

Marketing a People: African American Publishers, Sales, and Marketing Professionals and the Black Consumer Market, 1920-1970.

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At the start of the twentieth century advertisements were becoming the primary means of communication between the business and consumer sectors of society. Yet, advertisements did more than simply encourage consumers to purchase goods and services, they also told of new advancements in technology and interpreted their meaning and use in consumers' lives. Moreover, within the secondary discourse, advertisements gave consumers a picture of who they were and what society looked like in its ideal form. In presenting that picture, though, advertisers made no effort to be completely inclusive in regards to the nation's minority population.

If they considered them at all, the majority of the corporate executives and their advertising representatives looked upon the degraded economic status of African-Americans and concluded that they lacked the resources to participate actively in the marketplace. Although blacks were not pictured as consumers, they were, nevertheless, not completely absent from the nation's advertisements. Instead, images of blacks as lazy, ignorant, or violent were perpetuated in trading cards, dolls, children's books, cooking utensils, and other products. Caricatures of African-Americans were used in products like Niggerhead Tobacco, and black children were lampooned as pickaninnies, or the Gold Dust Twins, symbols of a popular soap powder. Advertisers did not challenge the demeaning images of blacks but, instead, helped circulate, shape, and extend distinctly negative racial perceptions.

As Ronald Berman has demonstrated, rather than seeking racial inclusiveness, advertising agencies aimed for the center and envisioned themselves addressing the largest possible group, the ones who had the power to maintain the consumer economy. Concurring with Berman, Roland Marchand further argued that advertisers worked within the framework of a "market democracy," in which one dollar equaled one vote. In this market structure, those with more money obviously had more votes than others. It also meant that those perceived to have little or no money were left out of the system. Thus the consumer aspect of

society, as advertisers mentally conceptualized it in the early twentieth century, was one in which not everyone was recognized as an equal citizen. Based on the small numbers of national advertisers in the black press and blacks in national advertisements, blacks were among disenfranchised as consumers, just as most were as voters.

Yet surprisingly scholars have failed to account for how persons considered outside the consumer society perceived their status and worked to change it. Consequently, this paper illuminates how black publishers, in taking the natural course of expanding the financial bases of their periodicals, marketed the black population as consumers to American corporations and advertising agencies. Moreover, it illustrates how the image presented of black consumers evolved with ongoing social and cultural movements. In addition, this essay points out how in pursuing the primary goal of increased revenue and circulation, black publishers and marketing experts were central actors in the movement to change blacks' image in advertising from that of caricature to ordinary citizen and to fashion them as a legitimate consumer population.

This study is comprised of two major sections. The first looks at the role of black publishers, like Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press, Robert Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier, and John H. Johnson of Ebony magazine. The second section examines the activities of black marketing, sales, and public relations experts in promoting the black consumer market largely through the organizational activities of the National Association of Market Developers.

Through an analysis of personal correspondence, speeches, articles in the advertising and marketing press, and personal interviews this study contributes to the historiography of marketing. Also, examining the actions of newspaper publishers like Barnett and magazine publishers like Johnson illustrates the lengths they had to go to in order to have black consumers taken seriously and the relationship between racism and capitalism. In addition examining the actions taken by black sales and marketing professionals, who operated both inside and outside white-

owned corporations and advertising agencies, highlights an important, yet unexamined facet of business and marketing history.

This study follows the path recently taken by Arlene Dávila in her work on the marketing of the Latino population. However, efforts to create an appreciation for a national black consumer market pre-date those of the Latino market which until recently was largely regionally based. Examining the infrastructure that led to expanded appreciation of the black consumer market broadens Davila's analysis both topically and historically. Moreover this study examines the dual subject of the construction of an infrastructure to coherently present black consumers as

a market as well as the historical construction and evolution of how black consumers were defined.

In examining the promotion of blacks as consumers it is clear that in many cases racism dominated over capitalism. Advertising agencies sought to protect their client's products from being overly identified with the black population regardless of the profit potential. Though this study raises the question of the role of whiteness and protecting the consumer spaces for whites only, it is beyond its scope to adequately address this topic and as such it is briefly considered as an important area for future study.
