



Why brands believe Black History Month is best celebrated year-round

February 13, 2015 by Chris Daniels , Be the first to comment

While many brands tip their caps to Black History Month each February, the ones that really connect with African-American consumers make it a year-round priority.

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McDonald's started an initiative called 365Black, which includes a dedicated website and Twitter feed.

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Yet communicators who spoke with *PRWeek* are divided on whether there's an opportunity for brands that are just starting to explore Black History Month.

Kim Hunter, president and CEO of Lagrant Communications, which helps clients target black and Latino consumers puts it simply: "You should stay away from Black History Month unless you have significant dollars to break through the clutter."

He explains that many companies want to be a part of Black History Month, believing it is the right thing to do, yet they fail to consider whether the timing of their initiatives will help them achieve brand objectives.

"If a client is looking to move the needle and build awareness around a product or service among African Americans, then I'll ask them, 'Why not do something in the month of August?' he says, warning against one-time campaigns. "That will get them more noticed than in February when there's so much out there already."

Case in point: Sony Pictures Entertainment sought Hunter's counsel after a media company proposed the studio buy about \$800,000 in advertising in black publications in February, he says. Hunter suspects the studio wanted to distance itself from the *racially insensitive* joke that recently fired studio co-chair Amy Pascal made about President Barack Obama in an email leaked by hackers last year.

"My recommendation to them was, 'this is not the direction you want to go in. You should look at a total communications strategy as it relates to moving the needle with the African-American market rather than doing a one-time insertion,'" he says. "Don't patronize them for one month of the year."

Hunter says Sony Pictures declined the proposal. The studio did not respond to *PRWeek's* request for comment.

Yet other marcomms experts counter that because Black History Month puts the spotlight on the contributions of African Americans, it's an ideal time for companies to reveal the roles they play in the success of their brands. Some communications leaders argue there are fewer brand and corporate campaigns taking place during Black History Month this year.

"I find it getting quieter and quieter even though there are tremendous opportunities," says Julieanna Richardson, founder and executive director of The HistoryMakers, a nonprofit educational institution that says it holds the largest black video oral history collection.

She explains that some organizations wrongly identify Black History Month with only the quest for equal rights.

"It has to do with the limited view of the black experience. There is an alarming trend to equate black history with the Civil Rights movement, as if the black community had no history outside of the issue," says Richardson. "But they have a rich history in arts, athletics, business, philanthropy, and music."

Alexis Davis Smith, president and CEO of PRecise Communications and president of the Black Public Relations Society of Atlanta, also believes there is a drop in brand activity this year. Yet she encourages companies to get involved, noting that doing so can be a springboard for launching programs on a year-round basis.

Like the other comms experts interviewed for this story, she says doing something more comprehensive beyond February's 28 days is most effective for building relationships with the black community.

Building out Black History Month comms

Davis Smith cites an example from PRecise client Coca-Cola as an example. In 2012, it launched Pay It Forward, a Black History program that gave four students an apprenticeship with bold-face names such as singer Ne-Yo and *Essence* president Michelle Ebanks.

This year, it expanded the program significantly, offering up to 20 students a chance to win a \$5,000 scholarship and a three-day mentoring experience in Atlanta hosted by comedian Steve Harvey, which the soft-drink-maker is calling the Pay It Forward Academy. The event also has a component for the mothers of the winners.

"We talk to kids a lot about getting ready for college, but often we're not talking to moms about their role even though in the African-American community, the primary parent is often a single mom," says Davis Smith. "Coca-Cola is empowering moms by giving them the tools to prepare their kids and deal with issues like empty nest syndrome."

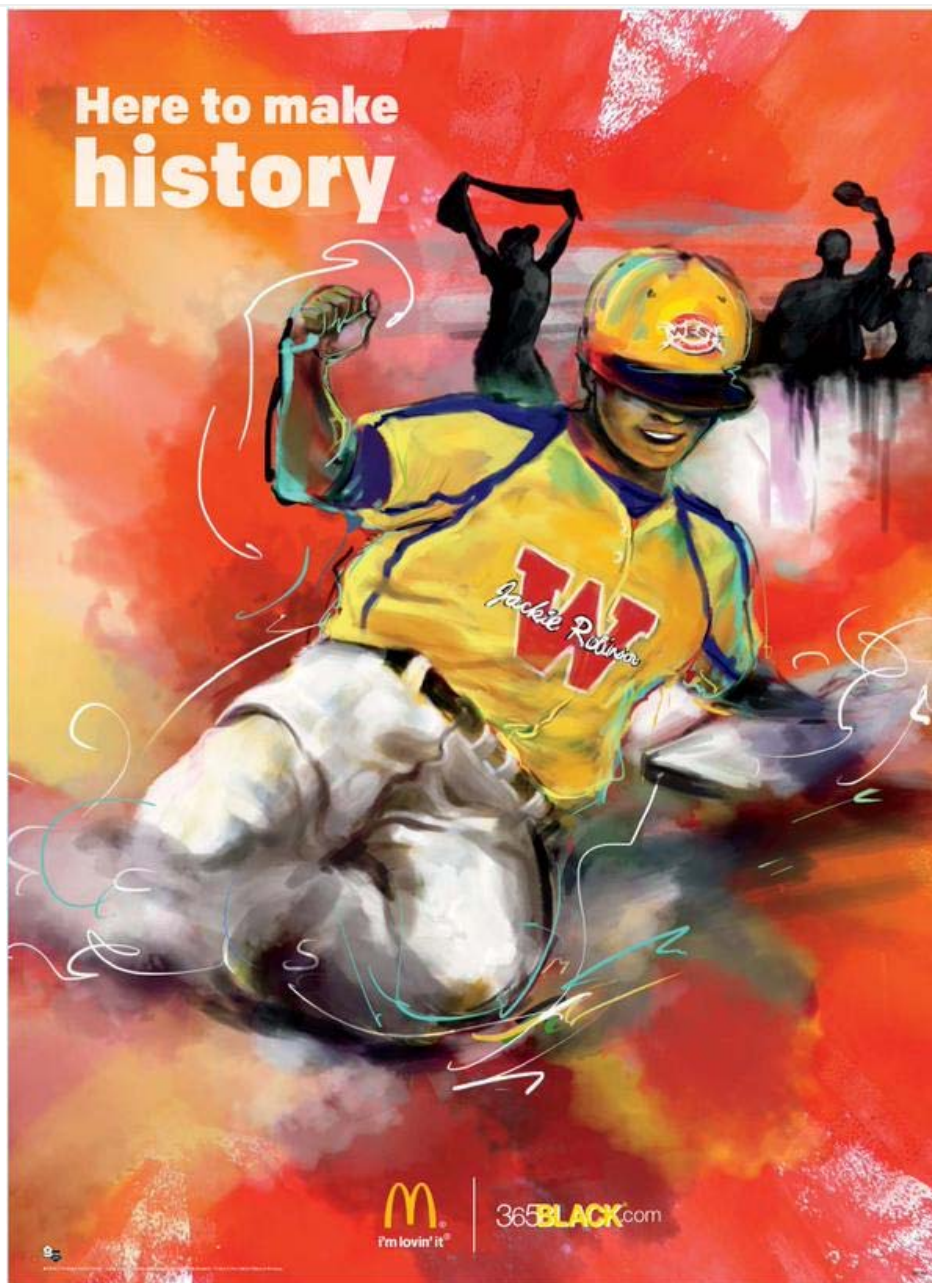
Coca-Cola has expanded the program over the years in large part "because they have found a way to fulfil a need within the community," says Davis Smith.

"The programs that also resonate the most with African Americans recognize the rich history of the past, celebrate history being made today, and focus on inspiring the leaders of the tomorrow."

For its part, McDonald's has communicated African-American pride during Black History Month and year-round because the company has institutionalized programs across its department, says Pat Harris, the fast-food giant's chief diversity officer.

"We see sharing our history as a motivational opportunity, but realize for the best engagement of our employees initiatives should happen year-round," she explains.

The company's internal communications department operates an employee network called McDonald's African American Council or MAC2, which has local chapters in each region to sponsor activities and bring on speakers to celebrate diversity. Its multicultural marketing department, meanwhile, oversees an initiative called 365Black, which includes a dedicated website and Twitter feed.

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365Black acknowledges the contributions and local stories of black employees and promotes initiatives that celebrate them. McDonald's launched a partnership for 2015 with American Black Film Festival, inviting aspiring filmmakers to create a 90-second film that brings to life the brand philosophy, "A little more lovin' can change a lot." Three finalists will attend the 19th annual American Black Festival in New York from June 11-14, and be mentored by film director Malcom D. Lee, known for *The Best Man* and

The Best Man Holiday.

While some have criticized McDonald's on social media for having a "segregated" website for black people, Harris says the company sees "it as another way to educate all employees and customers about other cultures. I am not opposed to having segmented marketing."

To show that it walks the talk, McDonald's posts an infographic every February on Flickr regarding its diversity. According to last year's, 82% of restaurant managers in the US were women and people of color, and McDonald's bought \$7.9 billion in products from businesses owned by women and people of color.

General Motors also takes a holistic approach. It is planning its ninth-annual Black History Month Celebration in Detroit on February 20, featuring retired NFL star Warrick Dunn and musician Brian McKnight, which has already sold out. Since 1998, the automaker has had formalized volunteer affinity groups, including the General Motors African Ancestry Network (GMAAN), made up of about 2,300 employees.

Jocelyn Allen, director of regional, grassroots, and diversity communications at GM, says, "My team has been trying to work more strategically with a number of these employee resource groups, so that we can share internally as well as externally what they're doing." Last June, Allen was named director of GM's newly established Diversity Marketing and Communications Center for Excellence.

As a result, GM's comms team is producing videos for internal and possible external use, including one that will profile GMAAN and young-and-upcoming black GM employees. They will also feature global design chief Ed Wellburn, the first African American in that role recently named Black Engineer of the Year by an industry association.

The PR team is also producing a video featuring employees of African heritage sharing their favorite proverb that they apply to being successful at work.

Correction: McDonald's posts an infographic on Flickr each year describing its diversity as a company, not Instagram.

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