A new framework for thinking about DEI in marketing
The results are in: A majority of consumers fully believe that today’s marketing campaigns are more diverse than ever and that brands have a responsibility to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. A survey conducted by Vox Media and The Circus, an insight and data storytelling firm, found support for DEI efforts in marketing and advertising across the board – though the same survey returned complex responses around the tactics brands employ in these DEI spaces, and how successful their efforts are with consumers.

The following series of questions is meant to explore these complexities and help clarify your brand’s intentions and strategies around incorporating DEI. Consumers want to feel seen by marketers and advertisers, and are more likely to support brands that embrace DEI and take a strong stand – as long as those efforts are seen as authentic. (For a full report on the research, see What the Data Says; and for more context on specific terms, refer to the Language, Please marketing glossary.)
“Should we use a DEI strategy?”

At a basic level, answering this question calls on brands to recognize the increasing buying power of diverse communities. More deeply, it invites brands to be fully in the know about consumers’ expectations. Our research shows that 69% of consumers across the board believe companies and brands have a responsibility to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in their marketing. The reality is that if your brand wants to retain its relevance into the future, it’s vital to engage younger generations and diverse audiences. Those consumers value diversity and inclusion across the board, with a caveat: They expect genuine and authentic engagement.

AND THEN ASK

“What structures are in place to back our DEI efforts in marketing and approach DEI as a lens?”

It’s not enough to include images and cast talent that suggests to the world that your brand is inclusive. Using a DEI strategy pays dividends if you are ready to learn and have the capacity for commitment and follow-through company-wide. Before starting any program or marketing campaign, ask yourself: Is this backed by a company culture that supports DEI efforts in its operations and ethos? If the initial answer to this question is no, it will inform where you go from here (see question 2). Once you commit to a DEI strategy, consider reframing DEI as a lens through which you filter every action your brand takes, internally and publicly, when engaging with all stakeholders.
“Do we have a clear vision for our engagement in DEI initiatives?”

This is a fundamental question; if you can’t answer it with a resounding yes from a genuine place that leans on your brand’s values, perhaps reconsider your campaign’s path. Are you looking to be a thought leader, an ally, or a friendly supporter? If your reasoning is that nodding to DEI is just what people do to make their brand look good or drive sales, it may be helpful to pause and get very honest about your brand’s “why” and whether you have the capacity and resources to follow through. Engage with this question to examine the emotional underpinnings and shared truths that make DEI initiatives meaningful and impactful, grounding your campaign in a genuine connection with the consumer.
AND THEN ASK

“Where exactly are we engaging in these areas?”

Consumer trust is already thin around brands' DEI efforts; 68% of consumers believe brands that take a stand on social issues are just jumping on the DEI bandwagon without helping effect meaningful change. What are reasonable expectations about your role within the DEI space and what your marketing can accomplish? It’s helpful to be realistic with your expectations internally and externally. Stick to what you know and are known for, incorporating DEI efforts in the areas where you already have credibility. This question asks you to evaluate the areas where your brand holds weight and the ones where it doesn’t, to help you create campaigns that nurture and grow consumer trust. For instance, if your brand has been actively involved in environmental sustainability, consider integrating DEI efforts in this space. If you are starting from scratch, consider working to build your brand’s credibility by partnering with channels that have preexisting relationships with the audiences you are trying to reach.
YES, ASK

“Are we prepared to push back on inadequate or superficial DEI requests?”

Whether you are a marketing team for a brand or an agency creating or responding to an RFP, at some point you may find yourself having to push back on inadequate, superficial, or insensitive requests and ideas. As a brand, you may want to challenge whether you are recommending a DEI strategy for superficial reasons; as an agency or media company, you may need to push back on asks that don’t align with your approach to DEI. That pushback can be uncomfortable, but muddling through an inadequate or superficial request is likely to lead to embarrassing or harmful results that can damage your reputation with consumers, 63% of whom believe the DEI mission has been hurt by companies just seeking to build their own social cachet. Having a strategy in place to address this situation can go a long way toward easing discomfort and ensuring a more positive outcome.

AND THEN ASK

“How can I prepare myself and advocate for a more nuanced approach without fear of retaliation, losing business, or disagreeing with another stakeholder?”

Use data, case studies, and a solid understanding of your company’s DEI goals to make the case for a more nuanced approach to DEI in marketing. Understand that DEI is a practice, not a moment, and that this practice is essential for the long-term sustainability of your brand. And remember: You don’t have to go it alone. Asking this question can also help you identify other stakeholders who may value DEI as deeply as you do and can provide support when advocating for more meaningful initiatives.
YES, ASK

“Are we diving deep into our data to understand our audience better?”

Your brand is likely clear on the numbers. They are one of the reasons you may have committed to DEI in your programs and campaigns in the first place. Yet this question asks you to push the data even further, teasing out what it says about your audience’s lives, needs, history, and culture. What’s more, it asks you to get clear on what you are asking for from your partners. Consider getting granular about what you mean by reaching a multicultural audience, a total market, or even a general market. Use your data to clarify whether you are looking for campaigns or programs geared toward a particular community or ones that are geared toward a total market but rooted in inclusivity. Be equally specific about the resources and budgets you want to dedicate to connecting with your segments. This question asks you for precision, which reminds you to center the importance of nuance.
“How are we interpreting and sharing these insights with our team and partners for a more effective DEI strategy?”

Insights are only valuable if shared widely and often. They should be shared with everyone involved in the campaign, from creatives to media buyers to customer service. Whether through internal presentations, workshops, strategic briefs, or precise RFPs, your insights should inform current campaigns. Often, brands’ marketing and comms departments may be clear internally in their needs but less so in communicating them. For instance, sharing your audience breakdown with potential partners is not enough; it’s helpful to also explain what that means for resource allocation. Do you want to use traditional formulas that assign resources to populations proportionate to their size, or are you looking to the future, taking into account how your target markets are changing and allocating resources accordingly? Sharing your insights and how you expect them to be interpreted helps all parties involved ensure your campaigns and long-term DEI strategy come from a textured and truly authentic place. More importantly, widely sharing these insights ensures that the DEI strategy is in use across the entire business at all times, resulting in a more inclusive and potentially profitable space for everyone.
“Should we include characters from diverse communities and backgrounds in our campaign?”

Representation matters: When asked what characteristic was most important when being marketed to, race, ethnicity, or cultural background was the top answer from consumers. When deciding whether to include characters from diverse communities in your campaigns, keep in mind that 63% of consumers said they are tired of campaigns that reinforce stereotypes through casting or other choices. Whether you are an agency or media company hiring talent on behalf of a client or a brand selecting spokespeople or stories in-house, look beyond just race or gender and consider other factors like age, disability, socioeconomic status, and intersecting identities. Be equally mindful, honest, and transparent about who may not see themselves represented as you make those decisions. This level of insight will help you better plan your campaigns and help you find ways to honor and reach those audiences in the future.

AND THEN ASK

“What shared human truth are we trying to express or explore through a DEI lens?”

This question invites you to deepen your connection with your audience by aligning your diversity and inclusivity efforts with universally resonant themes. The point here is not to water down or flatten diverse stories but to ground the stories you tell in thoughtful and nuanced experiences, so that every consumer will see themselves reflected in some aspect of them. The universal blossoms from specificity. This question will also get you and your teams thinking about the deeper story behind your characters — which helps avoid leaning on tired tropes.
“Are we going beyond tokenistic representations and stereotypes in our campaigns?”

Simply including diverse faces in your marketing without substantive inclusion is not enough — 65% of consumers said it feels performative when brands’ DEI efforts don’t go beyond casting diverse actors. A genuine connection is best realized through cultural relevance. Your talent, your products, and your stories must connect with your target audience’s complex identities and cultural touchstones.

“What steps should we take to amplify DEI at all levels of this campaign?”

If you and your team cannot speak to the specific experiences of the audiences you are trying to connect with, your efforts will likely come across as inauthentic. Stories that get at the core of an identity are best told by those with lived experience of that identity or by those who have done the work to understand the nuance, context, and history behind the cultures you are looking to lean into. Are you including outlets, writers, directors, creatives, producers, and more that represent the communities you are trying to reach? Are your programs connecting with culturally relevant organizations, community leaders, and individuals? Genuine DEI efforts transcend casting choices.
YES, ASK

“Are we allowing our selected channels and partners the freedom to share their expertise on how they relate to consumers?”

While it’s important to be as precise as possible in your criteria, RFP creation, and response process at the beginning of a campaign, too much rigidity can stifle creativity. Your partners are often in the best position to capture cultural nuances that can make or break how a campaign is received. Allow flexibility in how you think a campaign should look and feel. This question will also ensure that you are selecting partners you fully trust to execute your vision and bring thoughtful and exciting ideas that come from an authentic place.
Our research confirms that, although 63% of consumers across the board support DEI efforts in marketing, 40% of those who believe in the DEI mission do not support the tactics used by the industry. And 65% of all consumers said brands use DEI to “virtue signal” without making meaningful contributions to the cause. Though consumers desire support that feels authentic, the fear of getting it wrong often leads to overly cautious or generic campaigns. This question asks you and all involved in your marketing efforts to lead by example, taking steps (no matter how small) toward crafting textured and bold campaigns that show the trust you have in your consumers to “get it.” This reframe is not a call to forgo planning for missteps but to approach each stage with boldness and trust in your audience.

AND THEN ASK

“How can we shift from fear-based campaigns to bold campaigns that approach the consumer with trust?”
YES, ASK

“Are we demonstrating our long-term commitment to DEI?”

If your answer is no, you risk alienating current and potential consumers and compromising your brand’s reputation. The best way to alleviate skepticism and build trust is to ensure that your ad and marketing programs are in conversation with all aspects of your brand engaging in DEI efforts. Consumers will quickly notice and scrutinize a disconnect between external messaging and internal practices. Engaging with and communicating your brand’s efforts toward inclusion is often essential to building and fostering trust.

AND THEN ASK

“How can we partner with our consumers to build trust around our DEI marketing?”

The days of speaking at your consumer have long been over. Integrating DEI into your marketing is not about tricking your audiences into thinking about your brand. The perception of inclusion is simply not enough in this era. Asking this question will help you understand how to better speak and collaborate with your audiences to build a new, inclusive future together.
Given consumers’ complex and sometimes polarized sentiments around DEI efforts, DEI in marketing, and the tactics used, it’s not a question of if backlash will happen but when and how. Preparing for backlash is crucial for mitigating its impact and preserving brand integrity. Making sure your campaigns are deeply authentic and resonant is a first step to reduce backlash; importantly, a majority of consumers said they were willing to overlook a brand’s botched effort to take a stand on a social issue if the intentions were good. Next, get clear about the elements of your campaign that may make segments of your audience feel threatened or alienated. Then ensure your plan clearly outlines how your commitment to DEI aligns with the brand’s overall mission. Getting to a solid yes in this question will help you understand the risks inherent in your campaign so you can actively mitigate them and prepare yourself and your brand to stand firm on your DEI commitment.
AND THEN ASK

“If/when backlash happens, how can we allow for a pause before responding?”

While time is of the essence in crisis management, so is a well-thought-out response. A pause will give you and your team space to respond, not react, turning potential campaign pitfalls into opportunities for a deeper connection with your consumer. Pausing may look like first letting your consumers know you are aware and acknowledge the situation before involving a cultural consultancy or conducting a sensitivity review. Yes, taking a step back here, or at any point in your DEI marketing efforts, may feel uncomfortable, but that is also how you will find your solutions. Ultimately, a pause gives your brand space to craft a thoughtful response that clearly identifies the damage and those affected. It allows your brand an opportunity to respond from a place grounded in your brand mission and values and, more importantly, in honesty — a currency that will go a long way toward reestablishing trust with your consumer.
Brands and marketers have been asking the question of how to navigate performative vs. authentic DEI efforts for quite some time now. Consumers clearly value authenticity: 65% of those surveyed said the mark of successful social commentary by a brand is the brand using its platforms to serve the cause rather than itself. Still, brands often get caught up in *what can we do?* without considering *who are we doing it for?* This question invites you to confront the sincerity of your DEI efforts. Are you merely ticking boxes, or are you genuinely committed to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion? This question mirrors how deep your DEI commitments go and can help predict how your campaigns will land with savvy consumers.

Now is the time to start looking to the future and asking different questions that will yield better action steps. This final question shifts the conversation from a reactive and fear-based approach to DEI in marketing to one that is proactive and bold. It urges brands to embrace uncertainty and invites you to throw out the old marketing playbooks you’ve been relying on. The reality is that there’s no one “right” way to do DEI in marketing. There are well-researched, thoughtful ways that reflect the truths of both your brand and your target consumers. Acknowledging the messy, complex reality of advancing and upholding DEI, and recognizing that challenges and missteps may happen, begins to move the conversation in a new direction: toward meaningful, courageous action that consumers can resonate with.