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Agency Diversity Policies Are Great. Now – How About Improving Advertising Output to Match?

Jun 23, 2021



Jeremy Taylor spent a week in May 2021 attending the AdForum Consultants Forum, on the receiving end of nine full credentials presentations from some of the leading global advertising networks and from some up and coming independents.

Every presentation had at least some reference to the agency Diversity Equity and Diversity (DEI) policy and its impact. But the work seldom reflected the changes. Why should this be?



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DIVERSITY IS HERE TO STAY.

Excellent news. The high profile Black Lives Matter movement from 2020 has had a major impact on the way advertising agencies are structured, with major investment of effort and money in ensuring that management and staffing structures are changing to reflect the diverse world we all operate within.

Clearly, this work is not just about race – it also covers sex and gender issues and other reflections of our changing society. The immediate impact was there to be seen in the senior teams presenting the agency credentials, and it was great to see.

In the most memorable example, we saw a presentation from US independent The Richards Group. This agency came close to going out of business in 2020 following an unguarded racist comment from their founder CEO about some agency work he was reviewing at an internal meeting. In a stunning demonstration of the importance of reflecting the demands of society, The Richards Group lost a disastrous percentage of its clients, its billings and its staff as well as its CEO and a great deal of kudos in just one month following the comment. A huge effort from the company over the last year has apparently stopped the rot and established the beginnings of a recovery. Notably, the credentials presentation featured a major contribution from a specialist diversity consultant who has been working with the new management team to make sure mistakes are learned from and the issues addressed.

It wasn't just The Richards Group who talked at length about measures taken to address the need for diversity in management and staff. The big networks are reporting their progress regularly to shareholders and clients alike. And to add to the pressure, client procurement teams are starting to demand to see policies in place and action being taken.

This is an issue whose role is not diminishing in any way in the months since Black Lives Matter came to prominence.

SO - WHAT ABOUT DIVERSITY IN AGENCY OUTPUT?

The introductory sections of the agency presentations universally talked about their plans and actions to address diversity. The Richards Group was understandably at the forefront but everybody had a story to tell.

Then we came to the work and the star case histories that every agency loves to show. With no specific client sector requirements to worry about, every agency at the AdForum is free to show the work it is proudest of from the previous year, and which presumably it feels best represents the agency structure and systems.

And that's where the new commitments to diversity and equality seem to fall down. Answers to the logical question "How has this huge transformational DEI effort been reflected in the work?" were at best unconvincing – and this applied to all the presenting agencies. "Wait and see!" was one response. Blank looks and slightly worried passing of the responsibility for the answer around the presenter team was another common response.

And honestly, the work did not look substantially different from what was on show 12 months previously. This was often put forward as a good thing – even The Richards Group went out of its way to emphasise the continuity of its work for its remaining long-term clients.

It's hard not to wonder about the point of changing management and staffing policies at great cost in effort and money when the work remains apparently so unaffected.

WHY DOESN'T THE WORK CHANGE AT THE SAME PACE AS THE POLICY CHANGE?

To understand how this situation can be improved, we need first to understand why the creative work remains relatively unaffected by the structural changes.

The answer has to lie in the unchanging nature of agency cultures. Most businesses are naturally conservative and resistant to change, and advertising agencies are no different. In fact, you could put together an argument that agencies are some of the most conservative organizations around – something as apparently anarchic as creating advertising can only work inside a strictly controlled and process-driven environment, otherwise chaos would take over. And once a system for creating the agency output is in place, it is very difficult to change it.

Most agencies talk with pride about their cultures, believing that their distinctive culture is what truly differentiates them in the market. Take this away and all that is left is a process-driven system churning out advertising, goes the received agency wisdom. So not surprisingly, they instinctively preserve that culture and the way of working that they have always had, no matter if there are changes at the top of the management tree and new faces heading up departments.

HOW CAN THE DIVERSITY CHANGES MAKE AN IMPACT ON THE WORK?

There is another kind of diversity that agencies might consider adopting. It's known as Cognitive Diversity.

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Basic Info

FOUNDED IN: 2000






EMPLOYEES: 5

Even in businesses that realize the benefits of a DEI policy, there is still a habit of hiring people who *think* alike. There is an understandable tendency to look for replacements for roles, senior and junior alike, who have similar skill sets and mind sets to the predecessor in the job. If the previous occupant was good at that job, why would you not look for someone who thinks in the same way? Straying from this policy sounds risky.

Management teams like to surround themselves with others who have business styles similar to their own. And inevitably, when you hire more of the same thinking style the resulting output is not going to be too different. So even if the agencies can now claim that they "no longer have the boys club leadership team" (to quote The Richards Group one more time), the output has not been affected.

The next step in diversification is to bring in people who think differently. And where do you go to find them? There are some examples around the world of successful agencies set up and run by people with previous careers outside the industry, but they are still few and far between. The prize for getting it right will be a big one, but Cognitive Diversity might turn out to be the hardest diversity step yet for the industry to take.

While this work gets under way, there is another issue for the advertising industry to ponder. Agencies cannot be the only businesses in the industry to be taking action on DEI policies. It is vital that these principles are also put in place and operated on by client organizations, media owners and everyone else involved in the advertising supply chain.



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