



INSIGHTS

Positive Portrayals in the Media

What's Black About It?

By Pepper Miller and Herb Kemp

The expression “What’s Black about it?” originated when African-American marketing executives and experts challenged creative teams to identify the “cultural button” in their communications that would effectively bond Black consumers to a brand, product, service or idea. Beginning with our first interviews with African Americans in 1984, we have found that the majority of them continue to question the relevancy of many communications, media, and retail products and services that often fall short of their needs.

The lack of marketing messages that are culturally relevant to African Americans creates an opportunity for marketers to step in and make an effort to reach this target effectively. Such efforts are not only productive but also appreciated. The current emphasis in multicultural marketing is to focus on the similarities between various segments versus developing relevant communications for the respective ethnic groups.

“Why can't they just show us normal?” This comment from a focus group respondent encapsulates how many African Americans desire to see themselves in the collective media (Internet, television, radio, print, movies).

For example, when African Americans are asked how African Americans are portrayed in the collective media most are more likely to perceive that they are stereotyped more often in the media than any other race. Thus, being “progressive,” as defined by the African American community, is about empowering oneself to be educated and informed and to have a positive self-image that is recognized and respected by America. This is one of the most powerful needs and desires among many African Americans and yet is often overlooked by marketers.

An illustration of responding to the focus group respondent's statement is by examining an African-American advertising campaign creative by Burrell Communications.

But first, some background info. African-American men have made significant advances. This group has been growing at three times the rate of the White male population; they are younger, with a median age of 28.5 compared to 35.3 years for the general population and their life expectancy has been on the rise.

Their college enrollment increased 38.8% between 1990 and 2000, significant because education is a means for overcoming some societal barriers and advancing oneself. Additionally, African-American men are taking more

responsibility for their families; two-parent family groups increased at nearly double the U.S. rate from 1900 to 2000.

And many have assumed significant roles in business, politics, sports, entertainment, and other arenas. In turn, educational and professional achievements have impacted their incomes with a 59.7% gain in mean earnings between 1990 and 2000, despite the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

- Importantly, they have been the major influencers in the U.S. and globally as a result of their creation of rap, hip-hop and almost every other major pop development of the last 20 years, as reported in the April 2004 issue of *Ebony* magazine.
- Their influence on fashion is phenomenal: baggy jeans, baseball caps, baseball caps on backwards, oversized shirts, musical tastes (rap/hip-hop), and other preferences have been adopted by people of other races and influenced a whole culture in the U.S. and around the world.
- They are also the ultimate originators of “cool” -- an important marketing characteristic often copied by Whites and other cultures.

At the same time, they are more likely to be most noted for a perpetuation of negative stereotypes most often seen in the media.

Based on previous Hunter-Miller qualitative research, we have learned that marketers will elicit positive responses from most African Americans when they depict positive images of Black men with families and in leadership roles, i.e., by showing them as respected family heads and concerned fathers, business owners and corporate executives —the all-around good guys that many of them are.

Burrell Communications was able to translate the “Black man's burden” aspect of the Black experience to an effective marketing strategy via a targeted campaign for Procter and Gamble's Tide brand with Downy fabric softener. The print and TV campaign features an African-American man sleeping on his back with a small child sleeping on his stomach. Burrell and P&G took on an important issue in the Black community—the perception that all Black men are absent fathers—and made it positive and relevant.

According to Hunter-Miller research and Sarah Patterson, VP Director of Research and Account Planning for Burrell Communications, the campaign is receiving “rave reviews” from the Black community because it truly uplifts and gives Black men (and the Black community) their due by demonstrating the “normalcy” that occurs within the Black lifestyle. Additionally, because the campaign was so successfully received by the African-American community,

“Why can't they show us normal?”



INSIGHTS

continued

Burrell and P&G decided to include the ads in general-market rotation.

Make no mistake: if the Burrell campaign had featured an all-White cast, the response would have been dramatically different for African Americans. It most likely would have been just another White spot.

The rave reviews over time will translate to increased awareness (Tide is already a strong brand among African Americans), great feelings, trial or increased brand purchases, and loyalty.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Culturally sensitive and positive, relevant appeals that celebrate the culture rather than reinforce stereotypes continue to be elements that are more likely to gain the attention and loyalty of African Americans. The net-net is for marketers to provide a glimpse of Black middle America via the Black Experience.

Therefore, marketers should develop strategies and communications that reverse the common stereotypes by including:

- Upscale African-American individuals and families
- African-American family units (including the Black father as an emotional and responsible caretaker)
- African Americans working with and helping other African Americans
- African-American men and women in integrated leadership roles, particularly, African-American men in integrated leadership roles
- African Americans involved in technology and health care