Reaching the African-American Consumer via Print Advertising: How Times Have Changed

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Attracting the African-American consumer has been the objective of marketers for many years. Each year, enormous amounts of time, energy and money are expended in an effort to do this as effectively as possible, and that's just for print advertising. Have marketers and their advertising agencies finally gotten it right? Have they learned anything from the past? A look back over the last two decades shows that a number of important lessons have been learned, but along the way, the target audience itself has changed…perhaps even more than the advertising directed at them.

Back in 1981 I wrote an article that was published in *Marketing News*. It was entitled, "Focus Groups Offer Six Guidelines for Black-Oriented Ads." The article was based on advertising-related research we had conducted during the 1970's and early 80's. The overall objective of these studies was to determine what attracts and repels Black consumers (the term "African-American" wasn't even in vogue then) regarding print advertising directed at them.

During the intervening years we have continued to conduct this type of research, now utilizing a variety of qualitative methodologies. Since this issue is still pertinent today, I thought it might be interesting to revisit the guidelines I suggested, and then to look at ethnic advertising now to see the extent to which these guidelines have withstood the test of time. Given what multi-cultural, ethnic advertising has become, what would I say to advertisers if I were to rewrite that article today? They say that those who neglect to study history are doomed to repeat it.

I refer to them as "guidelines" to emphasize the fact that they do not apply universally or infallibly to all black advertising. Nevertheless, they have helped marketers and advertisers effectively position their products and services before this consumer segment. So let's look at the "then" and the "now" to see how these guidelines have changed. Although they specifically apply to print advertising, in some cases they are valid for broadcast media as well. And although they specifically apply to African-Americans, they may to some extent be valid for other minorities in this era of prolific segmented marketing.

THEN: "Don't underestimate the sensitivity of Blacks regarding ads directed at them." Blacks of all ages and lifestyles used to be extremely sensitive about how they were depicted in advertising. They saw the people in these ads as projections of themselves and often felt insulted by ads they perceived as "negative." In today's society, African-Americans and other minorities are much more visible in the media, and can be depicted in all types of situations and circumstances. While advertisers must still beware of being insensitive, the target audience is now much more open to what they see and read. NOW: Don't be overly concerned about sensitivity.

THEN: "The use of Black models is especially effective in creating awareness and impact." There was a time when marketers were quite reluctant to show Blacks in their ads because they did not want to risk the depiction being considered negative or offensive. Instead, they often gravitated toward product-only ads with no models, which had the additional advantage of being usable in both ethnic and general audience media. But then, as well as now, using black models is regarded as a sign that the advertiser has respect for, and is committed to, the black consumer. Today's savvy marketer knows that using ethnic-specific models is just one possible element of a viable, targeted ad. Numerous social and cultural cues, such as ethnic-specific icons, language, historical references, music, etc. are also potentially effective. NOW: Using ethnic models is only one way of generating awareness and impact.

THEN: "The depiction of affluence in Black-oriented ads can be positive or negative." Having made the commitment to use a black model in an ad, some marketers went to outrageous lengths to make the depiction as positive as possible. Some of you may remember these ads: a beautiful black family dressed in the latest designer fashions, sitting beside the pool outside of their fabulous home, while the copy exhorts you to use Acme Peanut Butter. While African-Americans appreciated being shown in a positive, "aspirational" way, they also knew when they were being patronized and often resented it. Nowadays, this type of approach is largely unnecessary. While upscale representations are still appreciated, other types of depictions are acceptable as well. This is another example of how this population has changed. What's important now is that the depiction be consistent with the specific target audience to which the advertising is being directed. Simply showing consumers as very affluent is no guarantee that an ad will be successful. NOW: The people being shown in the advertising should look like the people for whom the product or service is intended.

THEN: "Lengthy copy does not generate attention or interest." The African-American consumer used to have far less tolerance for lengthy copy than presently. Focus groups consistently showed that consumers tended to disregard ads that contained large amounts of written copy because they were visually

unimpactful and presumed to be boring. Nevertheless, advertisers felt compelled to tell "the whole story" about their product or service, especially when other media options, such as television, were not used as often for ethnic advertising. Today's multi-media ethnic campaigns offer additional advertising vehicles and opportunities for marketers to get their message across, apart from writing it all down in a print ad. Nevertheless, current research shows that consumers are less likely to disregard copy-laden ads because they welcome more product disclosure and information. NOW: Lengthy copy is less of a liability.

THEN: "Hey, man, chill out on the slang!" Back in 1981 I made the point that, given the high level of sensitivity that blacks felt about ethnic advertising, it was generally a good idea to avoid slang or colloquial expressions. Of all the "mistakes" that advertisers made in creating ethnic ads, research respondents almost invariably considered this the most egregious. Straightforward, grammatically correct English was considered the best approach. Whereas "African-American" used to be considered a homogeneous entity, today this market is frequently sub-segmented by a variety of demographic, economic and other variables. Within these sub-segments, different rules apply, including the use of language. In addition, the higher visibility of minorities in the media has resulted in greater vocabulary tolerance. Thus, among Blacks it can be equally effective to use grammatically correct English to sell financial services and rap to sell soft drinks or athletic shoes. NOW: Use colloquialisms when, where and if appropriate.

THEN: "Integrated ads can also be considered ethnic ads, and they can be highly effective." The first integrated print ads coming out of the 1970s and 80s caused quite a stir among African-Americans. While this advertising approach was not often used, when properly executed, it was considered attention-getting, effective "ethnic" advertising by black consumers. These consumers very often rushed out to buy the product or service being advertised as a reward to the advertiser, who had the "courage" to show blacks and whites as equals. NOW: Both ethnic-specific and integrated ads can be equally acceptable, and integrated ads are sometimes preferred.

As a measure of how far we have come socially in this country, integrated ads are now so common that they are generally taken for granted. Despite this, they may still be regarded as "ethnic" advertising because research shows that the black consumer will almost always notice a black person in an ad, and his reaction is often similar as to an all-black ad.

Obviously, things have changed over the past 25-30 years. The increasing diversity of peoples and cultures, and their increased visibility in advertising, have certainly had an impact on how products and services are marketed. What does the future of ethnic advertising hold? I'll write another article and tell you about it in 2021.