Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in PR: What’s Changed and What’s Next

Executive Summary
Table of Contents

Introduction 1
What changed after George Floyd 2
Beyond awareness: improving comfort and communication 4
Practical steps forward 5
Pitfalls to avoid 7
Conclusion 8
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Introduction

The conversation around diversity, equity and inclusion in public relations has been happening for decades. Despite this, the numbers are still dire. Only 21% of PR professionals are racially or ethnically diverse, the Diversity Action Alliance found in 2021. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found a similar number, noting 83.6% of PR professionals in 2019 were white. That's compared to a total population that was 76.5% white, the bureau noted in the same year.

Advocates for racial and ethnic parity in PR have noted several problems that keep these numbers uneven. After the summer of 2020—with the tragic murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers, the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, the Stop AAPI Hate movement and more—diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) became an essential conversation for organizations that want to address target audiences where they really are in 2021.

The creation of the Diversity Action Alliance in 2019 marked the increasing awareness of the issue in the communications industry. Business entities such as Nasdaq now craft disclosure requirements in which businesses need to declare the racial and gender makeup of their workforce. Investors "are treating a lack of disclosure on gender and ethnic diversity as risk," wrote Vinicius Oliveira, senior consultant at Clermont Partners, in a blog post.

However, it’s time to go beyond awareness. Some of the common wisdom for how to increase the diversity of your workforce isn’t really working.

Toward that effort, the Public Relations Society of America put several DE&I goals in place for 2020-2022, including to increase diverse representation among leadership throughout all levels of PRSA by 25% by 2023.

Our report will help you craft a roadmap for change in your organization and community, with insight into practical ways you can make change, what methods are working and which fall short.
What changed after George Floyd

Summer of 2020 saw some important changes, but DE&I experts are mixed on whether there was a lasting effect.

"In addition to the Black Lives Matter movement in the midst of COVID-19, we also saw the Stop AAPI Hate movement, and since then, when it comes to race and ethnicity, we’ve seen an increased focus on making sure all stakeholders feel heard and feel seen," says Carmella Glover, president of Diversity Action Alliance. "I think it’s been growing since 2019 but the shift in 2020 was really palpable."

The Stop AAPI Hate movement came as a direct response to the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans as some agitators blamed China for the COVID-19 crisis.

"As a Chinese American, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic only added fuel to the fire on xenophobia and bias against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities," says Pattie Yu, principal of The Yu Crew. "Mobilization, documentation of incidences so the community cannot be minimized any longer, empowerment, education [and] unity are among the good that has come out of bad."

Some organizations provided resources inside the office to help employees process tragedy. Jeff Wilson, vice president, workplace culture and chief of staff at Padilla, with an office located not far from the site of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, explained his organization’s response: “The day after the Chauvin verdict happened, we had several—we called them reflection sessions, not necessarily with an agenda but a chance to come together over conversations, dialogue, reflection.”

He added, "All the things you can do to not only recruit but retain your employees. It’s a part of an overall effort."

Others found not much has changed in the past few years.

“The day after the Chauvin verdict happened, we had several—we called them reflection sessions, not necessarily with an agenda but a chance to come together over conversations, dialogue, reflection.”
"The George Floyd situation is not a new situation," says Vanessa Abron, founder of Agency Abron. "The only thing that’s different is it happened at a time when everybody isn’t ‘go go go.’ If you ask anyone in the Black community, this has happened for years.

"This was just the first time people really paid attention to it because we are at home...We are sitting with our thoughts and internally reflecting."

For Abron, the DE&I initiative has "softened" in 2021 compared to 2020.

"Part of the problem is that PR agencies have been doing the PR stuff," Abron says, "creating the video vignettes saying, ‘We care.’ How far did it go beyond that? I don’t know."

The chance to see whether DE&I will mark only a "temporary change" will be determined if and when people go back to working in the office, she says.
Beyond awareness: improving comfort and communication

How can PR agencies be sure they’re going beyond awareness and creating a truly welcoming and uplifting environment?

At FleishmanHillard, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer (CDIO) Adrianne Smith says it’s not about having just a diversity officer, but a diversity office. That’s why her agency created a team.

FleishmanHillard’s CDIO team splits the bulk of its time between client work and shaping and building the culture of the agency, Smith explains. Projects include talent development, learning development, anything that you can think of that would round out the office of the CDIO, “not only creating a space but putting an investment behind it.”

Smith says that spreading out the responsibility for DE&I to more than one person is crucial. “A lot of organizations will hire an army of one. What will that do?”

The agency’s CDIO office handles the tracking and data portion of the job, as well as “equal parts listening to retention concerns and looking at our hiring process in terms of diverse candidates,” adds J.J. Carter, global chief operating officer and U.S. president for FleishmanHillard.

Mike Paul, crisis consultant and DE&I advisor, notes that improving diversity sometimes involves taking a chance on people. “Someone needs to give you the opportunity. There will be no change until you take the risk of opportunity. Believe in the person before they even believe fully in themselves. You mentor them; you sponsor them.”

Tracy Anderson, executive director of integrated communication at Ten35, recommended organizations provide interest groups, lunch and learns, and happy hours for diverse employees. Similarly, Ten35 offers town hall meetings once a month, including one for Hispanic Heritage month.

It’s about “taking the time to make folks feel comfortable and welcome—because even if you bring them on, they won’t stay if they don’t feel welcome,” Anderson says. She emphasizes that no one wants to feel like their only value is to be the Black or brown face in the room.
Practical steps forward

Once you have assurance that a budget is in place, and are empowered to carry it out, what is the best way to approach improving DE&I? Paul offered five practical steps:

1. **Start with a person**—either within or outside your company—who you can support on a management track.

2. **Establish a DE&I committee** that is itself diverse and matches the demographics of where you are headquartered, operate and serve.

3. **Release authentically and honestly current ethnic diversity numbers** in every category, not combining them or giving percentages, but detailing demographics at every single level and including it in your annual report.

4. **Hire the best diversity executive search firm** who has a track record of hiring senior executives of color. They might not necessarily specialize in PR.

5. **Be transparent and accountable** in regard to progress, creating a report on either a quarterly basis or twice a year.

Take DE&I seriously and treat it like you would any other job.

A DE&I effort should have the same strong and verifiable objectives that PR programs have, Paul says.

As an example, PR agency Highwire PR signed on to the Diversity Action Alliance’s mile posts and quantifiable goals, which include 35% diversity across the agency by the end of 2022—and have exceeded it. Ayanna Anderson, head of diversity, inclusion and belonging (DIBs) at Highwire PR, attributed the success in part to a strong and specific diverse hiring statement. She also recommended agencies look outside of their industry for diverse executives who have the right aspirations and can learn the industry. “People should be really open to meeting folks where they are at all aspects,” Anderson says. She highlights the importance of recognizing how workers from disadvantaged backgrounds might have overcome obstacles to enter the profession—and what that journey says about their character.
It’s all part of boosting psychological safety, says Anderson—an element that should be added to workplace satisfaction surveys. Making someone feel safe can include opportunities to share their culture, or can be as simple as not feeling judged for the lunch you bring to the office.

Anderson also recommends unconscious bias training. Employees might not display conscious racism, but could perpetuate stereotypes or microaggressions.

Some flexibility in the workday also goes a long way. Allow for alternate hours for people who might not be able to be plugged in and billable during normal business hours, says Carter.

That might include more mobile-first employees, and “building policies that support working moms and families, that means coming up with ways of building culture that doesn’t require a corporate HQ,” says Lauren Tucker, founder and CEO of Do What Matters consultancy, which provides education on how communications companies can create more inclusive workplace cultures.

While it’s also good practice in general, offering paid internships particularly helps people from marginalized communities. “Nobody’s going to get rich being an intern, but at least compensate them so they have their living expenses,” says PRSA CEO Linda Thomas Brooks.
Pitfalls to avoid

The louder conversations of the last two years have revealed what efforts don’t actually work, too.

“We’re good at pretty words in PR,” says Abron. “And that may be part of the problem why this is more difficult in the PR space. We need to go beyond painting the picture.”

“Hiring chief diversity officers isn’t necessarily helpful,” says Tucker. “I think what smart leaders are doing is hiring people to take care of the talent and focus on the talent.”

Human Resources departments need to focus less on “being the PR arm of the CEO and C-suite” and more on making work a better experience for people, she says.

Emily Borders, principal at Highwire, says, “The thing that didn’t work before was trying to do everything at once. It’s so tempting, and you do need to think about this in a holistic way ... but we can’t prioritize diversifying our vendors at the same level as diversifying our recruiting. There aren’t enough hours in the day.”

“Nobody needs one more statement,” adds Brooks.

Goals that aren’t immediately actionable are a mistake. Don’t set goals for 10 years from now, advises Glover. Technology and people will change in that time. Instead, focus on what can be done today.

That might mean “changing how the interview process works so that different kinds of people have an opportunity to come into the business,” says Brooks.

“The conversations that are working are two-way, honest, sometimes frank,” says Yu. “The ones that aren’t are those where you are walking on eggshells and not speaking the truth; or you are speaking, but not listening to understand:”
Conclusion

In addition to being good for humans, DE&I is good for business. A 2020 McKinsey report found: “The most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform less diverse peers on profitability.” (Its study took both racial and gender diversity into account.)

The business case for DE&I is clear, argues Brooks: “If you don’t want to do this because it’s a good human thing to do, it’s really, really good for business—and there are a lot of statistics that prove that now: customer satisfaction, diverse boards have better business. It’s not just my feelings versus your feelings. It’s that you’re actually going to prevent us moving forward on a strong business footing.”

That translates to changes in the way some agencies work together, too.

"We have never seen this many organizations in the PR and communications industry who are competitors ... come together to talk about how we can do diversity better together for the greater good," says Glover. "At the Diversity Action Alliance, we’re seeing organizations—who in every other arena are competitors—collaborate."

Smith pushes back against the idea that the industry should be talking about “the future” of DE&I. “The future gives people a scapegoat,” she says. "You’re putting it off. Giving the opportunity to say, ‘We’ll get to that next week or tomorrow.’"

Her view: "Tomorrow may never come. But if you’re forward-focused, you’re going to do that work today."

“You have to be action-oriented, accountable and authentic," Yu adds. "You have to walk the talk. You have to be intentional on making sure that DE&I are part of the fabric of your culture, your company, your behavior—from top down, bottom up."
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