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Best Practices for Inclusive Social Media
Introduction

Creating social media campaigns that are sensitive to diversity and inclusion sounds like it should be a slam-dunk for a pro communicator. Choose images with a mix of racial and gender identities, avoid using racial and ethnic stereotypes, and you’re good to go—right?

Not so fast. There’s more to diverse, inclusive social media than using a photo that doesn’t include merely a bunch of middle-aged white men, or an endless stream of straight couples. There are subtleties in how you craft social posts that showcase your organization’s commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I)—and not just pay it lip service. There are easy, tactical ways to be more inclusive in how you share social content, like adding alt-text to images so people with vision challenges get the point of your posts.

For an example of a social post that tried to be inclusive but missed the point, consider the case of Gordon Beattie, founder of UK-based Beattie Communications. In March 2021, Beattie, a 40-year veteran of PR and corporate communications, wrote a LinkedIn post intended to show the firm’s commitment to hiring diverse talent, but instead came off as cringe-inducing.

Don’t try to crack jokes or puns that involve inclusivity. In this case, Beattie’s attempt at humor did not go over well—he ended up resigning from his own company.
“At Beattie Communications, we don’t hire blacks, gays or Catholics,” Beattie wrote, adding, “We sign talented people and we don’t care about the colour of their skin, sexual orientation or religion.”

Unfortunately, the inflammatory first line of the post drowned out the well-meaning second line, and in the ensuing controversy, Beattie stepped down from Beattie Communications’ board; in a statement, the firm called the post, “tone deaf.”

In this guide to bringing DE&I values to social campaigns, communications practitioners explain their strategies and approach for DE&I-sensitive social media campaigns, and the tactics to deploy to craft inclusive posts:

• Why you need to connect social media posts to company DE&I initiatives
• How to review posts for appropriate diversity and inclusion content and images
• What to add to posts to improve accessibility
Intent matters: Be authentic, avoid slacktivism

In 2020, as social justice movements placed the spotlight on racial equity, many brands rushed to place the #BLM and #BlackLivesMatter hashtags on their social posts, or posted plain black squares to Instagram. All well and good, say communicators, but without the backing of a true commitment to diversity and equity, it’s just slacktivism—supporting a cause with little effort or commitment.

“Anything you do in social media has to connect to what you stand for,” says Kevin Clayton, vice president of diversity, inclusion and community engagement for the Cleveland Cavaliers. If a post on a pressing social issue isn’t backed up by real action, an organization is more likely to be called out for empty posturing.

The key, Clayton says, is to align language in a post that is similar to the language the organization has used in other statements about DE&I efforts. In addition, posts that show support for a social issue should include a link for more information, such as the organization’s value statements, or its DE&I initiatives.

Demonstrating authenticity about support and commitment in social posts is critical, explains Eleni Stamoulis, designer for communications firm Mission Partners in Rockville, Maryland.

“Tactically, not giving a ‘next step’ for people to take is an error we often see on social media,
says Stamoulis. “Many people know these issues exist, but just seeing them repeated can lead to fatigue and discouragement. Providing concrete actions for an audience can take or giving examples of what you are doing can make a difference.”

The takeaway: Include links to your own content to back up your position. It shows that your organization means what it says, and isn’t just engaging in “slacktivism.”

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On The Tragic Death of George Floyd:

5:26 PM · May 29, 2020 · Twitter Web App

Eschew easy but ineffective posts like the Instagram “black square.” Instead, do as the Cleveland Cavaliers has done, with posts that highlight an authentic and inclusive message.
Foster conversations and empathy to heighten inclusivity

Social media managers are insanely busy these days, and in the rush to manage conversations, communicators often forget about empathy, explains Carmen Collins, employee brand and social media lead for Cisco. In her view, the lack of empathy leads to social media misfires like the performative “Instagram black squares” posted in support of social justice.

The issue, Collins says, is not that we don’t want to be empathetic—we’ve just forgotten how it works. “We’re not doing it on purpose—it’s that we don’t have enough time to think about it,” Collins says. “And we’re treating posts as checking off a box, rather than something that’s part of a larger initiative.”

Empathy needs to be purposeful, Collins adds, with constant conversation among the communications team members about practicing empathy in their work and lives. This doesn’t mean engaging in some woo-woo therapy; it simply means giving more thought to every audience served by social media, and taking advantage of opportunities to see life from someone else’s viewpoint. Only then, Collins adds, can you raise your awareness of creating social posts.

“It has to become a habit,” says Collins. She recalls having a new intern who was blind, which gave her the opportunity to learn more about accessibility for people who are blind or low-vision. When Collins broke her arm and had to use voice-recognition tools to type, she learned about accessibility for people with mobility challenges. The opportunities to heighten our
empathy, Collins says, are all around us.

Communicators should also look for opportunities to have conversations about inclusivity and social media, and encourage social media teams to question how they are portraying key audiences. This is an approach taken by Marissa Gantman, chief communications officer for the Pacific Council on International Policy in Los Angeles.

When the Council recently drafted a statement about hate crimes against the AAPI (Asian Americans/Pacific Islander) community, some staffers wondered if an image of a lotus flower would be appropriate to add. "Fortunately, we had a woman on our social media team who was from the AAPI community," Gantman says. "She knew about the cultural importance of the lotus and that it would be appropriate for this statement. That points to the importance of having a diverse team, and people who understand cultural nuances."

If communicators are indeed fostering conversations about social media inclusivity, they also need to encourage teams to share posts before publishing, since diverse team members can help spot problems. An extra set of eyeballs was critical, Gantman says, when the Pacific Council was developing a collection of email and social media posts around a Council delegation visiting Alabama to lead discussions on the ongoing impact of slavery and institutionalized racism.

A comms team member added a reference to the Lynyrd Skynyrd song, "Sweet Home Alabama," to the content—perhaps not the best choice, since some critics of the song believe it's a defense of Southern heritage. Upon review by senior communicators, the image was changed to one of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.

Sharing content with a colleague who may be able to spot a problematic word or image before it's out in the world forever is a step every organization can immediately take.

"I've been pleased to see many white-led organizations going slower in their responses after
some recent high-profile incidents, clearly taking the time to be thoughtful in their responses and the related actions rather than jumping to ‘say something,’” explains Carrie Fox, president and CEO of Mission Partners. “That’s an important trend in itself.”

The takeaway: Encourage conversations to gain a deeper understanding of your unique and diverse audiences.

Use culturally relevant images like the lotus flower in this statement from the Pacific Council on International Policy—assuming you’ve confirmed the image appropriate.
Review posts through the lens of diversity

It’s unclear whether Gordon Beattie had colleagues review his, “we don’t hire blacks, gays or Catholics” LinkedIn post, but if he had, the post might not have seen the light of day. Viewing posts through the diversity and inclusion lens can shed light on problems that the post creator might not have thought about.

In the Cleveland Cavaliers organization, Clayton takes pains to ensure that anyone who’s charged with creating social posts is getting training in DE&I sensitivity for the broad-ranging demographics of the Cavs community. That goes for Clayton as well: “As an African-American male, there are certain things on which I don’t have the perspective.”

“Ask yourself, who’s my audience? What’s the message I’m trying to convey? And am I able to do that in a way that will be inclusive?” Clayton says.

One of his simplest suggestions to communicators is “the power of the pause.” “Take a few seconds to look at your post,” he says. “It slows you down.”

The advice to pause and think before social posting—as well as putting social posts through a quick DE&I review—is good advice in a world where many members of diverse communities are finding their voices. In early 2021, for example, Asian-Americans leaders spoke up about not only hate crimes, but also cultural stereotypes that are prominent in the media. Indigenous communities are raising awareness of the value of “land acknowledgements,” or
statements about the origins of indigenous land.

“Keep in mind that DE&I is a big field,” says Stamoulis. “Many people think it’s just about race, and they forget the other parts like ability, age, body shape, and the LGBTQIA community—let alone the intersection of race and any of these things.”

The takeaway: Build in a system for social post review through the lens of diversity and inclusion.
Choose images that don’t fall back on stereotypes

Images have power to show an organization’s commitment to inclusion and diversity or perpetuate stereotypes, says Michelle Raymond. She’s a London-based HR consultant and visibility strategist who provides training for companies looking to improve inclusion and diversity.

“If someone is trying to advertise a strong brand, we might suggest they don’t fall into stereotypes, like using an image of a large Black man in a post,” says Raymond.

She’ll urge clients to go beyond their initial impulses about who or what is representative of a group of people or an idea. When people think “Black man,” she says, they’ll jump to an image of an athlete or a musician—but not, perhaps, a Black man in a library. Why not, she suggests, use an image of a Black man in a social post about brilliant software coders, or a CEO speaking to a board?

Or, if a post is about relationships and families, don’t go directly to images showing a mom and a dad: A more inclusive post could feature two moms, or a multiracial family.

It’s also important that images match the words that the organization chooses. If you are voicing commitment to diversity and inclusion and your images clash, eager social media critics will be quick to point out the mismatch.
The Cavs’ Clayton is a fan of having a bank of images—for example, within a Digital Asset Management solution—from which communicators and social media teams can choose pictures for posts. By preventing the social posters from scouting the wider world for non-inclusive images (or worse, offensive images), communicators can reduce the possibility of social missteps.

**The takeaway:** Create an “image bank” of diverse, inclusive graphics that social teams can choose from when creating posts.
Raise and represent other voices

Highlighting inclusivity in social media images is a good idea. Better yet: Allow diverse groups of employees and other members of the community to “take over” your social feeds for a few days, highlighting their voices. Kim Clark, a diversity, equity, and inclusion communications consultant and educator in the San Francisco Bay Area, counsels her clients on “giving other people the mic” when it’s time to highlight a company’s commitment to diversity.

“Let’s say it’s June, which is Pride Month,” Clark explains “Instead of doing the usual corporate cheerleading, ask LGBTQ employees to take over the posts.” The employees can certainly do a bit of cheerleading, Clark says, but they should also be honest about the support and community they’ve found at the business, and the next steps the company can take to become even more inclusive.

Collins takes a similar approach at Cisco. She’s not a big fan of the “black square” approach to inclusive social posting: “That means you’ve made the post about you, and not about the community.” Far better, she says to have the communities in question speak for themselves.

“We'd rather go to our Connected Black Professionals,” Collins says, referring to one of Cisco’s employee resource organizations. She asked members of the group to pen many of Cisco’s blogs over the past several months, highlighting their experiences at the company. “We won’t censor them,” Collins says of the writers. “If they think we have more work to do in terms of inclusivity, we let them say so.”

The takeaway: To highlight diversity and inclusion, let your diverse employees speak for themselves.
Step up accessibility

Being inclusive in terms of social media is, of course, much broader than skin color and gender/sexuality. There’s also being inclusive toward the broad swath of people who have a vision or hearing impairment, or a condition that affects comprehension and reading, such as dyslexia. For these audiences, there are a wide range of adjustments that social media teams can make to posts so they’re easier to understand.

The easiest fix—and the one that is usually forgotten—is “alt text” for images, says Alexa Heinrich, social media manager for Florida’s St. Petersburg College. Heinrich, who’s become an advocate and adviser to many communications teams for her knowledge of accessible communications, explains that alt text is the written description for an image—for example, “people on a Zoom call.”

“When someone using a screen reader comes across an image on a website or social, the screen reader reads the alt text aloud to the user, says Heinrich, referring to software that reads text out loud for people with vision challenges. “Without alt text, a screen reader user more than likely won’t be able to imagine what your image is.” (Heinrich has a helpful Twitter thread explaining how to add alt text to posts on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Pinterest.)

Quick tips for accessible social content

Alexa Heinrich has gathered advice for improving the accessibility of social media posts. Check out her checklist. Here’s a sample of her suggestions:

Keep alt text short. It’s best to keep your image alt text concise. Some screen readers will even break up alt text after 125 characters, including spaces, so short is best.

Prioritize written content ahead of emojis. It’s best to put emojis at the very end of your posts and tweets, and avoid using them as bullet points. The more important information should be consumed by the user before the emoji meta descriptions.

Include keywords in alt text. If you can logically include your keywords in your alt text, go for it. Keep in mind that alt text is meant to be an accessibility tool, not an SEO device.
Another easy fix: When adding hashtags to social media posts, capitalize the first letter of separate words, like #WorldAccessibilityDay. “This way, screen readers can use the capital letters to denote different words,” Heinrich explains, instead of trying to read the space-less hashtag as a single word.

And of course, another easy fax is captioning for video—very helpful for people with vision challenges, or people whose first language isn’t English.

Do’s and don’ts for inclusive language

Kim Clark, a diversity, equity, and inclusion communications consultant at RCG and educator in the San Francisco Bay Area, creates guides of inclusive language for her clients. Below is a selection of her language do’s and don’ts for social media content.

Gender and pronouns: Don’t mention only binary he/she pronouns; do say “they.” (Used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun, “they” was the 2019 Word of the Year for the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.)

Race and ethnicity: Don’t say “powwow” or “peanut gallery.”

Socio-economic: Don’t say “thug,” “ghetto,” or “barrio.”

Mental health and abilities: Don’t say “lame” or “crazy.”

Follow @APStylebook on Twitter for evolving language updates.

The takeaway: Add fast and easy fixes to social content to allow differently abled people to access content.
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