A look at three Black Agencies

Without a doubt, the most effective sales messages in the world have been created by American advertising agencies. The evidence is everywhere. Our highways are crowded with motorists who "Think Small." Our ash trays are full of longer butts. Our shopping carts, bumper-to-bumper at check-out counters all over the country, are loaded with English muffins, Russian dressing, and washday miracles. A fat segment of the population is on a low-calorie diet. And men-s socks and women's skirts have reached a new high—all because American advertising agencies did their thing and did it well.

This success is no accident. Agencies have recruited the best talents and brains money can buy. And they've spent billions reseraching the life style—the established attitudes, shared experiences, customs and habits—of carefully selected markets.

Despite this success, agencies are faced with a communications gap. They're just not making it with twenty million families: The low-income market. A market with a median income of $5,000. A market that's earning $100 billion a year.

What's more, agencies have been particularly ineffective in reaching the $32-billion-a-year Black segment—one of the fastest growing markets in the country. How come agencies with such great track records are still on the outside of the low-income market? What's wrong? Mass-advertising techniques—that's what's wrong. They approach the Black customer as if he were a Black man in a white-face. They talk to the low-income white consumer as if he were a guy with a capital-gains problem. They have to. Mass-advertising techniques have been formulated in response to a white middle-class life style. You know, split-level mortgages, co-op apartments, volunteer fire departments, two weeks at the shore, mutual funds, and crab grass.

As you're well aware, low-income people don't live where the crab grass grows; they live where the store traffic grows. The inner-cities. A world of walk-up apartments and coin-operated laundries and mini-refrigerators.

A world where the local beach club is the nearest fire hydrant.

Surprisingly enough, skin color has very little to do with the complexion of the inner-city: Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Irish and Italians live where they do because they don't earn a lot of money. In fact, their whole life style is determined by budget restrictions. And this has profound implications for marketing and communications. It creates problems.

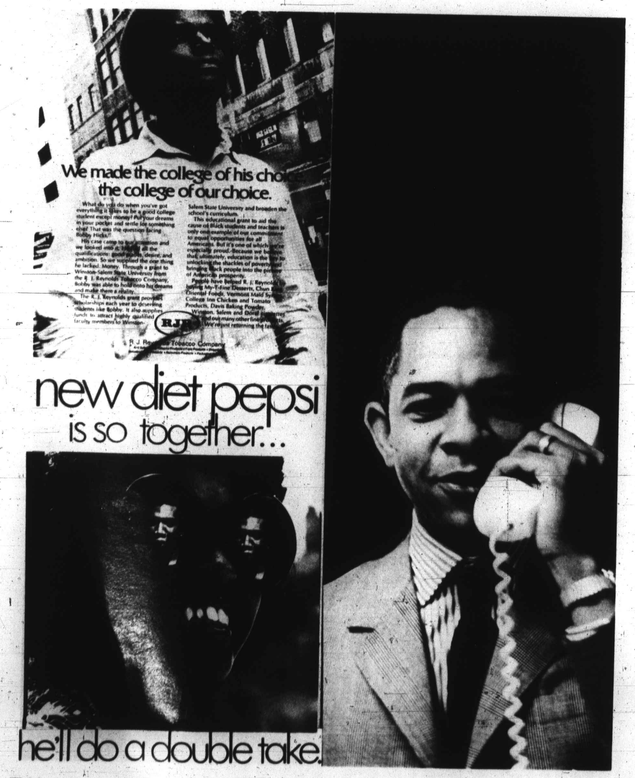
For example, let's take communications. You can't talk to the low-income market the way you're accustomed to talking. You speak a foreign language. White middle-class English. To be understood in the low-income market, you've got to speak Inner-City. And you've got to speak it fluently. One poorly chosen subject, one wrong predicate can sentence a whole campaign to Nowheresville.

There's a good way of telling whether you've got the word the right word. If you're using it, it's probably wrong. It's probably last year's In-Talk. Which means it's out in Inner-City.

What's more, you can't get away with just telling the low-income prospect that your product is different, that it will polish off his beard, or that it will put a shine on his floors and windows. You've got to educate your prospect. You've got to tell him how to use your product. He may not know. After all, he's not as educated as you are—and not as sophisticated as the guy who writes your headlines.

And last but not least, you can't depend on four-color product shots to get your message across. You need models. The kind that look and dress in a way that low-income people can favorably relate to. The kind that give the inner-city guy what he's looking for—status and recognition.

Now let's look at some of the marketing problems posed by the low-income life style. To begin with, you won't find many supermarkets or chain stores in low-income neighborhoods. And shopping centers are practically non-existent. Instead you find small outlets. As for product preference, sure, it's partially determined by ethnic background. Negroes like grits and rice. Puerto Ricans like beans and rice. And Chinese like rice and rice. But Sicilians don't live by Italian bread alone. And everybody knows that you don't have to be Jewish to like Levy's.



Effective advertisements, left, and the creator

Perhaps the biggest influence on marketing strategy is life style. A low-income not only determines what you buy but how you buy it. For example, low-income people tend to purchase smaller units. Why? First, because they're cheaper. And second, a small unti doesn't encourage you to eat more than what's good for your budget. In other words, the large economy size isn't so so economical to a low-income family.

To summarize: restricted incomes, inadequate education, language and physical characteristics of the inner-city all pose communication and marketing problems for mass advertisers.

Since communication is a two-way process, it's obvious that reaching the low-income market not only requires an intimate knowledge of the low-income life style, but also skills and experience in the sophisticated techniques used by leading advertisers. To date there has been no communications and marketing organization capable of providing such a unique blend of understanding and experience. Now there is such an organization, and it's called Zebra Associates.

As our name suggests, Zebra is completely integrated. Our staff includes people who have created advertising campaigns for both special and mass markets. And incidentally, our people come in two colors—black and white.

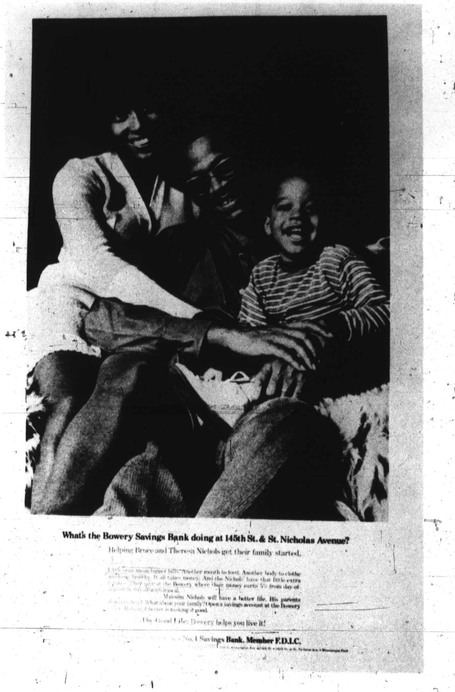
For the past eighteen months Zebra Associate's door has been wide open to both clients and community. Zebra is an advertising agency with a strong community conscience. They celebrated their first Christmas last year by giving a tree trimming party where clients brought an ornament for the tree and a gift for an underprivileged child. Now, with the second Christmas at hand, it becomes obvious that Zebra has grown by the number of Christmas ornaments on the tree and the larger assortment of gifts for needy children.

Each additional ornament represents a new client of Zebra, an agency that is Black owned and managed. The agency's black and white stripes come in the form of people. They are the creative staff, the account team, and the administrative staff, totally integrated, and dedicated to full service advertising. The people that they try to reach with their messages are in the low income bracket, a market long overlooked.

The president of Zebra is Raymond A. League, whose background encompasses wide experience in advertising and related areas. For six years he was an account executive and an award winning television producer for J. Walter Thompson. While at Thompson Mr. League was selected to reorganize their television production facilities in Japan. His career has led him to the American Embassies in Cairo and Monrovia, Liberia as a representative for the State Department, to Broadway as an assistant general manager for Roger L. Stevens Productions, to producing the Vernon Rice award winning play "A Sound of Silence," and to co-authoring a musical comedy "Aunt Carrie." He lectures frequently on several aspects of marketing and communication.

Miss Joan Murray is the lovely young woman who is the executive vice-president of Zebra Associates. She comes to advertising from an extensive background of television news correspondent and personality. Miss Murray has the unique distinction of being this country's first and major Black television news correspondent. She is currently co-hostessing a television series that helps viewers find employment.

Early in her career she was a production assistant and script girl on the CBS television program "Candid Camera," and gained additional professional experience by working in radio and television commercials, industrial and feature films, documentaries, and in various television programs. Her numerous awards include selection as one of the Foremost Women in Communications (1969-1970) and the Mademoiselle Award for outstanding Achievement in 1969. She branched out into Black entrepreneurship when she became co-owner and executive Vice-President of Zebra.



Creative advertisement for New York's Bowery Savings Bank

Entrepreneurship in the minority groups is encouraged by Zebra. Several of their clients are young businesses that they have nutured. For instance, Le Mans Haberdashery owned by a young Black man has increased his stores by two since becoming a client of Zebra. Not a day goes by that a member of the staff isn't on the phone giving advice to a fledgling business.

Community involvement is encouraged at Zebra. In every new project ways of involving the Black and Spanish community are explored. For a television show "Rappin' on the Roof" produced by Zebra for The Coca-Cola Bottling Company of New York, Zebra cast only authentic inner-city Black and Spanish teen-agers, some of whom had no professional experience and were using the money they made as funding for their college education.

In the public relations campaign to promote the television show, they recruited teen-agers from PAL to go through the community passing out free buttons announcing the show. They set up a school assembly program featuring the first "Rappin on the Roof" film and distributed it to inner-city public schools. Their training program includes five young people from inner-city who are being given on the job training in advertising.

This year's Christmas tree will include ornaments from a growing client list including The Bureaus of Housing and Urban Development, The Coca-Cola Bottling Company of New York for the television special "Rappin on the Roof", The Bowery Savings Bank, The Armo Company, a division of Kaiser-Roth, Standard Oil (New Jersey), Polaroid Corporation, and Kasser Distilleries.

Their clients will join Zebra for a tree-trimming party, sharing egg nog and donating a gift to be delivered by the Zebra staff on Christmas Eve to an underprivileged child.

Raymond League of Zebra says "Christmas advertising has a long tradition and though it is said commercialism should be removed from mass advertising" — a lot would have to happen to prevent gift giving and advertising these gifts at Xmas time. Much of the percentage of gift giving at Xmas is by the Black community and they appreciate the advertisers who recognize their patronage and are aware of the dollars they are spending through advertising messages directed at them concerning their products.

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