

Do advertising brands still discriminate?

INSIGHT

15 MAY 2013 5 min read

As one of few black women in a senior advertising role, MediaCom UK CEO, Karen Blackett says we need more Alesha Dixon-types on magazine covers and on TV and explains why some brands could still wrongly believe that 'black' is not aspirational.

I have recently had a couple of weeks off work and - given my advertising role - I love nothing more than catching up on all the media that I don't always have time for. Time off is time to play around on websites, flick through magazines, listen to the radio and watch some of the latest TV offerings.

As part of my media catch-up, I read [an interview](#) with the stunningly beautiful, gorgeous and intelligent Alesha Dixon in a recent issue of Cosmopolitan. I was genuinely shocked at something she said: that she was once turned down from being a cover model because of her skin colour.

As one of few black women in a senior media role, I have a burning passion to ensure the industry embraces diversity of all types. Aside from the fact that it is clearly morally correct, I firmly believe it is essential to the continued success of advertising and media agencies.

How can we claim to understand all the different consumers out there, unless our staff reflect all aspects of their diversity and difference? The Black and Ethnic Minority Population in the UK stands at 12pc and according to the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising's Multicultural Britain report, the UK will be as diverse as London is now (with around 40pc of BEM) by 2051.

So how far have we really come since I joined the media industry in the early '90s? Are our peak-viewing TV programmes embracing diversity in the characters portrayed on screen, the people presenting programmes and reading the news? Are we seeing diversity in ads on screen and in our newspapers and magazines? Are there really brands that still believe in this day and age that using a model of BEM origin will alienate white consumers?

The nations' favourites soaps are meant to reflect life in the UK. We see black and ethnic minority characters on these soaps - Coronation Street - check, Emmerdale - check, EastEnders - check, even Doctors - check.

We have for a long time seen black and ethnic newsreaders on our TV screens - Trevor McDonald always reminded me of my dad as a kid growing

up in Reading in the '80s, then there was Moira Stewart and now the new class of Dharshini David or Gillian Joseph on Sky. Even current ITV dramas such as The Ice Cream Girls use a black female character in one of the central roles.

What about adverts?

The programming on our screens demonstrates diversity and reflects life in the UK, but what about the ads?

Thankfully, we have moved on considerably since the days of advertising as depicted in Mad Men. Black and ethnic minority families are portrayed in a number of fast-moving consumer goods and retailer adverts on our screens and in magazines, but there are still a number of sectors where there is a noticeable absence of BEM representation.

Luxury brands still seem to veer away from using BEM models in their ads, unless a darker skin colour helps enhance a product benefit - for example contrasting a brightly coloured handbag or piece of statement jewellery. Why?

Why does beauty and luxury advertising still seem to veer towards white models or at best light-skinned ethnic models?

The reason is unknown, but I suspect that the luxury sector carries a misconception that "black" is not aspirational. So, it's not seen as aspirational for a white person viewing that ad or even a black person viewing it - i.e. there's still a perception that white is somehow better than black. Of course,

this assumption is incorrect and dangerous - and as a black woman who works in advertising, I hope I can be part of the solution in educating these brands differently.



Take the make-up industry. We see Revlon advertising use a famous black model in the likes of Halle Berry, and Covergirl use Queen Latifah, both of which are shown here.

The USA embraces ethnic diversity in advertising. The ethnic population of the USA stands at 37pc - so, yes, there is a clear market and the buying power of this market is acknowledged by brands and the media in the US.

I have a deep interest in making sure that what we read, see and hear in the UK reflects the whole population. Let's have more Alesha Dixon-types on the covers of our magazines, on our TV screens and in ads please. There's no reason for brands to backlash against black.

First published here on www.telegraph.co.uk 14th May 2013.

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