Best Practices Guide to Inclusive Marketing
Throughout the past decade, much has been written about the need for and practice of inclusive marketing, previously called “multicultural” or “ethnic” marketing. In this guide, we define “inclusive marketing” as marketing that addresses individuals from all backgrounds and demographic groups; breaks down traditional assumptions about consumers; and tells new, more accurate brand stories by increasing representation of diverse people. Effective, authentic, inclusive marketing means looking beyond conventional narratives about diverse groups and seeking to highlight the experiences and perspectives we all share.

By our definition, the central purposes of inclusive marketing are to reflect the accurate diversity of any given community, elevate the stories of people who have been typically underrepresented, and confront cultural biases that have been created by homogenous social narratives.
Whereas the terms “multicultural marketing” and “ethnic marketing” imply a focus on targeted racial or ethnic groups, inclusive marketing means recognizing that every person participates in a complex and unique mix of overlapping identity groups — an idea often referred to as **intersectionality**. For instance, a White, millennial, cisgender, and heterosexual man may also be neurodiverse, have an invisible illness that qualifies as disability, and be part of a family that comes from many countries, cultures, and religions. He, then, would have different perspectives and experiences from a White, millennial, cisgender, and heterosexual man who does not have a disability and whose family shares a single ancestral origin. The point is that no two people are exactly alike or share the exact same lens through which they view our world.

As our families, friends, workplaces, and communities have grown increasingly diverse, the modern market has called on brands to reflect these demographic shifts. Today’s consumer craves authenticity and truthful, accurate representation. In that sense, inclusive marketing must not only represent and speak to diverse markets — many of which have been marginalized, underserved, and underrepresented — but also acknowledge intersectionality and that the world is growing more and more diverse.

However, it is also important to note that inclusive marketing is not important solely because it increases representation. It isn’t just “the right thing to do.” Inclusive marketing is a business imperative. Organizations that know how to authentically listen and respond to diverse consumer groups can grow and thrive in the modern marketplace. Those who don’t will fall by the wayside. This guide will show you how to get started with best practices you can follow and specific resources for additional learning.
THE ROI OF INCLUSIVE MARKETING

Inclusive marketing is a highly effective business approach that will help your organization make a positive social impact, attract new markets, retain existing consumers, and increase overall revenue and profit. Here’s what the data shows.

MAKE A POSITIVE SOCIAL IMPACT

Marketing’s goals do not always need to be profit-driven. In fact, if you’re considering an inclusive marketing approach solely because it’s good for revenue, then pause here and go back to the drawing board. Consider the mission, vision, and values of your organization — and the team of people who comprise it — then do the work to align your brand objectives with a more authentic marketing strategy.

However, if your company is like most, then chances are good that you’re reading this guide and learning more about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as part of a bigger shift away from solely profit-driven goals and toward a triple bottom line impact that generates positive social and environmental change as well. Although revenue and brand perception are important, generating positive conversation, increasing representation, and improving social awareness are equally powerful pieces of your brand’s success.

The key to moving forward with authentic purpose while avoiding false or performative inclusion is to connect your inclusive marketing strategy with internal DEI initiatives. One great example of how to do this well is P&G’s “Widen the Screen” video series. These three one-minute episodes aim to expand mainstream narratives about Black experiences in America, by “elevating a spectrum of Black voices to share all the moments that make up the Black experience [including] Black obstacles, joy, ambition, heartbreak, and love.” And, it is important to note, this marketing focus is supported by multiple behind-the-screen initiatives that amplify Black actors, directors, filmmakers, writers, producers, and more.

The key takeaway is that inclusive marketing should always include its target demographic in the creative process, starting early and continuing throughout. “Widen the Screen” serves as a great example because P&G is not only supporting Black creatives but also keeping Black creatives actively involved in the making of the series.
ATTRACT NEW MARKETS

Research from PR Newswire shows that “64% of consumers consider making an immediate purchase after seeing diverse advertisements” and 34% consider a brand’s commitment to diversity when they’re making a purchasing decision.

Microsoft’s recent industry briefing “The Psychology of Inclusion and the Effects in Advertising” showed that 64% of people say they’re more trusting of brands that represent diversity, and about the same number (63%) say brands that represent diversity in ads are simply more authentic.

INCREASE BRAND LOYALTY

57% of consumers say they are more loyal to brands that commit to addressing social inequities in their actions (Deloitte), and according to research from Adobe, 34% of consumers have boycotted a brand because it did not represent their identity in its advertising, yet “up to 120 million people in the U.S. do not see themselves portrayed in ads” (Adobe). Imagine how much a company stands to lose by not fostering brand loyalty through DEI.

IMPROVE BOTTOM-LINE RESULTS

When organizations meet consumer expectations as inclusive, authentic, forward-thinking marketers, they respond emphatically. Additional reports from The Heat Test and Deloitte show that “brands with the most representative ads saw an average stock gain of 44%” and, impressively, brands with the highest diversity scores showed an 83% higher consumer preference.

The common factor within these statistics — inclusion as a business imperative — shows just how relevant and relatable marketing content needs to be for target consumers to take positive action. In short, audiences resonate with content and messages that present an authentic reflection of their lived experiences: a marketing approach sometimes called the “mirror strategy.”
FOUNDATIONAL BEST PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE MARKETING

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Inclusive language creates a firm foundation for respectful communication and interaction with diverse teammates, consumers, clients, and more. Knowing the best terms and phrases not only helps you attract and retain customers but also feel confident interacting with clients and partners as well. Start by reading The Diversity Movement’s comprehensive white paper, “Say This, Not That: Activating Workplace Diversity Through Inclusive Language Practice,” which includes an inclusive language thesaurus to help you shift your own ingrained (and likely unconscious) habits and make more respectful word choices.

DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION IN IMAGERY

When choosing imagery, remember that true diversity means so much more than the traditional three dimensions of race, gender, and sexual orientation. In other words, look beyond skin tone and clothing (which is often used to represent different cultures and genders) to include people of many ages, abilities, religions, languages, national origins, occupations, family structures, and more.

Keep intersectionality top of mind. Each person contains an iceberg of identities that extends far beneath what we can see on the surface. But rudimentary inclusive marketing efforts often don’t go far enough in representing diverse groups. For instance, the LGBTQ+ community is most typically represented as young, thin, White, exuberant, and male; people from the baby boomer generation (born 1946-64) are almost always portrayed as married with children and grandchildren; and at 19% of the U.S. population, the Hispanic and Latine community is drastically underrepresented across the board. When researching or establishing a target market group, establish the primary elements of segmentation — race, gender, age, culture, etc. — then go beyond those dimensions of diversity to explore intersectional segmentation as well.
When choosing any imagery, follow these three guidelines:

1. Remember that no community is a monolith, and no one person can represent all the diversity, views, and experiences that exist within a single demographic group. To provide an authentic representation of any individual from a cultural group, make sure you do your research, and ask a diverse team to review all images throughout the process of selection and production. It helps to remind yourself, time and again but especially in the midst of market research, that each consumer is, first and foremost, a unique individual.

2. Strive for an uplifting, positive, and visually appealing representation of underrepresented groups by avoiding any stereotypical elements and understanding how to mitigate your own unconscious biases. For example, young people aren’t always tech-savvy and not all Muslim women wear hijabs. Data-driven research can help you break your reliance on stereotypes. For instance, did you know that “nearly a quarter of all video games are purchased by consumers aged 40 and older” or that people over age 65 are now the fastest-growing demographic group in the country?

3. Avoid any form of cultural appropriation by including diverse reviewers and creatives throughout the creative process. If you are representing specific demographic groups that are not already part of your internal team, then you’ll need to conduct focus groups or tap into external partnerships and ask people who identify as part of that group to review your marketing assets and point out any possible appropriation or misrepresentation.

RESOURCES AND RECOMMENDED APPROACHES FOR MARKET RESEARCH

1. Increase the diversity of your team by partnering with diverse content creators

If your current team is mostly homogeneous, tap into diverse perspectives and experiences by contracting with freelance and external photographers, videographers, writers, editors, or content reviewers. Let’s make one thing clear: The knee-jerk response that “we can’t find diverse talent” is simply untrue, especially in marketing and content creation. Talented and qualified creatives are out there. To find them, start with an internet search for diverse creatives or by reaching out to your local HBCU, LGBTQ+ chamber of commerce, or community college which can help connect you with students and graduates.
Freelancing websites like Upwork and Fiverr also let you easily view the public profile of any candidate to assess whether their background, skill set, and lived experience might fit your needs.

Connect with and invest in minority-owned businesses

Consider this a first step toward greater supplier diversity. Hiring multiple minority-owned businesses to assist you in your strategy and campaigns not only helps you tap into diverse perspectives but also infuses critical financial resources into communities that have been historically underserved and underutilized for their professional strengths.

The five certifying bodies below are the most accredited, and each one offers a local directory of certified businesses you can connect with. If you qualify based on your ownership structure, certification as a diverse supplier is also a great way to expand your opportunities and connect with similar organizations.

- Find Minority-Owned Businesses (MBE) through the National Minority Supplier Development Council.
- Search Women-Owned Businesses (WBE) through WBENC.
- Connect with Disability-Owned Businesses (DOBE) through Disability: IN.
- Find local LGBT-Owned Business Enterprises (LGBTBE) through The National LGBT Chamber of Commerce.
- View 36,000+ Veteran-Owned Businesses (VOB) and Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Businesses online.

Additional resources are available online, including lists of marketing firms owned by LGBTQ+ professionals, women-owned creative agencies, veteran-owned creative marketing agencies, agencies owned by people of color, and professional groups for creative professionals with disabilities and/or forms of neurodiversity.

Make sure to include individuals from your target demographic in your creative process.

Conduct community-oriented focus groups and activities to test campaigns prior to publication and to increase your cultural competency and knowledge of these target groups.
INCLUSIVE MARKETING
FAILURES & MISSTEPS

EXHIBIT A: PEPSI COMMERCIAL FEATURING KENDALL JENNER

This 2017 campaign included imagery and videos from the Black Lives Matter movement, which Pepsi assumed would “project a global message of unity, peace and understanding.” Instead, consumers felt that it commercialized the movement and trivialized the reality of police brutality and racial justice. As the New York Times reports, “in the ad’s climactic scene, a police officer accepts a can of Pepsi from Kendall Jenner, a White woman, setting off raucous approval from the protesters and an appreciative grin from the officer.” This major marketing fail was big news across the country, eventually forcing Pepsi to pull the ad and issue a public apology. Here are some key takeaways for avoiding the same performative inclusion:

1. Avoid romanticizing and commercializing social issues by speaking to diverse people who have authentic lived experiences they’re willing to share.

2. Don’t include diverse people solely for the sake of diverse imagery. (This is often called tokenism.) In the Pepsi commercial, for instance, we see a close-up portrait of individuals from multiple different cultural backgrounds smiling and cheering (e.g. a girl wearing a hijab). This surface-level representation can be avoided by asking yourself these four questions: Why am I choosing to include this person? Is their individual story being told? How is their culture represented here? And, am I speaking authentically to the right target audience?
EXHIBIT B: DOLCE & GABBANA’S CAMPAIGN TARGETING ASIAN WOMEN

Produced specifically for Mandarin-speaking audiences with the intention of attracting fashion-oriented Chinese women as they expanded into the Chinese market, this Dolce & Gabbana marketing campaign shows an Asian woman clumsily attempting to eat a number of classically Italian foods, like pizza and a cannoli, with chopsticks. As CNN describes the videos, “set to a soundtrack of stereotypical Chinese music, the videos featured a patronizing Mandarin voiceover instructing her how to eat the Italian dishes.” The ad explicitly mocked Chinese people and disrespected their culture and norms.

The backlash was swift and passionate, with Dolce & Gabbana losing 98% percent of their sales revenue in China in less than a year. Nearly four years later, the brand is still struggling to win back Chinese shoppers who are the world’s biggest consumers of luxury fashion brands. As inclusive marketers, what can we take away from Dolce & Gabbana’s marketing fail?
WHO’S DOING IT WELL?

EXHIBIT C: SAY’S "IN THE SPOTLIGHT" CAMPAIGN

In order to amplify the experience and narratives of people who stutter, the Stuttering Association for the Young (SAY) partnered with the advertising agency BBDO to produce a heartwarming campaign called “In the Spotlight,” which features individuals of different ages, backgrounds, and cultural identities moving through everyday situations. What makes this campaign particularly powerful is that it taps into real, lived experience. In fact, BBDO copywriter Aaron Marshall drew on his own personal story of growing up with a stutter while crafting the content and that authenticity shines through in every scene.

EXHIBIT D: ETSY'S "GIFT LIKE YOU MEAN IT" SERIES

An incredible example of inclusive marketing, Etsy’s “Gift Like You Mean It” series, created in partnership with 72andSunny connects the company’s strength in personalization with stories about feeling alone or excluded and how customized gifts can foster a sense of belonging. In “Shiori,” a child finds joy in seeing her often-mispronounced and misunderstood name printed boldly on monogrammed gifts, and in “New Guy,” we see a nervous young man attending his partner’s family holiday party, unsure if he will be accepted and included, until he opens a customized ornament. The third video in the series, “Nana,” shows a grandmother separated from her grandchild — presumably by COVID restrictions — and how one-of-a-kind, handmade gifts help them feel reconnected.

The takeaway? By telling authentic human stories centered around inclusion and emotion, we draw people’s attention to the universal nature of these experiences, not just the skin color of the people involved. What’s central to this Etsy campaign is not Shiori’s Asian heritage, that the couple in “New Guy” is gay or Black, or that Nana and her husband are baby boomers. Rather, it’s that we witness these people feeling isolated, frustrated, anxious, and alone. We empathize, and we see ourselves in them, regardless of our own demographic background or individual identity groups. And really, that’s what inclusive marketing is about — making the consumer feel seen.
CONCLUSION

As an increasing number of brands begin to engage in inclusive marketing across all platforms, it is critical that the marketers behind those brands understand not only the purpose of inclusive marketing but the core practices that will ensure your campaigns are effective and authentic. As future-ready marketing professionals know, truthfully representing any community requires care, intention, and great research.

The takeaway is this. Inclusive marketing can only be successful if inclusion is integrated into the creative process as a means to an inclusive end-result. Put simply, you need diverse people on your team — whether as internal employees, external consultants, freelance contractors, or focus group participants — to mitigate your biases and give you a real look at multicultural experiences and communities. Working with diverse content partners, minority-owned businesses, and consulting firms that are led by diverse cultural groups will help you avoid inclusive marketing mistakes.
ABOUT THE DIVERSITY MOVEMENT

The Diversity Movement is a results-oriented, data-driven strategic partner for organization-wide culture change through diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our team of experts provides a customized mix of online learning, tools, events, and consulting services that help our partners create future-focused, employee-centered cultures and better business outcomes. For more information, visit thediversymovement.com.

ABOUT AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

As the largest community-based marketing association in the world, the AMA is trusted by marketing professionals to help them find the tools and training they need to advance their careers. Our community of local chapters spans more than 70 cities and 300 college campuses throughout North America. We’re home to award-winning content, PCM® professional certification, four premier academic journals, and industry-leading live and virtual training events. For more information, visit ama.org.