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## BRAND WAR

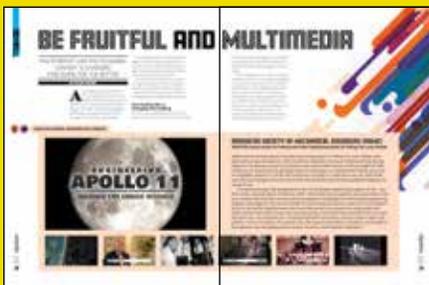
It's a great big world of branded content, vying for attention.  
Make sure your association's brand can defend its territory.



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MAY+JUNE 2021



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THE MAGAZINE OF ASSOCIATIONS,  
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# IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO SAY THE **Right Thing**

HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN DELIVER  
AUTHENTIC RESPONSES DURING AMERICA'S  
RACIAL RECKONING AND OTHER DEI INITIATIVES

BY MARIO BOONE



**I**n the aftermath of the violent caught-on-video killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, the nation witnessed an outpouring of statements of condemnation, financial contributions, and pledges of support to social justice organizations by various corporations and trade associations.

But to some in the Black community, these reactions seemed inauthentic, almost to the point of trendy.

Some institutions were criticized for issuing statements that seemed to be a day late and a dollar short given the volatile climate and circumstances of Floyd's killing. Many people also wondered why these organizations waited until the Minneapolis tragedy to speak out given this nation's long history of documented police violence against Black people.



If people feel they cannot trust you and your sincerity, that affects not only your brand, but also your standing in the community.



**Benjamin Fiore-Walker, PhD**  
**Manager of Diversity Programs**

**American Chemical Society**, the world's largest scientific society and the premier home of chemistry professionals

**Membership:** 155,000+



Several art museums were especially called out for their lack of inclusion and perceived racism by activists in that space. *The New York Times* reported in June 2020 that the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, was forced to issue a public apology after it was revealed the facility allowed police officers to use its grounds as a staging area while responding to protests against Floyd's killing. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art also faced ridicule for responding to the killing with an Instagram post of an image by a Black artist with no accompanying statement from museum bosses. And Getty was lambasted for making social media posts demanding equity and fairness without ever mentioning Floyd by name.

It raises the question: How can organizations — especially nonprofits and associations — combat the perception of inauthenticity? How can they sincerely be an ally to marginalized and underrepresented people?

I had some ideas about the role associations can proactively serve, but I wanted to hear what industry professionals who focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) had to say.

### **A Matter of Trust**

Just like other industries, associations must stay on top of not only what's happening in their echo chamber, but also in society at large, says Benjamin Fiore-Walker, PhD.

Fiore-Walker is manager of diversity programs at the American Chemical Society. He also works with the Inclusive Graduate Education Network to increase participation of underrepresented scholars in graduate studies of chemical science and chemical engineering.

"They need to have clear stances on the issues at hand and be prepared to comment on these issues in real time, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur before a response goes out," he says. "The idea is to have an already established position as events are unfolding."

Being perceived as inauthentic absolutely affects an association's internal and external stakeholders. He calls it a matter of trust.

“If people feel they cannot trust you and your sincerity, then that affects not only your brand, but also your standing in the community,” Fiore-Walker says. He believes a lack of trust developed from reactionary or inauthentic responses can lead to a cascading effect on an association’s stance on other issues and policies.

To avoid this, Fiore-Walker says associations must actively follow diversity issues and have a clear stance on them regardless of whether those issues directly relate to their association or industry. “As events unfold, you should be able to empathize with your employees and members who may be affected and give clear communication of that empathy,” he says. “At the end of the day, it is all about people and the treatment of people.”

**Long-Term Commitment**

For Lisa Hochgraf, “the key to authenticity is a deep commitment to the idea that diversity, equity, and inclusion will be a journey.”

Hochgraf is the senior editor for the Credit Union Executives Society’s (CUES) *CU Magazine*. Hochgraf is currently developing new DEI content for *CU* and working to diversify its freelance writer pool.

The more organizations learn about DEI by consistently working on benchmarks for the long-term, she explains, the more equipped they will be to effectively incorporate DEI in all facets of operations — from content creation to setting budgetary priorities.

In other words, solving these complex and long-standing problems won’t happen overnight.

CUES is putting its money where its response is in a number of ways. First, its magazine has been running a monthly column since September 2019 called “Diversity Insight.” The column focuses on



Organizations need to live and breathe diversity principles at every level. Marketing and communications teams have to make their commitment to DEI principles part of their daily activity.

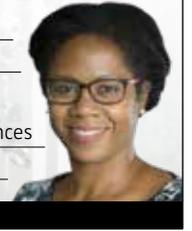


**Stacy Brooks**

**Communications Director**

**American Physiological Society**, a nonprofit professional society focused on supporting research and education in the physiological sciences

**Membership:** 10,000



a range of issues including how to be an ally to the LGBT community and how to develop a supplier diversity program. In addition, CUES frequently spotlights DEI topics in feature articles. The publications team continues to make it a priority to diversify their writers pool, and Hochgraf vows that DEI will be a significant focus when their printer contract comes up for renewal.

But Hochgraf says CUES leaders weren’t satisfied with just these efforts. She ticked off a list of more DEI initiatives such as:

- + A new quarterly e-newsletter about DEI in the credit union industry (launching this year)
- + Launching the CUES DEI Resource Center on its sales and membership site
- + Adding a DEI resource page to each of its websites
- + Updating the top navigation bar to redirect from COVID-19 content to DEI content

“I think it’s important to recognize and accept that you’ll get some things wrong in your efforts to do DEI right,” Hochgraf says. “When you do, it’s important to say you’re sorry in an effective way and to be OK if that apology doesn’t instantly fix things. Then, most important, keep on learning.”



When boilerplate DEI statements do not contain concrete actions that can be done within their sphere of influence, it can make a statement read hollow.



**Karla Haack, PhD**

**Chair, Diversity and Inclusion Committee**

**American Physiological Society**, a non-profit professional society focused on supporting research and education in the physiological sciences

**Membership:** 10,000



**Ditch the Boilerplate**

I also talked with Karla Haack, PhD, a Black physiologist and Kennesaw State University lecturer, about inauthentic responses to DEI matters in the association space. Haack chairs the diversity and inclusion committee for the American Physiological Society.

She cautions associations not to default to boilerplate language that doesn’t specifically address its members and their concerns.

“When boilerplate DEI statements do not contain concrete actions that can be done within their sphere of influence, it can make a statement read hollow,” Haack says. “Further, I think when those

# 5 Steps to More Authentic DEI Communications

## Be proactive.

Have clear stances on the issues at hand and comment on these issues in real time, rather than waiting for the aftermath of a crisis.

## Be persistent.

Consistently work on benchmarks for the long term. The process is a marathon, not a sprint.

## Be concrete.

Don't default to boilerplate language. With each statement, address the issue, your members' concerns, and say what actions you will take.

## Be committed.

Every team in the organization needs to make their commitment to DEI principles part of their daily activity.

## Keep

## learning.

Learn from mistakes and do your best not to repeat.

sorts of statements misalign with the experiences of the membership or practices of the organization, then they are absolutely perceived as inauthentic.”

Haack describes the racial reckoning seen during the last year as a “political and social cha-cha” of several steps ahead and just as many steps back on the road to progress.

However, she does believe a majority of Americans are ready to begin — or have already started — to reflect on how systemic and historic inequity persists throughout our society. Haack tells me one of the keys to speaking in an authentic voice on DEI issues is for associations to start from a place of acknowledgement. Take ownership and stand in the unknown about the position of your organization on this topic, talk to your members, collect data, and establish next steps based on this information.

“I can't underscore enough the value that comes from talking to members, asking thoughtful questions, and listening to their experiences,” Haack says. “Soliciting member feedback with climate surveys or town halls is a great way to establish that connection with all of your membership to eliminate a disconnect among constituencies of what's perceived and what is reality.”

## Take Ownership

A common theme among all the experts I talked to was accepting the fact that sometimes your organization simply won't be able to properly message every diversity-related controversy.

With that in mind, here are some basic warning signs that you're getting the response wrong:

- + Waiting until a problem develops to address DEI concerns
- + Failing to acknowledge your DEI shortcomings
- + Lack of transparency and a clear DEI plan to deal with the problem

To the contrary, there are some groups that just get it. They have done the necessary work to build a bank of credibility on the issue, which allows them



I think it's important to recognize and accept that you'll get some things wrong in your efforts to do DEI right. Most important, keep on learning.



**Lisa Hochgraf**

**Senior Editor, CU Magazine**

**Credit Union Executives Society**, an international membership association for credit unions focused on talent development

**Membership:** 29,000+



to authentically communicate during a DEI storm.

Here are some examples of getting it right:

- + Making DEI a core part of your organization's culture
- + Consistently espousing the benefits of diversity to internal and external stakeholders
- + Regularly evaluating diversity at every level of your organization and being open about any needed corrections and having a plan to do so

Finally, longtime communications guru Stacy Brooks says diversity can't be left to one committee, department, or person.

“Organizations need to live and breathe diversity principles at every level,” says Stacy Brooks, the communications director for the American Physiological Society. “Marketing and communications teams have to make their commitment to DEI principles part of their daily activity.”

This means holding yourself, your staff, and fellow organizations accountable by asking the tough questions. “Have we done enough to represent the melting pot of our constituency, our community, etc.?”

Doing these things can put you on a path to being seen as a true partner, an ally to marginalized people.

Then, when you speak, it's not just performative. It's authentic. **S**



**Mario Boone** is the media relations specialist for the American Physiological Society. He is a former television news reporter with nearly 15 years of broadcasting experience.

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