

# Why Diversity Matters: H&M's Hoodie Crisis and Other Unfortunate Missteps



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H&M's hoodie "mistake" is extremely disappointing, primarily because it's 2018 and we really thought we had gone beyond "oversights" like this. The company has [apologized](#), issuing a statement and removing the image. The [model's mother](#) seems to feel that the controversy is much ado about nothing. She's encouraging people to get over it.

We can move on from this crisis so we can focus on the bigger problem: The lack of diversity at any level in many of the world's largest public relations, marketing and advertising agencies. [The Holmes Report](#) shared a study that showed that 70% of the work force in public relations industry are women; only 30% of the C-suite is women. The ethnic diversity is even more appalling showing that the industry is 10.3% African American, 5.4% Asian-American and 3.3% Hispanic-American. Ad agencies also are experiencing the same lack of diversity. The American Association of Advertising Agencies released a [survey](#) last year revealing that 74 percent of 4As members were "either mediocre or worse when it came to hiring a diverse group of employees."

This 'hoodie' incident goes directly to the point that if

there are diverse voices in the room that this would not have happened. A person of color would have called out to the photographer and creative directors to raise the question, “Hmmm, this is not right folks.” Let me add that regardless of diverse people in the room, the hope is that there are more “woke” folks of any race, culture or ethnicity who might have realized that this was going to be a marketing nightmare. Ask [Pepsi](#) about its Kendall Jenner ad trivializing the street protests against police brutality. Ask [Nivea](#) about its “white purity” ad campaign. Ask [Unilever](#) about its Dove campaign showing a black woman taking off her shirt to turn into a white woman.

The opportunity for both [public relations](#) and advertising agencies is three-fold: 1) Hiring young diverse talent right out of college as paid interns and/or entry-level positions; 2) Retaining diverse talent to stay in the industry beyond seven years because many leave due to frustration with the inability to get promoted; and, 3) Promoting diverse talent to campaign principals, senior level managers, executive level and C-suite positions. Some agencies are trying to engage with more diverse affinity groups. One ad agency, 72andSunny, has taken the bold step to lay out a [playbook](#) for its company – and other agencies – to “expand and diversify the creative class”. The playbook opens up with a very clear mission statement: “Steal these ideas!” HP’s Chief Marketing Officer [Antonio Lucio](#) challenged its five ad agencies (BBDO Worldwide, Fred & Farid, gyro, PHD and Edelman) to improve its diversity numbers.

The basic tenets of 72andSunny’s playbook should be fundamental strategies for any company, but particularly public relations and ad agencies who are shaping and creating images that define race, culture and identity. Three of the most salient “plays”: frame diversity as an opportunity for all; set clear, measurable goals and “galvanize” everyone in the company to be a part of the solution, not just the managers

and executives in the C-suite.

Clearly, easier said than done, but we have to start now – well, like yesterday – despite the naysayers who are pushing back on diversity. Mistakes along the lines of H&M no longer can be tolerated and swept aside as isolated incidents of unconscious bias. The world in which we live in today is only getting more increasingly racially, ethnically and culturally diverse. That's a fact. Agencies must embrace this reality, checking itself everyday with every campaign.

***About the Author:** Neil Foote is a veteran journalist and media executive. He draws from his experience at the Miami Herald, Washington Post, Belo Corporation and Tom Joyner's Reach Media. He also teaches digital and social media for journalists, media management and business journalism at the University of North Texas' Frank W. & Sue Mayborn School of Journalism and runs Foote Communications, a media consulting firm. The native of Brooklyn, NY also is president of the board for the National Black Public Relations Society and founder of PoliticsInColor.com*