA and BPRS members to the platform, include a search on the site for diverse agencies, consultants and freelancers with the qualifications you need, by industry and communications expertise, location and size, and add them to your shortlist.

Taking the time to engage on an ongoing basis with organizations with diverse membership offers a path to building a pipeline of candidates, knowing more about agencies that are qualified for your business, and supporting their work and membership.

There's much more companies and agencies can do to make a difference. (Read: *Diversity in Public Relations: How To Make a Difference Today.*) Progress will be made as the result of a sustained commitment to building diverse teams and a diverse industry, founded upon the idea that our businesses will be more successful as a result.

It's also important to remember that investing time in diversity not only makes business sense, it's the right thing to do.

Find out more about the HPRA and BPRS partnerships with CommunicationsMatch.

About the Authors:

Simon Erskine Locke is founder & CEO of CommunicationsMatch™, an agency, consultant and freelancer search, RFP and communications resources technology platform that helps companies find agencies, by industry and communications expertise, location and size, member organizations and diversity. CommunicationsMatch has established partnerships with HPRA New York chapter, NBPRS and BPRS's New York

Affiliate to encourage diversity and inclusion when companies search for communications professionals.

Erika Sanchez is president of the Hispanic Public Relations Association's New York Chapter and has been an active member in the organization for the past 7 years. She's also the co-founder of Braid Communications, a full-service public relations consultancy focused on lifestyle brands and specializing in media relations, social media development, influencer marketing and multicultural communications; helping clients actualize their visions and create powerful narratives.

Tracey Wood Mendelsohn is president and CEO of Black Public Relations Society-New York Inc., principal of a full-service entertainment, media and talent management company and the executive producer for several media properties. She is a C-level, marketing communications, brand management, business strategist and non-profit development executive. Mendelsohn is also a serial entrepreneur, educator (New York University, The New School University) and social justice activist. Her 30+ years of experience encompass various sectors, including arts & entertainment, politics, luxury consumer goods, caviar, and gourmet food and travel.