

Building Better Dialogue with Diverse Publics

Five Lessons from PRSA Detroit's Ofield Dukes Diversity Summit

In the final weeks of 2011, the mayor of Troy – a large Detroit suburb – found herself facing public outcry over a “gay slur” on her Facebook page. Soon after this story broke, retail giant Lowes was slammed for pulling its advertising from a reality show following the lives of five Muslim families in Dearborn, Michigan – home to the nation’s largest Muslim community. That same week, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) mourned the passing of its first Diversity Task Force leader – the distinguished Ofield Dukes, APR, Fellow PRSA and a graduate of Detroit’s Wayne State University.

Ironically, as these events were unfolding, Detroit’s public relations community was planning its first ever Ofield Dukes Diversity Summit to kick-off to a year-long focus on diversity.

Sponsored by PRSA Detroit, General Motors and the Wayne State University Department of Communication, the Summit brought together 120 public relations professionals and students to redefine diversity beyond race and ethnicity and explore its meanings for the public relations profession. From generational diversity, to workplace inclusion and diversity issues in crisis communication, seasoned PR practitioners, journalists, corporate diversity officers and scholars offered valuable lessons for today’s communicators to build better dialogue with diverse publics.

Lesson 1: It’s a Gen Y and Boomer World. Embrace the different approaches that each generation uses to solve problems

For example, explained Jocelyn Giangrande, M.A., SPHR, CCDP, president and founder, SASHE, LLC, when a Gen Y-er doesn’t understand how to use a device, instead of consulting the instruction manual like his mother does, he goes straight to YouTube, where he can find an answer in mere seconds.

“It’s a Gen Y and Boomer World,” Giangrande said. Gen Yers (born in 1980-2000), 32 percent of the population, tend to consider their parents as “friends” and have significant influence on their parent’s purchases. Boomers (born in 1946-1964), make up about 30 percent of the population and have an estimated buying power of \$2.1 trillion.

Lesson 2: Don’t tell Millennials your product or company is cool; show them you’re cool.

Following this lesson paid off for Chevrolet, according to Cristi Vazquez, communications manager for the Michigan-based automaker. When Chevrolet launched its Sonic brand, it targeted an audience of “firsts” – young, college-educated adults under age 30 who were buying their first car, landed their first job or even having their first child. To this Millennial audience, Vazquez advised, a company must “show that you’re cool; don’t tell them you’re cool.”

Chevrolet’s careful audience research and inclusion of the PR team from day one led to a successful campaign featuring a thrill-seeking, bungee jumping Sonic; a musical obstacle

course, social game and mobile app; and a Super Bowl spot that had everyone singing, “We are Young.”

Lesson 3: Savvy employers engage different perspectives and use them wisely, and leverage diversity for strategic value.

“As a society, our historic focus on gender and race keeps us from fully appreciating diversity and inclusion,” said Rodney Martin, Diversity Partner, Warner Norcross & Judd – a Michigan law firm that takes an honest look at its hiring practices and highlights special accomplishments of minority leaders in an annual diversity and inclusion report.

“It’s pointless [for an organization] to recruit women and minorities if they aren’t going to feel included,” said Martin. Today’s employers must shift from a diversity mindset to one of inclusion – engaging different perspectives and using them wisely. An inclusion-focused employer empowers its minority employees, makes them feel that they are part of the team and gives them opportunities to succeed and advance.

Randy Walker, Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, Henry Ford Health System agreed, citing his health system’s success in creating mentoring programs, succession planning and leadership training for women and minorities. Today’s employers “need variety inside the organization to match the variety of issues outside the organization,” said Walker, who encourages the use of employee resource groups to tap into a company’s internal expertise and even drive sales and marketing results.

Lesson 4: Think of a crisis as a beginning – an opportunity for you to do things differently.

Following lunch was panel discussion on diversity issues in crisis communication, featuring seasoned journalists and public relations professionals and moderated by Alicia Nails, J.D., director, Journalism Institute for Media Diversity at Wayne State University.

Nails encouraged audience members to learn from recent diversity-related crises both nationally and at home in Detroit. For example, Bill Laitner, a long-time *Detroit Free Press* writer who covered the Troy mayor scandal extensively, recalled that when the news broke, the mayor did nothing. “The crisis communication should have started when the first call came in,” Laitner said. “We should’ve heard honesty and an apology.” The response from the Troy community was severe and profound, but when Michele Hodges, president of the Troy Chamber of Commerce, stood up in the audience to make a surprise announcement, she demonstrated how a crisis can be turned into an opportunity for positive change. Hodges explained that the Troy Chamber partnered with the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion to develop a community strategy to foster and encourage diversity in the city.

Walter Middlebrook, assistant managing editor, *The Detroit News* reminded the audience that “[Journalists] are not in the business of making everyone feel good. We’re here to report the facts.” When responding to crisis situations, cautions Middlebrook, “Flowery quotes that are

designed to divert the focus away from the issue won't work. They just make the reporter want to dig deeper.”

Georgella Muirhead, APR, Partner/President, Berg Muirhead and Associates reminded audience members that traditional media outreach is just one tactic in crisis communication. “We can use the same message but change how we deliver it to reach diverse audiences,” said Muirhead. John Bailey, Managing Director LEA and Founder JB&A – encouraged audience members to respond immediately to a crisis, gather the facts quickly and have a plan in place before the crisis so when it happens, “you can simply push Button A to put your plan into motion.”

When asked what one piece of advice they would give a new PR pro, Bailey said, “Learn Chinese!” Muirhead’s advice: “Keep learning.”

Lesson 5: Look at Diversity as an opportunity to learn, rather than as a challenge that must be overcome.

In his closing remarks, Matthew W. Seeger, Ph.D., Dean, College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts, Wayne State University, admitted that it’s not always easy to talk about diversity – a concept that is extremely complex to define.

“PR is about publics, and we must understand our publics,” Seeger said. “PR should be a two-way street. Help your clients to listen; not just communicate to publics.”

Seeger closed by praising Detroit’s PR community for taking on the issue of diversity and challenged audience members to continue to elevate Detroit into a positive, national spotlight.