OPINION

Another View of "Black Clout. . .Check It Out."

By Bernette L. Jones

The BLACK CLOUT . . . CHECK IT OUT charge of AHBAI jolts us once again to an awareness of how often we overlook sources of economic power that lie dormant within our grasp. Its real power is a specific methodology for raising the consciousness of African-American consumers to change our spending habits. Far beyond the scope of what Debbie Wright conveyed in the DAWN Magazine April 1988 feature on this topic, is a subtle message about the important role the ethnic health and beauty industry can play in demonstrating this vital element of economic empowerment to ourselves in our own communities.

Certainly, the longevity of firms such as Johnson Products Company, M & M Products, Soft Sheen, Luster's and Proline is an indication that the African-American consumer as a viable market segment has been alive for many decades. What has become clearer during this period of self-study, if anything, is the non rational (not irrational, but non rational) nature of our spending patterns, particularly when it's about looking good, getting what we want, or achieving that special affect that enhances our image.

We are a beautiful people who have learned to love and thrive on our uniqueness. Versatility in hair or image options is a means of expression that we enjoy whether it is about us or if we are watching others do "their thing" as if style were entertainment itself. And in some cases it is. Only a Patti LaBelle could even think about wearing such a magnificent headdress. How can you help but love it? We are the epitomy of style consciousness. And for those who don't mind spending heavily to stay in the style flow of new trends, it doesn't matter so much who gets our money as long as we get what we want.

But this pulsating excitement has its trade-offs. The net affect on businesses that seek profits in this non rational market place means being fast and flexible. Our non rational spending suggests a certain randomly rhythmic often cyclical, even gyrating, dynamic order that can be elusive and down right frustrating to those who depend solely on standardized concepts of traditional business practice. The movement in this market is more readily felt as a certain sense of the culture man understood thru the rigidly logical, rational, business thinking process that is too often taken for granted.

You can imagine the affects of such spending gyrations on an industry still in the process of becoming. Who knows what psychographic trend pattern will emerge next to start the whole process

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reeling in another direction and leaving those heavily invested in the "old" pattern, holding the bag, so to speak. Just keeping up with more new product starts per year than any industry in the country gets pretty hairy at times.

It is the 21 African-American members of the AHBAI who have successfully brought these two apparently opposing principals into a workable, productive, systematic process that has carved out a brand new, and one of the few growing, industry opportunities in this nation today. These companies have sustained annual sales of $20 million, $40 million, $80 million (and climbing) over several decades. Together they represent $500 million in a billion dollar market that is projected to be $2 billion before the 1990's; a fairly sizeable contribution to the urban economies where they are predominantly located. And, unlike the aged general market category for health and beauty, the real lure is that the ethnic health and beauty category is still just a stomping, kicking toddler with the potential for "new growth" opportunities abounding.

While those of us who are randomly buying products for our daily health and fashion needs are unconscious of this sizeable contribution we make to the nation's cash flow, our Caucasian and Asian-American counterparts have quickly moved in to participate in the opportunity as distributors and manufacturers. One example is the Revlon challenge that finally gained widespread public attention in 1986 and the increasing number of ethnic professional beauty suppliers of Asian-American descent in our neighborhoods.

The Black Clout . . . Check It Out campaign, using the symbol of African-American womanhood (The Proud Lady Logo) on products and in advertisements is a positive, pro active response to the competitive challenge that is normal in a free enterprise system. Unlike the Revlon boycott (neither initiated nor promoted by the AHBAI), Black Clout . . . Check It Out focuses attention on how we can use the urban ethnic economy via the ethnic hair care industry as a motivation and catalyst toward achieving a level of economic self reliance in our communities.

It is the only industry that I am aware of in which one dollar touches so many African-American heads, hands and pockets. It is one of the few in this country in which we participate at every level as raw material suppliers, manufacturers, distributors, cosmetologists, and consumers. Beauty salons have long been among the most on-going types of small business in our neighborhoods and have paid off as many mortgages and sent as many young people thru college as other well paying jobs in corporate America.

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