

Marketing diversity

Translating inclusion and equity to marketing demands care and conversation

By Rick Polito

Emerald-Jane Hunter doesn't have a magic wand. She doesn't have all the answers either.

That's something the **myWhy Agency** founder has to explain a lot. When brands come to her Chicago-based marketing company for guidance on how to incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion into their branding and messaging, she reminds them that she cannot create change from the outside. The brands need to have asked the questions inside the organizations first and discovered answers that include not just what they know but what they don't know. And what they need to learn. "I cannot advise you. I cannot. It's unfair to ask me, a woman of color, to design a program for you, your heart has to be in the right place," she says.

The questions the brands are asking themselves should be tough questions, Hunter explains. The process should be more long haul than quick fix. If the natural products brand is going to grow past a primarily White and affluent audience, the change can't begin and end at window dressing, she says. "I will not hire BIPOC influencers just to make your social channel look great. Not gonna' do that."

More natural product brands are beginning to ask the questions Hunter describes. More companies are taking the internal audits and creating plans to incorporate the principals championed by the JEDI Collaborative, a natural product organization based on Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. The conversations inside a company have to happen before the messaging that might re-

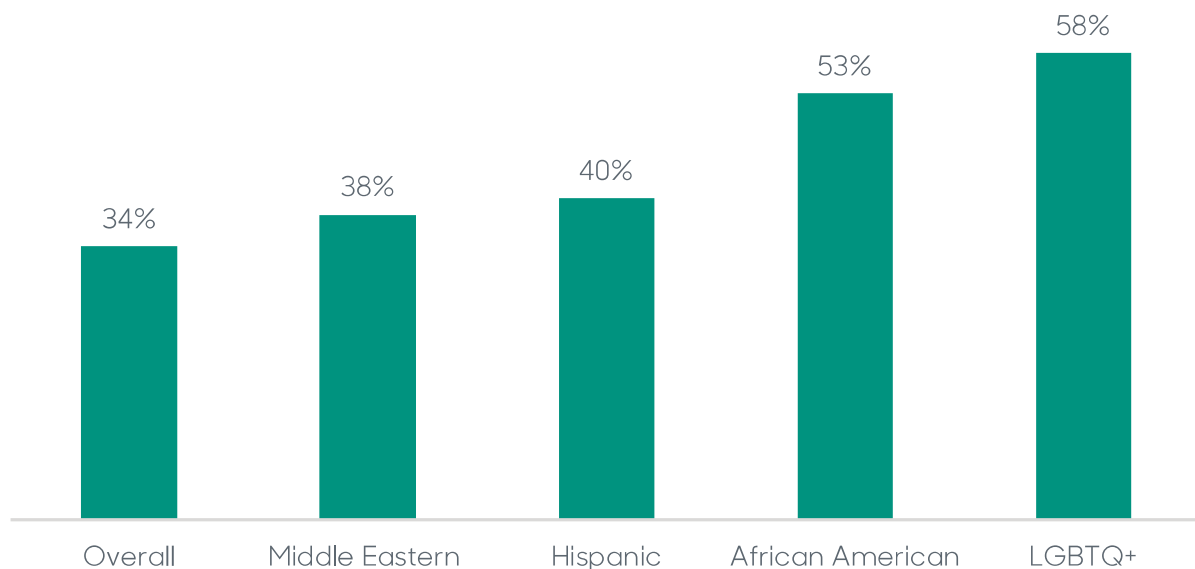
NBJ Takeaways

- » Brands need to do internal work on diversity, equity and inclusion before they can create authentic external messages
- » Advisory boards that recruit voices outside a company can be a sounding board for marketing
- » The industry lacks data on diverse consumers

flect the resulting consciousness is created. And no, those conversations won't be easy. "A lot of brands need to really be honest within themselves, to say this is uncomfortable work," Hunter says. "It's hard work."

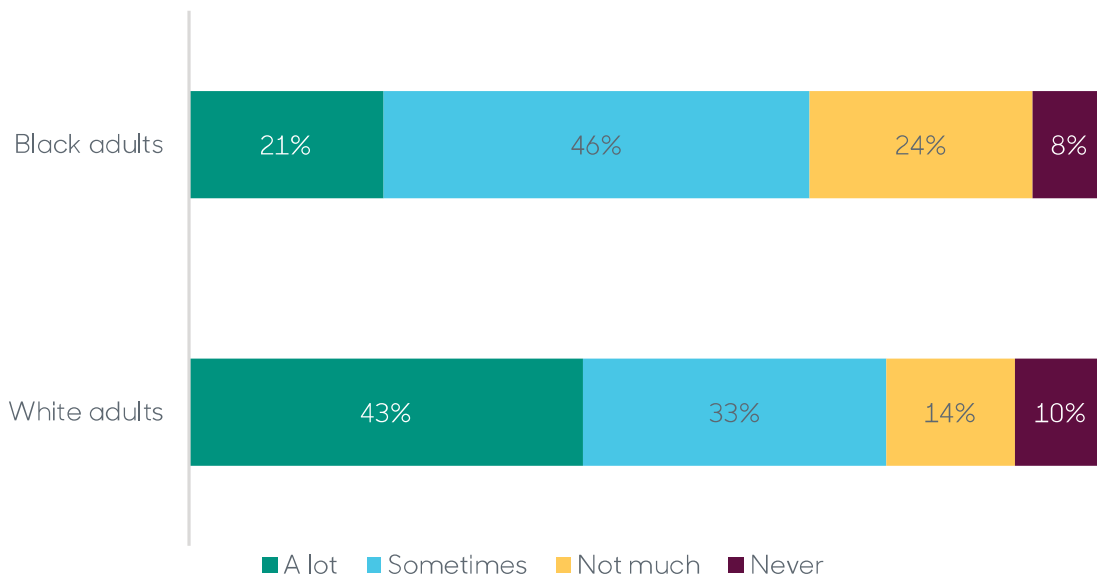
CONSUMER RESPONSE TO LACK OF DIVERSITY IN ADVERTISING

Percentage of consumers who have stopped supporting a brand because it didn't represent their identity (race, gender, religion, etc.) in its advertising



Source: Adobe survey of 1,012 U.S. adults over 18 years old

HOW OFTEN CONSUMERS FEEL THEY SEE PEOPLE WHO LOOK LIKE THEM DEPICTED IN ADVERTISEMENTS



Source: Morning Consult
 Polls conducted June 18-21, 2020, among 2,200 White adults and June 18-26, 2020, among 2,000 Black adults

Turning down the temperature

Taury Laws helps brands have those hard conversations. Laws, a former brand manager for **Unilever**, offers diversity and inclusion trainings for companies. Those trainings can be anxious, uncomfortable and awkward, but Laws says she has discovered a technique to lower the temperature: improvisational theater. Improv, she says, puts everybody on the same uncertain playing field. The fear of saying the wrong thing fades. “We use the improv element to bring out a spirit of play,” Laws says, “but also to release any feelings of judgment.”

It also provides introduction to empathy, but even that is just a start, Laws says. “I think empathy is incredibly important. But I think it also requires you to recognize your bias, and then educate yourself beyond that.”

That education includes an expansion of what diversity and inclusion mean. Laws says she needs to nudge marketing teams past the immediate impressions of what diversity means. It’s not just race, she says.

It can be socioeconomic status. It can be sexuality or ability. It can be combinations of all of those things, or it can mean the assumptions linking one factor to the other are entirely false. Brands are ruling out whole consumer groups based on ignorance and faulty assumptions. Not all people of color are poor just as not all White people are wealthy. “Am I welcoming people who don’t look like me to my business?” Law asks. “And why is it that I have an assumption that they aren’t going to pay for my \$40 supplements?”

A more enlightened view opens brands to a bigger market, but until the contact is made and the empathy is built, the view stays narrow.

Hunter explains it as a problem of “lanes.” “Sometimes, out of fear and not wanting to make a mistake, everyone’s like, ‘let me just stay in my lane, because that’s my comfort zone,’” Hunter says. “If I’m a Black person on one side of the street and you’re white on the other side of the street, and you never come across to my side of

the street and have a conversation with me, you’ll never understand or know the sort of empathy that allows you to connect with me.”

Trainings like Laws provides and the urgency for dialogue that Hunter describes can start moving people out of their lanes and draw them across the streets. Hunter says the first step is authenticity and honesty, with an element of vulnerability. “People will listen to you when you say, ‘Look, I don’t know what I don’t know. But I want to do better, so let’s chat.’”

Having diverse teams is an obvious and important step. That brings in new views and provides a backdrop for conscious marketing messages.

But how a diverse team functions is the next step, and part of the educational process. “The inclusion part has to be there,” Laws says. “They have to feel included, and they have to feel like they have equal voice on the team to be able to make the suggestions and call things out. And then the team has to be willing to listen to them.”

Content matters

More conscious messaging can't happen until the shortcomings are at least acknowledged, but how the messages are crafted can't be done in a vacuum either. Ann Gynn is a consultant at **GForce Communications** and blogs at the **Content Marketing Institute**. She advises companies to recruit advisory boards for marketing content. That advisory board might include people inside the company, but outside voices are vitally important, she says. "Just because you have one person of color on your staff doesn't mean they are going to be the expert on all things," Gynn says. "No one person can be the expert on all things. The advisory board can fill in gaps that you have in your organization."

And companies shouldn't be afraid to ask people from different groups to participate, Gynn says. It can feel awkward, but many times, the help is eagerly given, she explains. "They want you to do better, and so they are willing to help."

Where the content is delivered matters, too. Hunter talks to brands about stepping outside the circuit of natural product showcases. Expo West may be important, but the mammoth Essence Festival, a celebration of Black culture staged in New Orleans, can put a product in front of a whole new set of consumers in a context that resonates for them. She tells brands to cut back spending on the expected shows and deploy it in new places. "I tell them, 'At Essence, we're going to spend some of that money.'"

Laws notes that creating more diverse content can be as awkward for brands as talking about the issues that underly the need for that content. "Through every step, there are fears that people are going to get it wrong or make missteps," she says. People have to push past that discomfort and accept that when the company is going in the right direction that content becomes authentic.

Tokenism is a fear she frequently hears brands talk about, but it's also a good example of how context matters. "If the Black person or the person of color in your ad is the only person of color that exists within your company, within your vendors, within your purveyors, within your board, then yes, that is tokenism," Laws says. When the brand's diversity and inclusion efforts become more authentic, those problems

fall away. "If you're doing your own photoshoots, and you're paying people correctly, and you are treating them with respect, then you're probably not going to go down a path of tokenism."

Conversely, without authenticity, without a plan that weaves diversity, equity and inclusion into the fabric of the company, the risk of missteps and the costs of those missteps climbs quickly. "It has to go past window dressing, or you're going to get called out," Gynn says.

Moving past window dressing should

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include "action," Hunter says. Action should support the marketing and not just *be* the marketing. "Showing you care doesn't always just mean writing a check for \$100,000 and then doing a press release about it. Get your employees to go volunteer on top of that \$100,000."

Next steps

Hunter is not satisfied with efforts that stop at "more," as in more diversity, more inclusion, more equity. The ideas around training, diverse hires and marketing efforts need benchmarks, she says. "If you don't put some levels of accountability in place, then, once again, it's going to be all talk." Holding the sentiments to task can mean working with accountability partners on audits that look at in-house processes but also drawing on that outside expertise to examine marketing and merchandising, addressing issues around access, for instance.

Gynn says brands collaborating with other brands on those issues can also gain new perspectives while simultaneously building better credibility. "If the brand or several brands take ownership of the issue

and actively strive to make a difference, I think that speaks loudly to the younger generations," she says.

Brands could also collaborate on creating a better toolbox.

Shannon Charles is a marketing executive at **Naturade**, a Black-owned company making expansion into underserved communities a pillar of its marketing efforts. She believes it is time for brands to cooperate and build a structure for reaching those communities. Naturade is exploring the landscape without a map. A coalition could

do the research. The industry would see a sales benefits, but new groups of consumers would see health benefits.

That effort could begin with consumer research that simply does not exist. "We just don't have enough data," Charles says. If brands knew where the consumers were, they could target them. They could put products in front of them, create new products, build lines to meet their needs, and in some cases, their expectations of price and presentation. "If you are brand trying to serve a consumer, you need to find out who that consumer is," she says.

The natural products industry doesn't have those answers, she says. "There's nothing."

Hunter doesn't have all the answers either. But she knows that part of the answer is brands stepping up to asks the questions. "Make the internal commitment. Do that checklist. Make sure you're being honest. Be brutally honest. It might not look pretty." She doesn't promise a graduation date on the long-haul journey. She certainly doesn't promise a magic wand.

"I'm not going to wave the magic wand," she says. "Because I ain't got it." 🍃