Where Do We Go from Here?: Crucial Conversations in Multicultural Marketing

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Where Do We Go From Here?:
Crucial Conversations in Multicultural Marketing

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Procter & Gamble, one of the most well known consumer packaged goods companies across the globe, is also a notable corporate leader in encouraging the challenging conversations desperately needed in our society to foster justice, equality and inclusion (Procter & Gamble 2021). While P&G has been a frontrunner in the area of diversity and inclusion for a number of years, the company took a bold step when it released its award winning campaign, “The Talk” in 2017. The one minute campaign spot grippingly shares the painfully realistic conversations Black parents have with their kids as they face discrimination in our society. The clip ends with a call to action, “Let’s all talk about ‘The Talk’ so we can end the need to have it. It’s time for everyone to #TalkAboutBias.” (Procter & Gamble 2021) Two years later in 2019, Procter & Gamble prompted us to continue the conversation when they released “The Look”. In this follow-up campaign, P&G boldly highlighted the bias Black men are subjected to in our society. This campaign ends with another call to action, “Let’s talk about ‘The Look’ so we can see beyond it.” (Procter & Gamble 2021) In both of these courageous efforts, Procter & Gamble challenges every day citizens to engage conversation about difficult topics that, when attempted, will make us a stronger and more inclusive society. P&G even shows us by example what the conversations look like and how they are necessary in their “Talk About Bias” social experiment where they pair 14 different ordinary people together to talk about bias. As educators, we can learn from P&G’s efforts to tackle this important challenge. In business school classrooms, we, as educators, are in positions to facilitate these difficult conversations with and amongst our students so that they become better leaders in the marketplace. We must push beyond our comfort zones as we recognize that our students are stepping into roles where they will be decision-makers who will embrace equity and inclusion as the standard, rather than the exception.

Our nation watched and wrestled as the social unrest during the summer of 2020, provoked by the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, prompted reaction of armed forces and law enforcement. These images have re-surfaced and are now juxtaposed against law enforcement’s reaction to the January 6, 2021 siege of our nation’s Capital. The notable differences in these reactions remind us why Procter & Gamble has been front and center in addressing the need for change. Given that we are in the midst of days of reckoning for consumers, brands, and policy makers, our task as educators becomes of paramount importance. With P&G as a frontrunner, more companies are re-evaluating their organizational commitment to accepting, including, and advocating for others with whom they may differ. It is during these
times that introspection is needed for each of us individually, and discussion is warranted between us collectively.

We have offered the Multicultural Marketing course in the Terry College of Business at UGA for almost ten years. We undoubtedly understand during these current tenuous days in our society that many are questioning the status quo and, as a result, our future business leaders need to be in a safe space to engage conversation, learn, discern and grow. The Multicultural Marketing course is designed such that there are two main growth opportunities: 1) an initiative led by me, as the professor, to ensure students are aware of key issues related to diversity in the marketplace, and 2) an initiative led by each student to choose and take ownership of a diversity-related topic that he/she is interested in. What we have found is that student-led discussions facilitate student-to-student engagement and openness to learning that is new and different, especially for students who have had limited exposure to multicultural issues. These discussions that are initiated and led by students result in personal awakening and growth. Students’ level of motivation in choosing a topic that they are interested in spills over into the classroom in the form of engaged and open discussion. A part of my role as instructor is to set the tone in the classroom such that each student’s opinion is valued. At the start of the semester, we talk about the importance of mutual respect in the classroom, especially given the sensitive topics that we will discuss. We understand that we will not all agree on topics that we discuss. When we disagree, it is grounds for fruitful discussion, so we are mindful to show respect while holding a differing viewpoint.

During the summer of 2020, former students who had taken Multicultural Marketing contacted me, unsolicited, to share their learning experiences from our classroom conversations. On June 1, 2020, one student wrote and reflected on her increased level of comfort being a part of difficult conversations in her profession when she stated, “Dr. Grantham, I took your Intro to Marketing course as well as your Multicultural Marketing course. Since graduating, I began working at a marketing agency. I just wanted to let you know that your classes have prepared me so well for my job. With the current BLM movement and Pride month, I feel like I know how to be part of the conversations with our clients on how to move forward in their marketing campaigns. Thank you so much for your inspiring and informative classes!” Another student reflected, “Hi Professor Grantham, I had the honor of taking your Multicultural Marketing class in the spring of my senior year at UGA, and it was without a doubt the most impactful and meaningful class I took throughout my 4 years at the university. I wanted to write you an email during this time to say thank you. Thank you for opening my mind and so many of my classmates' minds to issues that minorities face and topics that used to feel uncomfortable to so many who grew up sheltered in white communities going to white private schools like myself. You provided a safe space for students to share their personal experiences, and I often find myself recalling and sharing things that I learned during your class. Taking your class made an impact on my growth as a person. This class was so important, and I hope it continues for a long time.”

One additional student reflected, “College has been a time of reckoning and repentance for me as I've realized how my actions have exacerbated racism. I used to think racism was only outright hate for another race; I did not have that so therefore, I was one of the good guys. I was also raised believing race in politics (local and national) was the left's way of "poverty pimping"
gain votes without truly caring for minorities and that race was not a systemic issue. Through
the grace, kindness, and boldness of teachers like you and other inter-racial friendships I've made
here, I've learned SO much and have realized the ignorance I've had of my own privilege and
experience. Not only that, but I've also noticed the failure of officials I've voted for to even
address systemic racism, much less act on it. I'm afraid that my words may seem like
sentimental puffery or worse, a selfish attempt to prove I'm not a racist so I can stay one of the
"good guys". I just want you to know how GRATEFUL I am for your leadership, your
perspective, and your patience as you've educated us about difficult subjects that white people
shy away from. You have done an excellent job educating people about injustice in a way that
provokes them to action. Please know that I am grieving with you in these times. I recognize that
your life as well as those of your family, have infinite and eternal value. I want to be a part of
creating change that reflects that in my generation and my children's generation."
As evidenced by these students’ reflections, the social unrest of 2020 increased the desire for
individuals to act.

Millennials and Generation Z seem to have a yearning to understand, empathize, and advocate.
It is up to us as educators to create spaces where we can allow our future leaders to do just that.
When students choose topics that address diversity directly, and challenge the status quo, they
are showing their interest in engaging in conversation. It is then up to us as educators to support
them in facilitating these discussions. This means that we have to immerse ourselves into
conversations where we may not have the answers. When we listen, learn and grow alongside
our students, we put ourselves in a vulnerable position. The resulting impact on the classroom
atmosphere is powerful, as it signals to the students that we are in this community-building
process together. Over the years in teaching this course, students have become more bold,
engaged, interested, and unashamed in their advocacy for others who are different from
themselves. Students’ increasing awareness of these issues challenges us to ask ourselves what
is our role in making changes to benefit the next generation. As an educator, it has been
refreshing to note the change in levels of openness to what have been viewed as “sensitive”
topics in the past. This young generation of future business leaders is embracing diversity as a
standard. They are establishing the new norm where equity in the marketplace is a key pillar.
Creating space to engage the necessary conversations where we push beyond our comfort zones
is one key step toward establishing this pillar.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
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