

The importance of cultural nuance in advertising

By [Emily Stander](#)

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The One Club's Creative Week is five days dedicated to giving creative leaders and pioneers an online platform to come together and discuss issues, changes and ideas across different industries. Today, I report on a panel hosted earlier this week, 'One size does not fit all: the importance of cultural nuance in advertising'.



Source: www.unsplash.com

Led by Davianne Harris, partner and head of strategy at New York City-based branding agency Oberland, this panel discussion revolved around advertising and how it's not only about selling products, but also about telling stories.

The full panel included:

- **Kristin Sanger:** Senior director of contributor marketing at Shutterstock
- **Jerry Won:** Founder and CEO of Just Like Media
- **Matt Story:** Vice president of global marketing partnerships and advocacy at Visa
- **Dr Marcus Collins:** Head of planning at Wieden+Kennedy NYC

There have been a lot of promises from brands to change the way they advertise, and consumers have taken it upon themselves to hold brands accountable for 'check-the-box' diversity efforts. This creates issues with authentic representation and storytelling in branding efforts.

Here, I cover three key messages from the discussion...

Who is telling the story?

The first problem we encounter when thinking about authentic storytelling in advertising and branding is who is actually telling the story. In strategy, according to Collins, having people tell their own stories removes the proxy which would otherwise exist if they are not given that platform - it creates a delta between our perception and what is actually real.

Sanger pointed out that stock photography notoriously lacks diversity, whether it's stereotypical in nature or completely exclusionary of underrepresented groups. It's historically been tailored to the white male gaze.



The power of inclusive portrayal in advertising

Emily Stander 28 May 2021



Because stock photography is often the place people go to craft their campaigns, diversity and inclusion is not always easy to come by for those who are not financially able to get those assets themselves. "The way we can really put [diversity and inclusion] in motion is to ensure that we have representation behind the lens, not just in front of the lens," said Sanger. "The representation behind the lens really ensures that people are using their lived experiences to portray themselves and others in ways they want to be portrayed."

According to Story, the essential perspective is that telling an authentic story actually goes to the masses and brings people into what you are doing. Ultimately, having a more diverse team has been proven to yield better results. Telling more diverse stories brings more people into the stories you're telling, which is ultimately going to be better for your business.

Segmentation and data

In strategy, a lot of segmentation is done. This is the process of taking a heterogeneous market (one which has many elements) and putting it into homogeneous clusters (where everything is similar). "The issue is that we put these people in homogeneous-like clusters that are demarcated by demographics - age, race, gender, household income, education, thinking that's a descriptor of people. While it's easy to put people in those boxes, while those things are seemingly tangible, they aren't accurate," said Collins.

Data is an essential starting point where you can start to gain more intimate knowledge of the communities you are trying to connect with. According to Won, different people from different communities all have unique stories - the only way to fight that from a business perspective is with data and we need to desegregate the data. Having a diverse data set from the start helps uniquely with this issue. "How can surveys and other demographic data really create how that story is told? Make your decisions more defensible by relying on objective data sets, so you can point to that and say "that's the reason why we're going with this,"" he said.



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A key point for Sanger on this topic is also the question of who is interpreting this data. Having meaningful connections and asking questions about how people want to be identified unlocks the ability to better market to people.

Authenticity

The key in creating a meaningful culture within the advertising and branding space is making space for true authenticity. According to Collins, brands need to transcend the context where we talk about people in meaningful ways - what are the beliefs of the people we are looking to communicate with and what do their daily lives look like?

For example, oftentimes in the workplace, leaders of colour can have the issue of being seen as the single voice of their community. For Story, this is an issue which can be solved by both parties. Firstly, underrepresented folk need to understand what they are willing to take on and put down that boundary. However, it is up to the organisation to make the workplace a safe space where employees feel they can be vulnerable enough to set those boundaries.



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Final thoughts

As a company or organisation, it is not enough to make a statement every time a social movement demands it be heard. The struggle of marginalised and underrepresented groups does not go away once the 'hype' dies down on social media and it needs to be an ongoing conversation.

Won expressed that there are necessary questions you need to ask as a business when considering diversity and inclusion. When you talk about representation and brand on a screen, where do you draw the line between doing what's right for your business and actually caring? Making a statement is almost necessary at this point, but do you care about the consumer and their communities, or is this a strategic marketing play?

The One Club's Creative Week will go on until 11 June 2021. You can find more information about the event [here](#).

ABOUT EMILY STANDER

Freelancer specialising in games and entertainment | My first loves are writing, music and video games
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■ #BehindtheSelfie: Millicent Maroga, corporate affairs director at Heineken SA - 18 Jan 2023
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