

# EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE: DIVERSITY IN EVENTS

**TOP AGENCY EXECUTIVES SHARE INSIGHTS ON THE ACTION STEPS THEY'RE TAKING, AND THE PROGRESS THEY'RE MAKING, TOWARD GREATER DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION**

Few business sectors have a greater impact on diversity, equity and inclusion than experiential marketers. From the composition of their own internal teams to the vendors they choose to partner with to the marketing message they craft to the speakers they put on the stage—every single decision an event marketer makes offers an opportunity to change the landscape in favor of more diversity.

It's an awesome responsibility to be sure, and it's one that many in the industry are tackling head-on as the cultural changes of the past year make it clear that the status quo has got to go.

Event Marketer convened a digital panel of agency leaders to talk about where the roadblocks to DE&I are, and how their respective organizations are overcoming them.

## THE PANELISTS:



**CORI BROWN**

Director,  
Experience Group  
Opus Agency



**ANUP DAJI**

VP,  
Experience  
Wasserman



**MALIA JENNINGS**

Director,  
Multicultural  
Marketing,  
NCompass  
International



**BRIANA KORNEGAY**

Director,  
Multicultural  
Engagement,  
NCompass  
International



**MARTHA YAQUIAN**

VP, Strategic  
Accounts, Sparks

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### **EVENT MARKETER: WHERE ARE THE BIGGEST PAIN-POINTS AND ROADBLOCKS IN THE EVENT INDUSTRY WHEN IT COMES TO MAKING PROGRESS TOWARDS DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION?**

ANUP DAJI: The biggest pain point is the lack of diagnosis that occurs during the planning and development phase of an event. Most events aim to attract a diverse audience, so who they are and how they experience events needs to be considered throughout each touchpoint of planning. This means questions should be evolved regarding the tone of the message, the appearance of onsite staff, and whether the venue reflects the values and heritage of the audience.

MALIA JENNINGS AND BRIANA KORNEGAY: Many missteps in multicultural marketing are due to a misunderstanding of the audience. And just as marketers must understand the brand to engage the audience, they must also have a comprehension of the audience to successfully engage them towards the brand. This means the diversity in audience must be as diverse as the ideators creating the campaign. Representation matters along with a strong cultural acumen for different groups. NCompass Multicultural prides itself on being cultural anthropologists in addition to marketers, from the diversity represented in our team, to the intuitive research executed to ensure we're hitting our mark. The results being consistent bullseyes in meeting our client's goals with the development of compelling and culturally authentic consumer experiences.

CORI BROWN: For us it's an equity issue; opportunities for upward growth and equitable pay. We see more diversity in the entry level positions in our industry than in senior and executive level positions. As a female, there is a very real and present gender pay gap and not many opportunities for me to enact real change. Salaries send



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**MALIA JENNINGS**  
Director, Multicultural Marketing and  
**BRIANA KORNEGAY**  
Director, Multicultural Engagement  
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a message to your employees about how much you value and perceive them. Big titles and ever-changing initiatives shouldn't be the drivers for diversity. We need more seats at the table and fair compensation for all employees—this should be the foundation for change. Equity levels the playing field.

### **EM: HOW DOES YOUR COMPANY USE DATA TO INFORM ITS DE&I DECISION MAKING?**

AD: Data underpins everything we do at Wasserman. In the context of DE&I, we use data to unlock insights around the specific diverse segments our clients are looking to attract. This can mean understanding the difference between acculturated and un-aculturated Hispanics, or when to use LatinX vs. Latino based on generation and economic status, or even understanding which digital platforms Black millennials use vs. Black Gen Z, which can be used to guide content amplification strategies. By using insights to inform us about behaviors, lifestyle preferences, and influences we can confidently advise our clients on how to ensure their go-to-market experience speaks authentically to the audience they're trying to reach.

### **EM: HOW SHOULD THE EVENT MARKETING INDUSTRY SUPPORT UP-AND-COMING DIVERSE TALENT?**

MJ/BK: Let them in the door.

MARTHA YAQUIAN: By creating relevant programs that educate, connect, inspire and motivate them. We've seen success in mentorship programs and ERGs. Flexible mentorship programs aligned to the needs of each mentee/group of mentees with real and meaningful growth tracks will keep diverse talent engaged and supported. Mentorship programs cannot be one-size-fits-all, though. If you're creating a program to advance women in leadership positions

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but do not have any women involved in the creation of the program, well, that's a problem. Same goes with every other group. To be successful, program creators have to get buy-in and input from the groups they are trying to support. There also needs to be a clear focus and structure for the program. And, more importantly, not everyone makes a great mentor. Make sure your leaders are prepared for the possibility of sensitive discussion topics, and that they have the time to really focus and support their mentees. And remember, some mentees may want to be matched with a person of a similar background while others may be interested in learning from a different background or demographic.

ERGs or Employee Resource Groups also build a sense of community and belonging for new/younger employees by connecting them in a social and professional way while encouraging deeper interaction. They empower employees by giving them an open forum for discussion and a collective voice to speak with leadership to address concerns, employee/community needs and policies, and solve problems. We are proud to have three ERGs currently running, with the hopes of two more starting in 2021, and participation really contributes to a strong sense of "one family" at Sparks.

Both of these are solid initiatives as they foster training and open conversation, two elements we know to be valued by our younger employees. Through these programs, we hope to continue the process of listening and learning and providing forums for inclusion, accountability and forward movement.

CB: We all need role models and the ability to envision ourselves at higher levels within the industry. The phrase "you have to see it to be it" should be a core principle for companies, starting with their recruitment, hiring, and retention practices. People of color want to see people who look like them in the company. Experiment with less rigid hiring criteria, like not requiring a hospitality degree for entry level jobs. We all know what we do takes strategy, the ability to work



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**CORI BROWN**  
Director,  
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Opus Agency

quickly under pressure, good judgement, and a strong work ethic. I'm more than just a diploma. I have a B.S. in Biology and an MBA—I would have never gotten a call back for an events or marketing job back in the day. Being more accessible will bring us a variety of additional talent. Also, offer mentoring enabling underrepresented groups to access information and key relationships that will foster an environment of and for success. Seems silly, but ask employees what they need. It's easy to assume we know what's best for our employees, based on our own experiences and insights, but you know what happens when you assume things.

AD: Help them grow their careers. We need to give the next generation of our industry the opportunities to tell their personal stories through their work. Nurture their understanding of the event marketing industry through true mentorship. Help them build their network and reputations by offering them gigs based on passion and expertise. Consider inclusion riders where appropriate.

### EM: HOW CAN EVENT ORGANIZATIONS DO A BETTER JOB OF HIRING MORE DIVERSE TALENT?

CB: There's clearly a hiring gap when it comes to diverse talent, otherwise we wouldn't be answering this question. So let's start with defining what diversity means to your company. One big "lightbulb moment" that many companies have failed to deliver on: highlight the diversity within your company on external channels, create a diversity recruitment video, and add personal quotes from your employees. Think beyond the traditional channels of recruitment. Get creative and go beyond LinkedIn, Indeed, etc. Advertise in publications, on websites and forums with more diverse audiences. Create and offer targeted internships and job opportunities for historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) who have more diverse student bases. We have to provide

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an environment for inclusion if we want to attract diverse talent.

AD: Four words: Be intentional about diversity! Great talent will go where they feel welcomed, valued, seen, and appreciated. This starts with seeing people who look like you in leadership positions who are thriving and growing. Sometimes you can't visualize what you can be until you see it in someone else. This was at least true for me when I was starting my career in the industry.

MY: I believe the answer lies in developing a targeted diversity recruitment strategy but before you can develop one, you have to first define and communicate your diversity brand, what diversity, equity and inclusion means to your organization, in a way that people can understand and relate to. The Sparks diversity brand centers on the concept of BE YOU. Our goal with this simple motto is to quickly let everyone know that all are welcome and valued.

Once you have a clear view of your diversity brand, you then need to develop a diversity-focused hiring experience that demonstrates your message. Utilizing more inclusive language and imagery in job descriptions, on recruiting websites, and in all hiring practices like Aptitude Tests and interviews can help make all candidates feel more welcome.

With your brand and tools aligned, the recruitment strategy can take shape. We are focusing on several elements: expanding our college partnerships to include more schools with diverse student bodies, partnering with multicultural professional organizations, participating in more job fairs and utilizing recruiting sites that focus on diverse talent, to name a few.

MJ/BK: Companies can attract diversity talent by hiring diversity talent. Not all multicultural job candidates want to be the first in the door. And most of us don't want our being the first diversity hire to be



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**ANUP DAJI**  
VP, Experience  
Wasserman

the company's statement on diversity, we want its work and workforce to be their bold declaration on inclusion. So if corporations want to color the canvas of their virtual meeting rooms with diversity, they must be willing to paint the first strokes. NCompass Multicultural strives to disrupt places void of color through our work.

### EM: HOW CAN EVENT ORGANIZATIONS PROMOTE OR LEVERAGE THEIR DEI INITIATIVES IN AN APPROPRIATE WAY?

AD: There's a fine line between self-promotion and authentic commitment to a cause.

When promoting DE&I work, the focus should directly reflect the overarching company purpose and align with the goals of the event. Ultimately, let the work communicate the commitment; if you are committed to DE&I initiatives, the effort will be shown in the execution. Operationalizing DE&I across the entire event planning process is a great way to promote the commitment. From BIPOC representation in pre-event marketing materials to ensuring minority-owned vendors are featured in communications, to working with diverse media to promote the event—an authentic integration will promote itself.

CB: Make diversity and inclusion a priority from the top down. First, we have to take ownership of the lack of diversity in our industry. Secondly, acknowledge that workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion constitutes an ongoing effort. And third, reevaluate your diversity and inclusion strategy regularly and make changes if you aren't meeting your goals. Brands/event companies need to showcase their culture and commitment to action openly and proudly. Be intentional with on- and off-the-clock events. Nothing sets a greater

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precedent for employees and potential employees than constant and consistent awareness when it comes to diversity.

**EM: SEVERAL STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT DIVERSE EXECUTIVE TEAMS AND WORKFORCES GENERATE MORE REVENUE. HAS YOUR COMPANY EXPERIENCED A POSITIVE BUSINESS BENEFIT DUE TO ITS FOCUS ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION?**

CB: We have definitely seen positive reactions from—and deeper relationships with—the clients and prospects we are serving. Our ability to talk openly about our position on equity and diversity has reflected positively. With little exception, nearly every proposal we submit includes specific language and examples of how Opus is focused on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. We also talk specifically about our own company initiatives and diverse tapestry. Brands today want to only do business with companies who embrace their role in this important movement.

AD: In short, yes. Wasserman's diversity, equity, and inclusion progress have absolutely demonstrated how creating connections and community with shared objectives can shape the future of an industry. In 2019, Wasserman launched The Collective, an entire division of business focused on elevating women in sports, entertainment, and culture. In that same year, we elevated our multicultural marketing efforts to a DE&I (then D&I) committee to educate and empower all of our staff about the incredible cultural diversity that exists within our very own walls. This included over 20 webinars and panels on cultural issues such as gender fluidity, Hispanic representation, and a town hall focused on social justice. This has now evolved into a core business offering that allows us to guide our clients on partnership and activation initiatives that sit at the intersection of cultural connectivity. This has translated to successes such as launching creative campaigns specifically celebrating



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**MARTHA YAQUIAN**  
VP, Strategic Accounts  
Sparks

the LGBTQ+ community, highlighting the work of Black artists at onsite activations, and using data and insights to develop Hispanic-focused messaging initiatives.

MY: For sure, but we aren't measuring DE&I success in terms of new business or increased profits. Our focus is solely on the benefit to our workforce. Our DE&I mission statement starts with two simple words: BE YOU. We've used it this past year to focus on better recognizing and appreciating the differences in our employees and inspiring them to bring their full, authentic selves to work and reach their full potential. When our employees feel empowered and share their unique voices, we bring a broader perspective to our client solutions. It makes us smarter, helps us innovate and, ultimately, leads to greater experiences for all.

MJ/BK: As co-directors of NCompass' Multicultural Department, our business is built on a cornerstone of diversity. This culture of inclusivity, both in staffing and clients, has generated tremendous new business growth that has positioned our agency as leaders in the space. Over 10 years ago we produced our first African-American targeted HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) sponsorship for Toyota. Today, our work represents Latinx, Asian and LGBTQ+ audience targeted work for Toyota, McDonalds, Comcast, Cartoon Network and beyond.

**EM: LET'S TALK ABOUT DIVERSITY AT THE POINT OF ACTIVATION: HOW CAN EVENT MARKETERS ENSURE THEIR EVENTS AND CAMPAIGNS ARE DIVERSE, EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE?**

AD: Understanding the behavior, preferences, and lifestyle intricacies of your audience from the onset will be evident in the execution. Give empathic consideration to the attendees—who they are, how they experience events, what matters to them, and more. If I am part of a marginalized group, walk into an event, and see that they thought of something that



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matters to me, there was a clear intention to include people like me. Making your audience feel welcomed and feeling as if someone thought about them and their needs creates a form of respect between a brand and a consumer, which will translate to loyalty and authentic buzz from all communities.

MJ/BK: Multicultural marketing does not follow a “build it and they will come” mantra. Brands can’t build a diversity marketing campaign in their back yard and expect diversity audiences to come play ball. Brands must go to where diversity audiences live and pitch their products with cultural authenticity, relevancy and integrity to hit an accord. If played right, the return on your investment will be repaid as diversity audiences show brand loyalty to brands who support their community.

MY: I recently read a Workhuman article that quoted Dr. Robert Sellers, chief diversity officer at the University of Michigan as breaking down diversity, equity and inclusion in the most relatable way. He said, “Diversity is where everyone is invited to the party. Equity means that everyone gets to contribute to the playlist. Inclusion means that everyone has the opportunity to dance.” Event Marketers need to take a deep look at their customer base and prioritize thoughtful language, visuals, and stories that appeal to as wide an audience as possible, while providing relevant opportunities for them to engage, without making any one group feel left out or like they don’t belong.

CB: Following the tragic death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter global protests, it’s important to recognize there has been some progress. However, we have to keep doing the work! This is only the beginning. Revisit these topics as part of the mainstream conversation (such as keynote or town hall) rather than in breakout sessions, where most attendees are already interested in DEI topics. Feature speakers who resonate with your diverse (and not-so-diverse) audiences. Create meaningful content that aligns with your core message of diversity and inclusivity. Together, we can strengthen our efforts to continue to move the needle to where it should be: diversity as the norm rather than the exception.