

Pitching Diversity: Diversity is not a product, but promoting it requires persuasive discipline

By Bruce Jaobs



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As a former advertising vice president, I am accustomed to asking questions about market audiences: Who are we talking to? What are their needs? How can we fulfill them?

Over the past decade as a diversity professional, I have found that some of the very same questions apply. To be sure, diversity is not a product, and we err gravely if we treat it as a commodity. Diversity is a moral value and a human investment. But putting diversity effectively into practice in our organizations raises some of the same questions, and the same need for disciplined thinking, that arise in other organizational efforts to reach and motivate people and achieve results.

Here, for example, are three questions that I believe are at the heart of any successful commitment to diversity.

1. WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE? This is not as simple as it may sound. Your diversity efforts can have many audiences and many varying participants. One audience, of course, is your workforce: the people whose actions and knowledge constitute the actual functioning of your organization. How does diversity need to work for them? What do all of these people need to know, what do they need to do, and how do they need to feel supported? But there are other potential audiences for diversity as well. Your customers and clients need to know that they will be treated fairly and respectfully. Your peers in your industry need reason to view you with esteem. Media need evidence for your sound practices and your solid reputation. So does the general public.

2. WHAT ARE YOUR OBJECTIVES? What do you aim to accomplish? To diversify your hiring and your human expertise? Reach a broader range of people with your products or services? Prevent or remedy problems of bias in promotion and internal influence in your organization? Address an image problem arising from a diversity issue? Smooth the process of mutual understanding and respect among employees from varying backgrounds? All of the above?

3. HOW WILL YOU ACCOMPLISH WHAT YOU WANT TO? What messages, actions, and methods will enable you to engage your workforce in a productive culture of diversity? What will it take to better embrace the diversity of your potential customers or service recipients? What do you need to do to address actual or potential internal problems or liabilities regarding diversity? How do you need to deal with media and public perception of your diversity culture? And how do you

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set priorities for what areas and actions are most urgent?

All of these questions, and others as well, call for a hard, honest, and rigorous assessment of where your organization is with diversity, where it needs to go, and how it will get there. Diversity may ultimately be a moral and human value, but it requires no less thoughtful discipline than any other investment in order to reap the rewards of fairness, positive morale, productivity, and public goodwill. Ultimately, you are bringing your mission and message of diversity to an audience, and you want to do it right.