



CONVERSATION WITH
MJ DePALMA

HEAD OF MULTICULTURAL & INCLUSIVE MARKETING, MICROSOFT ADVERTISING



THE FUTURE IS NOW

Not many businesses with the scale and global influence of Microsoft have made such vast strides in championing inclusive marketing and advertising alongside technology developed to match this ethos. iProspect talked with MJ DePalma, Head of Multicultural & Inclusive Marketing, Microsoft Advertising, on why representation on both sides of the camera matters.

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How would you define diversity and inclusion? How do these concepts translate into marketing and advertising?

In the simplest of terms, diversity is *I'm different* and inclusion is *I matter*. Diversity refers to the amount of variety, for instance, in people and data sets. When you deliberately ensure that the widest selection of data points or types of people are part of a study, project, or campaign, that is inclusion and a driver of innovation.

The business world needs a clear understanding of the difference between Diversity & Inclusion, inclusive marketing and inclusive advertising. D&I refers to programmes, managed by HR or specific D&I teams, that are meant to promote an inclusive workplace and develop an inclusive culture in any given company. Although you need an inclusive culture to drive the flywheel of innovation expressed as inclusive marketing, inclusive marketing itself is not D&I. Inclusive marketing focuses on addressing the new consumer mindset of purpose-led purchasing with solutions that consider various aspects of diverse populations and their unique needs and interests. Inclusive advertising focuses on the promotion of these solutions.

Diversity, inclusion, marketing, and advertising play interrelated parts when you consider an overall business strategy that can truly provide products, experiences, and services that not only resonate with diverse populations, but can reach everyone.

There are two main motivations for inclusive marketing: the moral imperative to include everyone and the business potential it represents. Looking at brands you work with, which dimension do you think is more prevalent?

I would add the legal requirement as a third motivation. For instance, "accessible marketing" (i.e., ensuring that all public facing marketing experiences are made accessible) doesn't only represent the business imperative of reaching 1.2 billion people with a disability and the 2.3 billion family and friends who care about them, in some countries it is a legal requirement. The recent Domino's Pizza Supreme Court case in the United States illustrates this. The court ruled in favour of a man with no sight who sued Domino's because he was unable to order food on Domino's website and mobile app despite using screen-reading software. The court ruled that Domino's must make their website and app accessible. Making digital experiences accessible to all is inclusive marketing.

As far as the intersection of moral versus business imperatives, I think the north star for any brand is that the customer experience aligns authentically to the brand's core mission. I have seen a majority of brands that want to "do good" and simply sponsor a particular social or environmental cause. This is not enough with today's discerning consumer mindset. Only if the sponsorship is aligned with genuine resonance with the brand's purpose can the initiative work well. Brands are beginning to understand what their customers care about from a social and environmental perspective, and to self-examine their business practices in light of these purchasing mindsets. More and more brands are exploring this tipping point of truly understanding that inclusive marketing is a business growth strategy.

Does the fact that some minorities, for instance women or LGBTQ+, are quite vocal about their lack of representation influence brands to focus on them instead of other minorities such as disabled people? What can marketers do to ensure they create inclusive advertising for everyone?

It is difficult to answer in so far as it is difficult to measure who is the most vocal and what does representation really mean. Representation can mean in front of the camera (in ad creative), behind the camera (creative teams), and also the product features that produce a better customer solution for these diverse populations. Therefore, brands that truly pay attention to who their customers are and what they need will be in a better position to serve more people well. A customer base is not a monolith, and brands must get away from producing an average product or an average experience based on the average person. Gender, veterans, people with disabilities, immigrants, LGBTQ+, ethnicities, parental status, environmental concerns, etc., whatever the dimensions of diversity or intersection of them might be, empathy will produce the best product, service, or experience.

This is obviously applicable to inclusive advertising, which requires a worldview that balances expression in the creative with common human values that are often global in nature, but also considers diverse audience nuances and local regional cultural drivers. Deep customer research is the key to unlocking the creative opportunity to build an authentic and relevant visible connection. This worldview includes the invisible underlying efforts of ensuring responsible data management and privacy of the individual's data. Microsoft is committed to taking concrete steps to help strengthen people's privacy protection, and that's why we extend the rights

that are at the heart of the European Union's GDPR to all customers worldwide, including consumers experiencing advertising with Microsoft Advertising solutions.

As a technology platform, what do you do to ensure your algorithms don't replicate bias patterns in the name of efficiency?

Microsoft has identified six ethical principles to guide the development and use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with people at the centre of everything we do. Fairness: AI systems should treat all people fairly. Inclusiveness: AI systems should empower everyone and engage people. Reliability & Safety: AI systems should perform reliably and safely. Transparency: AI systems should be understandable. Privacy & Security: AI systems should be secure and respect privacy. Accountability: AI systems should have algorithmic accountability. Designing AI to be trustworthy requires creating solutions that reflect these principles, and we are always happy to help brands interested in developing solutions based on AI, for instance, through our guidelines for developing conversational AI bots.

As a marketer, what are you the most enthusiastic about for 2030?

It is the idea of inclusive transformation. Companies who make the effort to understand that an inclusive business strategy will be the key driver for business growth will be around in ten years. This includes sustainability: my hope is that the private business sector uses its power for scaled positive (or negative) impact on our environment. The United Nations in 1987 defined sustainability in their Our Common Future Report as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs." The future they were referring to is now.

I hope we can see the forest for the trees (pun intended) and begin immediately doing our part in our personal lives as well as our business lives to affect positive change for the environment and reverse global warming. Each of the brands we work with has the power to play a part of a global solution. As marketers who drive the stories brands tell, let's demand an *all's well that ends well* story. Consumers' decision journeys are shifting towards considering any given product or service's supply chain practices, fair trade efforts, and environmental stress required to produce that product. This consumer pressure will only increase. Let's get ahead of this now.

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