Your association membership is diverse...Are your communications?
In this issue of Signature

JULY+AUGUST 2022

BOOK

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Finding new voices to represent your association is about more than just offering a spot in the choir.

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FINDING NEW VOICES TO REPRESENT YOUR ASSOCIATION IS ABOUT MORE THAN JUST OFFERING A SPOT IN THE CHOIR.

BY THOMAS MARCETTI
Often when I’m talking with other media professionals about finding new voices, I think about that quote and the accompanying scene from the movie “Sister Act.”

A new choir director is assessing the singers she inherited. She approaches a shy singer hiding near the back of the group. The director brings the singer forward and provides some unconventional encouragement. Everyone is surprised when the timid voice becomes loud, confident, and powerful.

In the end, the newly empowered singer becomes one of the choir’s stars and helps improve everyone else—all because the director looked at the choir with new eyes, recognized talent, and gave a new voice the opportunity to shine.

Now, association media professionals looking for new voices are usually not auditioning singers. They also usually don’t have a lounge singer played by Whoopi Goldberg to help find and cultivate new voices.

What they do have is a proverbial choir in their membership and in the not-yet-member professionals in their industry.

It’s our job as media professionals to find, encourage, and cultivate those voices so they carry over the din.

Making ‘Welcome’ Mean Something

Inspirational ‘90s movies aside, in recent years, associations—like many organizations and businesses—have turned to DEI initiatives to reach out to underserved and underrepresented communities in their field.

Anamik Saha, co-author of the 2020 report “Rethinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing,” says it’s not enough for associations to add a couple new voices to their choirs—or I guess in this case, writers, photo subjects, presenters, etc.—if they don’t do some rearranging as well.

“Often, publishers’ desire for more writers from disadvantaged backgrounds can stem out of fear or embarrassment of not being seen as inclusive,” says Saha, senior lecturer for media, communications, and cultural studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. “Fear and shame in this instance are generating new opportunities for minority and working-class writers. But it seems far from ideal when the push for diversity is more about preventing reputational damage than solving structural inequalities.”

As highlighted by Signature parent company SIIA’s new Equity Award, many associations have this mindset as they reach out for new perspectives.

“A diversity of voices and experiences at the table produces the richest outcomes, and we fundamentally believe we are better as a community and an organization when there is a broad range of contributing perspectives,” says Billy Williams, American Geophysical Union’s executive vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion. “We’re doing this because it’s our long-term commitment to say our science is better when there are more perspectives.”

AGU was the inaugural Equity Award winner in 2021. A key part to the success of their efforts, Williams says, is an ongoing commitment to learn and not settle for just one DEI victory.

“You can’t put out one solution and just keep doing that one solution, because the world changes,” he says. “We have also learned to share everything we do and work with partners. It’s not a competition. We want to bring others along the way, learn from them, and they can learn from us.”

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NO MORE FISHING EXPEDITIONS

From hiring and RFPs to lining up speakers and contributors, many associations rely on an approach better suited to fishing — toss your request out into the world and wait to see who bites. This process works, as long as all you’re looking for is the same thing you’ve always gotten. Ultimately, to best serve your members, your industry, and your community, you’re going to have to go looking for new voices.

Many often overlooked opportunities can be found right here in the association space. As we all know, there is virtually nothing so niche that there isn’t an association for it. In that way, many under-represented professionals have found places where they feel they have a voice. These organizations can provide frameworks for you to emulate as well as numerous opportunities to collaborate on content. The association world is home to a myriad of organizations and many people from historically excluded communities.

For example:

- American Indian Science and Engineering Society
- National Council of Asian Pacific Islander Physicians
- Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting
- Trans Journalists Association
- Society for Healthcare Professionals with Disabilities

At the very least, these organizations are great sources for pointing to new, expert voices in your industry. In a more strategic sense, partnering with associations like these is sure to open a flood gate of opportunities to better serve your members and theirs.

For more short-term projects — or when a deadline is looming — many people and groups have compiled databases of experts from marginalized communities. Consider the “Database of Diverse Databases.” (editorsofcolor.com/diverse-databases) A project from Editors of Color by Conscious Style Guide, this site contains more than 100 databases featuring subject matter experts and freelancers from underrepresented groups, such as:

- LGBT+ Physicists — lgbtparticles.org/outlist.html
- Women in Machine Learning — directory.wimlworkshop.org/list
- Multicultural Marketing Experts Directory — multicultural.com/experts
- Disabled Cartoonists Database — disabledcartoonists.com
Joel Babdor, an immunologist at the University of California, San Francisco, says one of the most important ways for associations to work together is to share content that is not always immediately considered part of their voice.

In 2020, Babdor co-founded the group Black in Immuno, which supports Black researchers in immunology and other sciences. It urges institutions to collect and publish demographic data as part of action plans to empower marginalized researchers.

“Without this information, it is impossible to evaluate the state of the current system in terms of equity and diversity,” Babdor says. “It is never too late for progress.”

Of course, when we start talking about making changes, it’s hard not to think of the old proverb, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.” Fortunately,
voices, traditional promotion strategies often don’t include a truly full-spectrum of available audiences. Professionals who don’t belong to the narrow focus of traditional publishing may have long ago moved on to more inclusive platforms, channels, and gathering spaces.

+ Complacency. Many publishers genuinely hope that content will crossover to wider audiences without any proactive efforts. They then tend to hope new voices will find them based on their content.

Rethinking diversity is the first step to addressing these hurdles, but the study points out that action needs to follow if publishers truly want to elevate new voices. The report encourages marcomm professionals to reflect on their practices, challenge their assumptions, and change their behavior.

+ Value and engage directly with marginalized audiences. In addition to creating a fuller and better understanding of your content’s potential reach, finding who and where marginalized people turn to for content can provide new leads on where to reach out for partnerships.

+ Empower staff. Diverse hiring and other DEI initiatives are only effective if people are given the freedom, and feel comfortable, to do this work. This includes not burdening marginalized voices with speaking for their entire community.

+ Develop partnerships. For whatever community or audience a publisher is trying to reach, there is already a network of organizations and individuals doing the work to reach and represent those people. Publishers need to invest in establishing long-term partnerships with these organizations to find and develop talented writers.

“The work we do, our day-to-day work, is our way of effecting change. We work through these challenges by doing what we are best skilled to do: Find new voices and amplify them.”

SALLY KIM
senior vice president and publisher of G. P. Putnam’s Sons

organizations are working to cultivate new voices for our future.

“I founded Educare Publications because I recognize the need to elevate the diverse voices of college students and professionals,” says CEO George Paasewe. “Our mission is to advance writing skills and promote authorship and entrepreneurship amongst diverse learners while increasing the representation of diversity in our industry.”

But it’s important to note that improving inclusivity is not about sidelining veterans with 15 years of experience to make space for college grads or professionals new to the field.

In “Sister Act,” Whoopi doesn’t fire the rest of the choir and focus on the one new voice. Likewise, associations will have to evaluate existing systems and structures to better understand and address how certain practices can be alienating to qualified writers and editors who don’t belong to publishing’s traditional demographic.

Improving the system will benefit everyone in it and become an important part of bringing new voices forward to not leave anyone behind.

“When people have been successful in an existing system, they can feel threatened if that system changes and become unsure about whether they’ll continue to be successful with new diverse structures, processes, and hierarchies,” Williams says. “That can be threatening for some people, and you have to help them move through that and refer back to that ultimate goal of recognizing that we are better as an inclusive community.”

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In recent years — especially in the wake of high-profile murders such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd — many organizations and businesses offered a flurry of statements, promises, and commitments to DEI and antiracism. In Signature’s 2021 year-end issue, Leah Smiley, president of The Society for Diversity, told us, “A lot of organizations said the right things, had the right people in marketing photos. They got people in the door, celebrated diversity hires in more marketing, and then did nothing. Who cares if that person feels welcome, safe, or part of the team? Who cares if they leave in six months?”

While some efforts and initiatives are clearly half measures, it can difficult, especially for organizations just getting serious about their efforts, to tell if they are doing the right work.

The Time’s Up Foundation — which is dedicated to creating a society free of workplace discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender identity, and income level — offers the following advice to help your organization do more than just talk the talk.

+ **Apply an intersectional analysis to help understand and improve the experience of your staff.** Recognize the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination some of them may face, while being mindful of people’s agency in deciding which identities they feel safe and comfortable disclosing.

+ **Investigate the effects of your association’s external actions.** How do the products you produce or the policies you lobby for impact historically excluded communities? The work that your organization does externally can either build credibility and trust or undermine your stated values.

+ **Invest in structural changes that will genuinely benefit these communities.** For example, commit to a strategic planning process that centers on antiracism; hire facilitators that specialize in racial equity and racial healing; or set significant resources aside for training that effectively teaches people of all races and genders how to combat racist behavior, including unconscious bias and microaggressions.

So much of the work needed to create inclusive workplaces and organizations is measured in the long-term. But if you’re looking for some more immediate measures of your efforts to bring forward new voices on your team, consider some of the excellent tools being created by your peers, such as C4DIsC’s — Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications — Toolkits for Equity.

The Coalition for Diversity and Inclusion in Scholarly Communications toolkits consist of the Antiracism Toolkit for Allies, Antiracism Toolkit for Organizations and the soon to be released Antiracism Toolkit for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). You can find out more at www.c4disc.org.

For a short survey to help you gauge the progress of your team or organization, visit https://bit.ly/3zGqMnE.
Use Your Voice

And if you’re a director of marketing, executive editor, chief education officer, or other high-level manager, you can go ahead and start making changes with a few quick emails or phone calls.

And that doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t create equally meaningful change. Whatever your role, you have a voice. You can help your association call out to new voices. And it’s also an important step to moving away from respondents who don’t embrace inclusion.

You are going to be authentic and can move into those zones, be vulnerable, and be willing to acknowledge your past and commitment. Don’t always try to be leading. This isn’t an area where you can innovate and leapfrog. You really have to crawl before you walk and walk before you run.”

Sally Kim, senior vice president and publisher of G. P. Putnam’s Sons, an imprint of Penguin Random House, says it took her many years to recognize the power of her own voice to create change. “My path to publishing was anything but charmed,” Kim says. “There was no one really like me in the industry back then, especially in editorial. My background and perspective were not exactly assets.

“I felt lucky just to be here, so I took it upon myself to quiet my voice. I concentrated on those dualities of being an editor so that no one could question my right to be one — being introverted enough to wrestle with a piece for hours on end; but extroverted enough to be that piece’s ultimate champion.

“Now I know you need more than those things to be a good editor. I don’t need to underline what an upside-down time it’s been for all of us these past two years. But particularly as the national conversation opened up deeper wounds and much-needed reconciliations, so many of us didn’t know what our roles were, how we could work through these challenges by doing what we are best skilled to do: Find new voices and amplify them — publish works that so many others back into the world.”

DEI commitments in writing. Spell out your expectations in your organization’s RFP templates as well as on your website. This can be a welcome sign to marginalized professionals considering a partnership. It’s also an important step to moving away from respondents who don’t embrace inclusion.

Offer a simplified approach. Anamik Saha, co-author of “Rethinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing,” notes that the effort to reply to RFPs can be a major barrier to entry. Because the work that goes into RFPs is not compensated, agencies or independent contractor that don’t have as many resources are often left out of the process simply because they can’t afford to participate.

Share your budget. “Without a budget, practitioners, firms, and small businesses just try to bid the lowest, sometimes at the expense of what they’ll pay their people,” says Sarah Saska, co-founder and CEO of DEI consultancy Feminuity. “When that happens, it often further entrenches gender- and race-based wage and hiring gaps.”

BUILD A BETTER RFP

When we talk about a publication’s voice — or an association’s voice — it’s easy to focus on writers, editors, presenters, videographers, etc. But virtually everything an association does creates content. That means virtually everything they do is part of their voice. So, odds are, if you’re doing an RFP for it, it’s an opportunity for new voices.

Even better, many of the changes to make RFPs more equitable and accessible are relatively minor adjustments that can lead to significant returns.

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