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Diversity Survey 2009: Progress at work

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Though strides have been made, the challenge of recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce is one that the PR industry is still facing, according to the 2009 *PRWeek*/Hill & Knowlton Diversity Survey.

In 1996, Roxana Lissa founded RL PR to focus on the Hispanic market and today serves as its CEO. But she first learned about PR as a profession while still in high school. Results from a vocational test guided her toward communications. After some research, she went on to study PR in college.

“I thought it was a great opportunity because there are not a lot of people who are doing what I'm doing,” she says of being a diverse candidate within PR. “I looked at it as an opportunity, not a challenge.”

Lissa's experience is not typical of the average PR practitioner. The 2009 *PRWeek*/Hill & Knowlton Diversity Survey found that only 21% of respondents became aware of PR as a profession before college, with 50% learning about it during college, 4% during graduate school, and 25% while working in another career. The survey additionally found that 54% of Caucasians knew someone who worked in marketing communications before entering the PR industry, compared to 46% of non-Caucasians.

This year's survey polled 395 PR professionals: 61% of respondents were Caucasian, 17% were black, 15% were Hispanic, 4% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, and 2% reported other.

Increasing awareness

“We need to create greater awareness of PR as a profession,” says MaryLee Sachs, US chairman and world-wide director of marketing and communications for H&K. “Young people, particularly those entering universities, don't know about it.” And as the industry promotes itself more to younger students, the diversity within will increase as well, she adds.

In addition, awareness of the industry could also help more students pick PR as their first career option. According to the survey, 34% of Caucasians reported that PR was their first career choice, compared to 23% of non-Caucasians.

“Overall, PR is not a topic of conversation that comes up at the dinner table when you are sitting down with mom and dad, your brothers and sisters,” notes Kim Hunter, president of Lagrant Communications, who has spent his career helping students from diverse ethnic backgrounds get into the communications field. “And that's regardless of ethnicity.”

Malcolm Berkley, PR manager for UPS and a minority in the communications industry as a black man, says that direct interaction with a PR professional, who was working on behalf of a client at his college, helped him switch from his original plan.

"I was on track to be a banker," he recalls. "My entry into the field is a direct result of interaction with someone in PR who defined it as such, and in a way that made me understand that the skill sets I have can be applied to other things."

PR pros agree that to increase awareness, the industry must get involved as early as the high school level in reaching out to students.

Barbara Arnold, academic advisor for the PRSSA at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, suggests that firms or PR departments should sponsor scholarships, provide speakers for career days, and offer paid internships.

Raschanda Hall, global media relations manager for Business Wire, also suggests working with universities to help build curriculum that "prepares students and opens their eyes to this option." She attended Dillard University in New Orleans.

"Black colleges tend to have more general majors," says Hall. "If there are people advocating for the development of a specific focus, such as PR programs, in more of these schools, that can also pump new life into this industry."

Barriers to change

Although the lack of awareness of PR as a profession was common to overall respondents, it is something that ultimately affects the industry's attempts to recruit a more diverse workforce.

When asked about the greatest barriers that prevent ethnically diverse professionals from joining and remaining in the PR industry, 41% of Caucasian respondents and 49% of non-Caucasian respondents said "lack of information and understanding."

Additionally, 26% of Caucasians and 50% of non-Caucasians reported that organizations "not actively recruiting ethnically diverse students" was an obstacle. However, the biggest barrier was that there were "not enough role models," with 44% of Caucasians, 46% of Hispanics, and 62% of blacks offering that response.

"I continue to hear from African Americans in particular that many of the people who are making decisions to recruit, hire, develop, and retain are not reflective of who they are: African Americans," Hunter says. "Until we start getting people of color running P&Ls, running agencies, it's going to remain a challenge."

In the Asian-American community, Bill Imada, chairman and CEO of IW Group, says that high-profile Asians within communications are helping more parents and families become increasingly comfortable with PR as an acceptable career option. These role models include Jon Iwata, SVP of marketing and communications at IBM, and Michelle Suzuki, who founded Michelle Suzuki Communications.

Sachs agrees that it is important for high-ranking ethnically diverse PR professionals to be seen within the community. She cites two high-ranking members of her own agency – Vickee Adams, US director of media communication, and Norman Mineta, vice chairman – who are involved with diversity groups, professional organizations, and on the speaking circuit.

"Agencies, corporations, and nonprofits who have people of color in those types of positions would probably be well placed to get them out there even more," she says.

But while only 56% of respondents said they were satisfied with the level of ethnic diversity on their staff, many professionals did not look at the diversity of the PR industry when they entered the profession. The survey found that 12% of respondents reported that ethnic diversity of prospective industries or companies played a major role

in their choice of careers, 21% said it played a minor role, and 67% said it played no role.

"I didn't think that diversity was that important when I was in college," Imada says. "I didn't think about it. It wasn't until I got into the PR arena and I was the only Asian-American... and the only other person of color was Latino, who worked in the mail room."

UPS's Berkley had a similar experience. "I was just looking for opportunities at first," he says. "Today, I've got 17 years' experience. As a veteran, I have the luxury of looking at things a little bit differently." But, he adds, with the young people he mentors, he sees a different perspective.

"I don't know, without prompting, if they consider [diversity] fully when looking for starting opportunities in PR," he says. "I don't know that aspiring professionals out of college are looking at how diverse is the workplace."

"It was not about what opportunities I had to grow as a Latina," says Olga Romero, PR specialist and spokesperson for Southwest Airlines. "It was just, 'Let's get the job and we'll figure it out.'" She adds that she considers diversity more now, and is involved with the Diversity Council at Southwest and the Diversity Committee for PRSA.

Within Southwest, the Diversity Council is a group of volunteers who work to bring diversity into recruitment, HR practices, and suppliers. The group also works on internal diversity initiatives and celebrations of such events as Black History Month.

According to the survey, PR practitioners within a corporate setting are more satisfied with the level of diversity on staff than their agency counterparts. Sixty-two percent of those who work at a corporation were satisfied with the level of diversity on their staff, compared to 50% of agency practitioners.

But for Carla Santiago, AE at Edelman in the multi-cultural practice, diversity was very important as she began interviewing for a job in the PR industry.

"I really wanted to find a place where I could be myself and be comfortable," says Santiago, who moved to the US from Puerto Rico when she was 18. "You go to the interviews, look in the cubes, and see who is there."

Another challenge of being ethnically diverse, Santiago adds, is getting pigeonholed into multicultural PR.

"I interviewed at all of the big agencies here in New York, and I ended up in the multicultural practice. I don't think I would have ended up in the general market being Hispanic," she says. "I understand the American way and American consumers, but I still have an accent, so I think that's a barrier for us trying to get general-market jobs."

Networking and mentors

In addition to student outreach initiatives to build awareness of PR as an industry, agencies and corporations can also increase their efforts to recruit and retain diverse talent, as well as provide mentors and networking opportunities for their diverse staffers.

RL PR's Lissa says that when she launched her own firm, she used networking as a way to establish contacts and people who were willing to help her build a company. And, she adds, the Hispanic community is very open to networking.

"You will see how different it is to go to a Latino event versus a non-Latino event," she says. "People talk to you and they are very friendly. That's why I was able to network myself a lot."

And the survey found that 24% of Hispanic respondents found their first PR job through networking, compared to 14% of blacks and 23% of Caucasians.

"I would venture to say it's not as commonplace for ethnic minorities to network, but I will tell you the general market kids who I see, they don't have the capacity or they don't do it as much," Hunter says. "I think it's generational."

In the black community, adds Business Wire's Hall, networking and community activities are often things that happen outside of the working environment.

"I took on a lot of those things outside," she says, working with churches, fundraisers, or youth sports leagues.

In addition to networking, mentoring is just as important, with 59% of respondents reporting that they've had a mentor of similar ethnic background, 16% saying they have had a mentor of a different ethnic background, and 25% reporting they never had a mentor.

However, Lissa adds, it is difficult for people working in multicultural communications to have mentors in the same space. Joyce Lu, PR and events manager at InterTrend, agrees.

"There are very few practitioners who have a multi-cultural background and they hardly do ethnic PR," she says. "So it's very hard for us to find mentorship within the industry."

Pio del Castillo, account supervisor at Lopez Negrete, says that ethnic minorities often need more professional mentors because their families and friends may not have the level of education, or knowledge about the industry, that is needed to be a mentor.

"They are the first in their families to ever go to college," says Ecuador-native del Castillo, "so they don't have many role models in their communities who can encourage them to pursue their career."

And while many ethnically diverse PR pros say it is important to have a mentor with your same background, it is equally important to have a diverse group of mentors.

"I think you need to have mentors who are like you and mentors who are not," adds Hall. "The mentorship piece is so lacking. For me, it makes the difference in whether people stay in the industry."

Additionally, the survey found that 61% of respondents have mentored sometime professionally in the PR industry, while 42% are personally involved in helping recruit and retain ethnically diverse talent to the PR industry.

"The people I know at higher levels, I think we feel a very heavy responsibility to mentor younger people," says Deanna Lee, VP of communications and marketing for the New York Public Library, who is of Chinese descent. "I'm happy to see growing diversity, especially in the lower to mid ranks of PR, but I would very much hope to see an increase in the high ranks of PR going forward."

Recruiting and retaining talent

Another way firms can increase diversity, Hunter says, is to hire diverse candidates at all levels of their careers.

"When I go into meetings with my colleagues on the agency side, I still see a sea of white people," he notes. "Some people's philosophy is to bring them in at the junior level, groom and develop them, and then move them up through the ranks. And I'll say that is not always going to happen because agency life is always a revolving door. Why not bring them in at all different levels?"

When it comes to recruiting ethnically diverse professionals, 23% of Caucasians reported that there is no problem, compared to 7% of blacks and 25% of Hispanics. Forty-one percent of Caucasians reported that there is a problem, compared to 80% of blacks, and 56% of Hispanics.

According to the survey, 29% of Caucasians believe the industry has no problem retaining ethnically diverse

individuals, compared to 9% of blacks and 24% of Hispanics. Thirty-one percent of Caucasians reported that there is a problem, compared to 84% of blacks, and 49% of Hispanics.

“Is the industry doing an effective job across the board of reaching into the high schools and introducing PR earlier and earlier?” Berkley asks. “[Then we can] increase the pipeline of candidates, whether it's ethnic diversity or all sorts of diversity and being open to looking for talent in non-traditional disciplines, people who bring different perspectives and skill sets to the industry, rather than just your traditional PR student.”

Sachs agrees that agencies and the industry overall have “to do a little more risk-taking when we are looking at making hires and thinking, ‘Is our organization reflective of the general US population?’”

“We can do this [survey] every year for another 10 years and we'll find that the melting pot of young people coming into the profession is bubbling up through the system,” she adds. “When we first started this, it was true to say we were better represented by a multicultural workforce in the more junior ranks and less so in the leadership and management positions. That's still true, but I think it's starting to get a little bit better. Not enough progress is probably being made in that space.”

Ed Moed, managing partner and cofounder of Peppercom, says the agency works to not only hire diverse talent, but also uses their expertise about their communities. Peppercom has been actively recruiting Hispanic talent more often recently, he explains. The agency has also asked several Hispanic employees to lead sessions about the community, often for higher-level colleagues.

“These people are being heard. They are also rising up and being respected that much more in our company,” says Moed. “To be comfortable, you have to make people feel that their culture and their diversity matters and that they can make a difference.”

Some PR professionals think the 2010 Census will have a similar effect on marketing and communications as the 2000 Census, which really piqued companies' interest in Hispanic marketing.

“As those leaders understand the business value of diversity, then it will trickle down to PR and marketing functions,” says Alfredo Richard, SVP of communications and talent development for Telemundo. “There is still a lot of room to grow in diversity across *Fortune* 500 companies. The need for multicultural strategies triggers hiring and buying that brings diversity into the organization.”

Richard also looks at his own background – he is originally from Chile – as providing “a competitive advantage for me,” he explains, especially as companies are looking to reach the Hispanic market, particularly in Spanish. Having worked in Latin America for several years also helped him get positions with MTV and, eventually, Telemundo.

Monica Novoa, communications manager for cause marketing agency Hershey Cause, also thinks about what she can bring to a company with her background, as her family is from El Salvador.

“Just because things aren't where we'd like for them to be, let's work toward something better,” she suggests. “Let's remember that we are the ones who are bringing those diverse perspectives and that we can become advocates.”

Optimistic outlook

According to the survey, respondents are mostly positive about diversity going forward. Forty-two percent of respondents believe the PR industry has become more diverse than when they entered the industry, versus 9% who responded that it is less diverse and 49% who said that it is about the same. But, when breaking down the data, Hispanics are the most positive, with 51% responding that PR is more diverse, compared to only 28% of blacks and 47% of Caucasians.

“I think Hispanics know that there is a niche out there that the Hispanic world has to be served,” Southwest's

Romero says when asked about that difference. “We know that there are a lot of companies growing their Hispanic business that will need our services.”

Another reason why Hispanics might be more positive about diversity within the PR industry is that more of them work in ethnically focused agencies.

Sixty percent of survey respondents reported that they work for a PR agency, and of those, 26% of Caucasians, 28% of blacks, and 59% of Hispanics work in ethnically focused agencies.

But while Sachs does note that these types of firms are “a big draw” for multicultural professionals, she hopes things will continue to diversify.

“I would like to think that in 10 or 15 years time, there will be no need for multicultural specialists because we are all one big melting pot and the bigger agencies will be reflective of the general population,” she says. “That's a big wish, but that's something that we should be aiming for.”

Working toward diversity: APCO Worldwide

Founded by a woman, Margery Kraus, APCO Worldwide has always been an advocate of diversity and inclusion, says Nelson Fernandez, MD for the firm's New York office (pictured).

In May 2009, the firm soft-launched a diversity and inclusion program, including making Fernandez the chief diversity and inclusion officer.

“I think this is really going to set a very different kind of model for our industry,” he explains, “one that is really focused on metrics and on driving diversity and inclusion initiatives going forward.”

The program has four committees – a community affairs task force, a communications task force, a strategy and metrics committee, and a recruitment and education committee. It will work to get involved in community programs, as well as ramp up recruitment and retention initiatives.

The program will officially launch in 2010, with Fernandez making sure everyone in the agency understands the program and its goals. He will work alongside his committee chairs and co-chairs: Cindy Abraham, Laurie Labuda, Cassandra Pye, Megan Carpenter, Linda Distlerath, Elena Garcia, and Jessica Lee.

“For APCO, and probably for the industry as a whole, there is no one I can think of who doesn't believe that hiring diverse talent makes sense for business,” Fernandez says. “The question is how we get from being intellectually committed to the issue to being really operationally invested in the issue.”

Working toward diversity: Porter Novelli

Anthony Viceroy, Porter Novelli's president of global operations and CFO, personally and professionally got involved with Together Our Resources Can Help (TORCH) this year, working to teach New York City high school students about arts and communications. Each week, 30 high school students, mostly sophomores, come to PN's office to get hands-on lessons about the PR industry and how it can be a career opportunity. Additionally, junior-level staffers work with the students as mentors.

“It's a great program and the right thing to do,” Viceroy says. “Equally as important, I think recruiting a diverse background has always been a challenge for the industry. My feeling was that getting to students early on and building a long-term relationship with them would give PN an excellent opportunity. When they do graduate from college, those who went into communications would probably look to us first. Those long-term relationships will help us be better recruiters for more diverse candidates.”

The PN team, which has met several times this year, worked on videos and digital elements for the TORCH Benefit and Light Awards in November, “so they really get a hands-on feel of what it would be like working within an agency,” Viceroy explains.

The 2009 PRWeek/Hill & Knowlton Diversity Survey was conducted by CA Walker. E-mail notification was sent to approximately 4,185 agency and corporate PR pros.

A total of 395 PR professionals completed the survey online between September 10 and September 25, 2009. The results are not weighted and are statistically tested at a confidence level of 90%.

The content on these pages represents a sample of the overall survey. Complete results are available for purchase for \$150 by e-mailing Erica.Iacono@prweek.com.