



POINT OF VIEW

# Beyond casting: Authentic cultural representation in healthcare advertising



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Marketers are finally realizing the value of reaching more diverse audiences. This comes as the result not only of a newly born desire for inclusiveness, but also because while illness touches the entirety of society, some illnesses are disproportionately experienced by people of color.

However, with few exceptions, many of the efforts in our industry to create inclusion in advertising have stopped at the casting door. But as Ad Age noted in a piece in 2020, casting alone won't cut it, because to truly reach a multicultural audience, advertising needs to ensure that consumers are seen, understood, and represented authentically and fully as people.

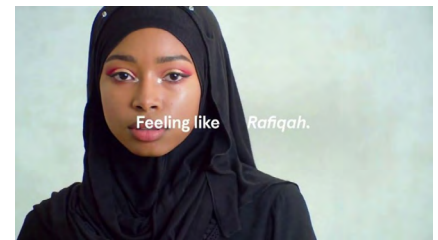
The desire to go beyond casting may finally be changing as a result of the evolving demographics in the U.S., and the recent surge in awareness of systemic racism and disparities in the delivery of healthcare—the most prominent example being the inescapable fact that people of color are suffering disproportionately from COVID-19. As we seek to build on this awareness to make healthcare advertising more inclusive, we must understand and utilize the building blocks necessary to achieve our goals.

## Changing demographics make authentic cultural representation in advertising critical to success

Millennials are the most diverse generation in U.S. history, and they want to see advertising that reflects them. Brands that go beyond simply casting for diversity will reap significant rewards with this audience. In a study fielded by Google, IPSOS, and Nielsen, not only did three-quarters of Black millennials say they want to see brands better represent Black people in advertising, but 70% said they were more likely to buy from a brand that takes a stance on race-related issues, and three-quarters said they were more likely to positively view brands that realistically reflect Black culture<sup>1</sup>. Another study in Ad Age from 2019 found that cultural relevance makes up 25% of the consumer's purchase decision<sup>2</sup>.

## Historic distrust in the healthcare system is a legitimate barrier to reaching certain audiences

According to a recent poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation, only 60% of Black Americans trust doctors to do what's right for them most the time, versus 80% for White Americans<sup>3</sup>. This lack of trust is especially acute for Black women with children—37% of whom report being treated unfairly. Black patients experience higher rates of being disbelieved, and of being denied tests, treatments, and pain medication. And the feeling of being mistreated is borne out by the reality of undeniably worse health outcomes for people of color. To quote just one statistic, Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely to die in childbirth than White women<sup>4</sup>.



Glossier, "Feeling like glossier" campaign



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Ben & Jerry's new flavor, Pecan Resist, supports four organizations that are working towards a more just and equitable future



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Distrust in the healthcare system also stems from historical abuses such as the infamous Tuskegee Study, which ran from 1932 to 1972. For those unfamiliar with this “experiment,” it was an unethical and medically unsound study conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service and the CDC to observe the “natural history” of untreated syphilis. Although the Black men who participated were told they were receiving free healthcare from the federal government, they were not. In fact, they were never informed of their diagnosis, and/or were told they were receiving medical treatments when in fact, these were disguised placebos or ineffective methods. The study lasted 40 years and resulted in unnecessary suffering and mortality for participants and their families.

Other equally horrific examples include the gynecological experiments conducted in the 19th century on enslaved Black women—without anesthesia—by Dr. Marion Simms, who is still known as the “father of gynecology”, and, throughout much of the 20th century, the practice of eugenics, which led to the forced sterilization of thousands of Black women in the U.S. And as Black Americans continue to experience systemic racism and disparities in healthcare, we need to work harder to speak to them authentically, and in language that can be trusted. At minimum, we must demonstrate we have done our homework, assembled the right team, and are speaking to the mindset and needs of the Black community as reflected by how authentically they are represented in our advertising.



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### TAKEAWAY:

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### How do we, as healthcare marketers, overcome this legitimate distrust?

Beyond casting, how do we create culturally relevant advertising? It means that marketers must:

- **Live the values of our customers** by giving back to the community in meaningful ways, having an inclusive workforce so that our agencies reflect the community, and supporting social-justice issues that benefit everyone
- **Have a strong POV in our ads**, because culture-focused advertising that goes beyond stereotypes position brands as relevant
- **Go where the most influential people in the community are already gathered:** Research shows that Black millennials engage more with media that represents Black voices. They watch substantially more YouTube videos on mobile devices than other millennials, and two-thirds say that YouTube is a platform that offers media channels that amplify Black voices
- **Go deep in targeting:** There are differences between Black and White consumers, and advertising should reflect this
- **Be “unapologetically Black” in creating relevance:** Putting the unique culture, mindset, and needs of the Black community front and center will speak to this audience and still generate broad appeal. A great example of being unapologetically Black yet broadly appealing is the 1988 Nike “Spike & Mike” ad<sup>5</sup>
- **Expand campaigns into multiple culturally relevant channels** with social, partnerships, etc., to create a multidimensional cultural experience
- **Speak openly to race-related issues:** Nike embraced Colin Kaepernick, regardless of market reaction, and this action ultimately accrued to their benefit
- **Whenever possible, leverage a diverse agency team:** This ensures that cultural nuance is brought to the work, which can help avoid the kind of unconscious bias and tone-deafness that surfaces in high-visibility marketing gaffes. The 2017 Pepsi ad<sup>6</sup> that was pulled because it appeared to trivialize the BLM movement is one example. This ad borrowed imagery from the BLM movement, and featured a climactic scene where Kendall Jenner hands a Pepsi to a police officer



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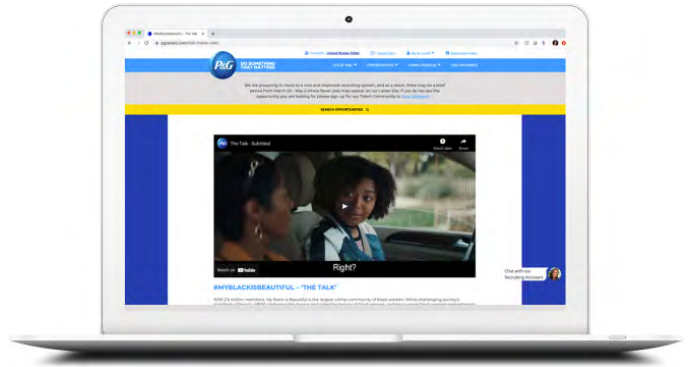
A great example of a campaign that hits nearly all of the criteria above is the Proctor & Gamble “Black is Beautiful” campaign, which launched in 2006 with a general desire to better understand the Black female audience for haircare products<sup>7</sup>. It organically morphed into a culturally relevant, unapologetically Black, astoundingly beautiful campaign that tackled race-related issues, won awards for the company, and built a strong customer/brand relationship as a result.

P&G accomplished this by taking seriously the results of a survey they conducted, which showed that 71% of Black women felt they were poorly portrayed in the media, despite the fact that they spent three times as much as White women on beauty products. P&G initially sought to address this shortcoming with a corporate campaign called “Black Is Beautiful” that deftly demonstrated deep empathy and an intimate knowledge of their audience. P&G took this insight, and was able to create an authentic, organic, multi-channel campaign that included marketing, social media, and #hairtruth campaign.

The campaign garnered 2.5 million Facebook followers during its first decade. The program was re-energized in 2017 with the video “The Talk,” developed by the Egami Consulting Group, an independent Black-women-owned multicultural agency.

While these examples come from packaged goods, the underlying principles of how to achieve true inclusion in advertising are foundational. The difference is that for our industry, with the health of the Black community on the line, the stakes are much higher, and we have to get it right.

For more information, email us at: [business@evokegroup.com](mailto:business@evokegroup.com)



*“The Talk” was developed by a Black-women-owned agency to re-energize P&G’s #hairtruth campaign*

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