

Corporate Commitment to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion: Analyzing the Responses of PR Agencies and Other Companies after 2020 Black Lives Matter Events

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Abstract

Communications and public relations is a predominantly White dominated industry with shockingly low representation of people of color. After the resurgence of Black Lives Matter in June 2020, companies and agencies quickly took a stance, with many showing their support after intense pressure from stakeholders. Organizations such as the Diversity Action Alliance are building off of this momentum and aim to accelerate diversity and representation in the communications and public relations industry by holding these companies and agencies accountable. This study looks at the websites of organizations that signed on with the Diversity Action Alliance to evaluate how they publicly present their Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Based on quantitative data as well as a qualitative content analysis, this paper found that a large number of these companies did not have any diversity related content on their websites in October 2020. Of those that did, only about half had comprehensive information that described tangible steps they were taking to combat racial inequity in the industry.

I. Introduction

Key players in the communications industry have the power to influence culture and shift the public narrative, so it is important that the people creating campaigns for audiences accurately represent them. Strategic campaign teams that are not diverse cannot truly understand the needs of their clients and are therefore limiting productivity and generation of ideas. In the ongoing struggle for racial equality, especially after the murder of George Floyd in June 2020, organizations have realized that it is beneficial to promote an inclusive workplace, and many are claiming to be advocates for diversity on social media and their websites. In June 2020, Ben & Jerry's and Nike, longtime activists for Black Lives Matter and other social issues, were quick to release messages of support, while newcomer advocates like McDonald's spoke out for the first time. While this is a step in the right direction, it is hard to measure the effectiveness and merit of what companies are doing and if their commitment to combat racial justice is sustainable.

Industry groups such as the Diversity Action Alliance (DAA) are aiming to hold their members accountable in their Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) initiatives. Results from these groups' studies will

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give organizations a clear picture of current DE&I practices and provide benchmarks in an effort to create more corporate diversity in the next five years. Current signatories of the DAA include a mix of Fortune 500 companies, public relations and communications agencies, communications schools and industry groups.

Consumers seem to be more aware of what companies are doing and often are critical of the information (or lack thereof) that companies release. The information provided on a company's website can give clients and consumers a better understanding of the steps they are taking to fight racial injustice and can have a large role in influencing public perception of the company. This paper will synthesize DE&I statements and commitments publicly shared on the websites of public relations agencies and large companies that have signed on to the DAA in 2020, looking for similarities in how content is shared and key commitments toward change. This will provide insight into how these core players can further charge towards a more diverse, equitable and inclusive public relations and communications industry.

II. Literature Review

Need For a More Diverse Industry

Minority representation in the public relations and communications industry is low. The Myers Report surveyed 700 advertising and communications professionals in early 2020. Of the respondents, 76.2% of junior level employees, 81.1% of mid-level employees and 82.9% of senior executives were White. Only 7.1% of junior level employees, 3.0% of mid-level employees and 3.8% of senior executives were Black (MediaVillage, 2020). These statistics are not representative of the U.S. population, which is comprised of approximately 40% of people with diverse non-White backgrounds. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), 60.1% of Americans are White and 13.4% Black.

Edwards (2013) explains how public relations is a cultural intermediary, which shapes the "presentation and representation" of culture (p. 243). Agencies have the power to shift the narrative, because the relationship between a source and its publics allows for the constant exchange of messages, which can be interpreted in different ways. PR provides social meaning and is a medium that shapes people's values and understandings of not only specific brands, but of the world.

Often, if a certain project or client involves an ethnic minority group, the viewpoints of diverse employees in an agency are welcome. However, when it comes to higher profile campaigns, the involvement of minorities is limited (Edwards, 2013). This strategic use of ethnicity places the responsibility of a few to provide the perspective of all minority groups. Minorities in public relations are not representative of the entire U.S. population. Given that this industry has such a large influence on culture, the people creating the campaigns for audiences must accurately represent them. Teams that are not diverse may not truly understand the needs of its clients, and thus are limiting productivity and generation of ideas.

When diversity programs are in place, much of the focus is on recruiting and hiring diverse employees to fill a quota, which Brunner (2008) describes as "knee-jerk diversity." However, "retaining and truly appreciating what diverse employees bring to the workforce" is the more important piece, as well as creating a welcoming and inclusive culture where people of color feel valued (Brunner, 2008, p. 157). If public relations by its very definition involves the relationship between an organization and its publics, diversity within the organization is essential to building and maintaining these relationships.

Black Lives Matter 2020 - Brand Statements

The Black Lives Matter movement saw a large resurgence in June 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. Companies, and brands were almost forced to respond. Some were quick to make statements acknowledging Black Lives Matter, and others waited to release statements only after competitors and consumers weighed in. This time, a "social issue" became everyone's issue, and companies that usually stay quiet actually spoke up.

In early June 2020, Edelman, a global communications firm, released a special report of its Trust Barometer which surveyed 2,000 random people on their views of brands and racial justice in America. Sixty percent of consumer respondents said that brands should publicly speak out on systemic racism, and more than half believed that taking a stand on racial justice is a moral and societal obligation for brands (Edelman,

2020). It is also significant that these numbers were noticeably higher from people of color. The data from the Edelman Trust Barometer shows that consumers want more from a brand than just its product. Many base their loyalty on the brand's issue stances, so it would be beneficial for brands to align themselves with their consumers.

According to Pasztor (2019), "Findings reveal three primary approaches in how organizations frame diversity: first, as an organizational asset promoted and preserved through its human resources and corporate values; second, as a driver of business excellence and competitive advantage; and finally, as a structural mechanism supported by diversity and inclusion initiatives such as employee mentoring, networking, diversity training, and institutionalized governance" (p. 455). To a degree, this shows that incorporating diversity rhetoric into one's mission statement provides a benefit to an organization, with the primary goal of advancing its reputation.

Companies include diversity practices on their corporate websites because this is one of the places that key stakeholders look to understand the organization. In a study in 2012, many corporate mission statements were found to have similar language and failed to explain robust diversity initiatives (Pasztor, 2019). A vague diversity statement does not necessarily translate into tangible action. The priority has seemed to be on a diversity-focused reputation without clear objectives on how to achieve it. Releasing clear content to the public is necessary for a company to inform its stakeholders about what the organization stands for. However, the most important part is the action the company chooses to take in order to make a difference.

Diversity Action Alliance

The Diversity Action Alliance (DAA) is "a coalition of Public Relations and communications leaders joining forces to accelerate progress in the achievement of meaningful and tangible results in diversity, equity and inclusion across our profession" (DAA, 2020). It has already partnered with over 100 top public relations agencies, Fortune 500 companies, and communications schools who are committed to changing the future of the industry.

The DAA has a clear commitment that incorporates three main components, with the goal of making an "impACT" on the industry: Adopt (best practices), Champion (the cause), and Track (diversity data). Below are the key action steps of each component as listed on the website (DAA, 2020):

ADOPT - Organization Commitment

- Accelerate progress in representation by hiring and promoting people of color, and other diverse talent, at all levels.
- Attract and retain diverse talent through internal and external announcements of diverse executive-level hires.
- Bolster the pipeline of people of color through an annual review of internal metrics, and leverage best practices to address any identified issues.

CHAMPION - Personal Commitment

- Actively sponsor diverse talent, including people of color.
- Role model positive change internally and externally through my words and actions.
- Drive and embed inclusivity as part of my organization's culture, helping to empower people of color in their career.
- Visibly hold myself and the leaders in my organization accountable for progress.

TRACK - Organization Commitment

- Benchmark and track inclusion to improve the culture of inclusion within our organization.
 - Share key representation metrics with the Diversity Action Alliance for benchmarking and for anonymous reporting of the aggregate progress within the communications profession.
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This study will examine the DAA companies' websites for statements on diversity and actions taken. There is a gap in research on diversity practices by public relations professionals. Thus, this study asks:

RQ1: How do companies present DE&I content to public stakeholders?

RQ2: What themes are present when comparing websites?

III. Methods

A qualitative content analysis of the websites of 86 companies listed as signatories by the Diversity Action Alliance (identified in Appendix A) was conducted to examine content describing public diversity, equity & inclusion practices. The organizations analyzed consist primarily of public relations agencies and Fortune 500 companies with large communications efforts, such as Exelon and Johnson & Johnson. By signing the DAA, these companies have committed to making real change, but an important factor is how they communicate this information to their publics. Excluded from analysis were 29 DAA signatories, in categories such as specialty diversity organizations, employee engagement firms, and universities.

For the purpose of this study, any content or statements that may have been released on social media channels were not analyzed. Websites are the primary location where potential clients, future employees, and key stakeholders look to gain information about the company. This is an analysis of the information publicly available on company websites and does not include information or DE&I initiatives that are not accessible through the website itself.

Each website was thoroughly analyzed and coded based on key criteria, some of them based on elements listed in previous studies, and some on emergent themes observed in a pilot analysis of a small sample.

1. The presence of a clear statement or press release in May or June of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd – a message addressing racial injustice in the U.S. and inequalities in the public relations/communications industry.
 2. The presence of at least one follow-up statement or press release from July-October 2020 providing actionable steps the company is taking to combat racial injustice in the industry.
 3. The presence of diversity, equity & inclusion goals embedded in the values or mission statement of the company.
 4. The presence of the company's involvement with the Diversity Action Alliance or mention of itself as a signatory.
 5. The presence of commitments that align with the ADOPT, CHAMPION, and TRACK components of DAA goals. It was observed that a website either mentioned all three components or none at all, therefore they were combined into one metric.
 6. Overall ease of finding diversity, equity & inclusion or racial injustice focused content on the company website on a scale of 0 to 5.
 - **0 = No DE&I content was present.**
 - **1 = Poor.** Many clicks required to locate DE&I information. Content was present on the website but it was extremely difficult to find.
 - **2 = Below Average.** Multiple clicks to locate DE&I information.
 - **3 = Average.** Three clicks to locate DE&I information.
 - **4 = Good.** Two clicks to locate DE&I information.
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- **5 = Excellent.** Only one click to locate DE&I information, meaning content was prominent on the homepage of the website or very easy to find.
 - Location of information also noted (home page, “about” section or another clearly marked tab, blog or news section, career section).
7. Overall comprehensiveness of diversity, equity & inclusion or racial injustice focused content on a scale of 0 to 5.
- **0 = No DE&I content was present.**
 - **1 = Poor.** DE&I content was present on the website but it was extremely vague (e.g. only provided a short statement with no action steps).
 - **2 = Below Average.** DE&I content was vague (e.g. a statement with minimal action steps that did not align with ADOPT, CHAMPION, TRACK goals and benchmarks).
 - **3 = Average.** DE&I content was sufficient (e.g. company had either a statement or resources that addressed components of ADOPT, CHAMPION, TRACK goals and benchmarks but provided minimal detail on how these would be achieved).
 - **4 = Good.** DE&I content was detailed (e.g. company had either a statement or resources that fulfilled components of ADOPT, CHAMPION, TRACK goals and benchmarks with moderate detail on how these would be achieved).
 - **5 = Excellent.** DE&I content was extremely detailed (e.g. company had either a statement or resources that fulfilled all components of ADOPT, CHAMPION, TRACK goals and benchmarks and provided specific action steps with clear detail on how they would be achieved).

IV. Findings

Table 1. Website Statements

86 websites	Statement May-June 2020	Statement July-Nov 2020	DE&I goals in mission	DAA mentioned	ADOPT CHAMPION TRACK commitments
Yes	44 (51%)	36 (42%)	38 (44%)	10 (12%)	44 (51%)
No	42 (49%)	50 (58%)	48 (56%)	76 (88%)	42 (49%)

Statement Made in May/June 2020

As seen in Table 1, 44 of the 86 companies (51%) published a press release or statement in May/June 2020 on their website following the murder of George Floyd and resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. During this time, consumers were extremely cognizant of what companies were saying in response to the national conversation against racial injustice. Some PR agency statements were very comprehensive and included specific action steps. For example, Golin released a [statement](#) on June 4, 2020 that advocated its solidarity with the Black community and listed five immediate actions the agency would take to tackle race inequality, including additional “fast-tracked” DE&I efforts. Others were somewhat vague and gave their support of Black Lives Matter without tangible evidence that they would make an organizational change. For example, Taft Communications considers DE&I to be one of their client focuses. They released a statement also on June 4, declaring, “At Taft, we pledge to do more within our own organization. We will speak out on issues of justice. We will find ways for each of us — as individuals and as a team — to make a positive impact in this tumultuous world.” However, the company had not released any additional information at the time of this study. There was no place on the website to find out about DE&I practices for the agency itself as well as specific deliverables that align with the DAA’s ADOPT-CHAMPION-TRACK goals.

Statement Between July-Nov 2020

Fewer companies, only 36 out of 86 (33%), made statements between July and November 2020. Most were subsequent statements to their initial one in May or June and provided a robust plan on their steps towards DE&I. A few of these statements were the first time the company released diversity-related content.

DE&I Goals in Mission

Thirty-eight of the 86 websites (44%) had DE&I goals in their mission statement or company values. If a company signs the Diversity Action Alliance, it is assumed that diversity is something its management strongly believes in. However, these results indicate that a minority of DAA members prominently describe diversity as something important to them on their websites. Most DAA companies (51%) had released statements or press releases that described their commitment to DE&I, but this was not incorporated into mission statements or publicly acknowledged as a core value of the company.

Diversity Action Alliance (DAA) Mentioned

Only 10 of the 86 websites (12%) had any mention of the Diversity Action Alliance. This does not mean that the remaining 76 companies do not prioritize DE&I principles; many websites had extensive DE&I information and commitments. However, it is interesting to note that DAA membership is not something that is widely shared. As the number of signatories grows in the coming years, it will likely be a key indicator of organizational diversity efforts across industries.

ADOPT-CHAMPION-TRACK Commitments

Although few websites explicitly mentioned the DAA, 51% of the 86 websites made clear commitments that aligned with the DAA’s ADOPT-CHAMPION-TRACK framework. Under the ADOPT section, these companies committed to hiring and promoting diverse talent. Under the CHAMPION section, companies committed to changing their work culture to be more inclusive. Some examples made were anti-bias training workshops, diversity work groups, business resource groups, etc. Under the TRACK section, companies committed to creating benchmarks to track diversity numbers in their organizations. A handful of organizations made their numbers clearly available on their websites, with the results showing that significant changes need to be made in order to accelerate diverse talent into leadership positions.

Table 2. Website Components on DE&I

Ranking Scale	Ease of Finding Info on DE&I	Extent of DE&I Info
0 = Not Present	30 (35%) = not present	30 (35%) = not present
1 = Poor	6 (7%) = many clicks to locate info	11 (13%) = extremely vague
2 = Below Average	8 (9%) = multiple clicks to locate info	4 (5%) = vague
3 = Average	15 (17%) = 3 clicks to locate info	8 (9%) = sufficient
4 = Good	10 (12%) = 2 clicks to locate info	15 (17%) = detailed
5 = Excellent	17 (20%) = 1 click to locate info	18 (21%) = extremely detailed

Ease of Finding Information on DE&I

It is significant to report that 30 out of 86 companies (35%) had no DE&I-related content on their websites at all (Table 2). These companies received a ranking of 0. The 55 remaining companies that had some DE&I-related content were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that many clicks were required to find the information as it was “hidden” on the website, and 5 meaning that the information was very easy to find, commonly right on the home page.

Seventeen companies were ranked as excellent, including WE Communications, Finn Partners Inc., and Padilla, which had DE&I information visible directly on the home page of the website. Ten company sites only required two clicks to find DE&I information, and 15 sites required three clicks to find the information. On five company websites, DE&I information was extremely difficult to locate. Some examples were Southwest

Airlines, which had its DE&I information buried in the Careers section, and Weber Shandwick, which had its information several pages deep in the News section.

Overall, 11 companies had their information located directly on the home page, 18 in the about section or another clearly marked tab, 19 in the blog or news section, and eight in the career section.

Extent of DE&I Information

It was notable that 30 out of 86 companies (35%) had no DE&I related content on their website at all (Table 2). The 55 remaining companies that had some DE&I related content were ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning that their DE&I content and commitments were extremely vague, and 5 meaning that the information was detailed and comprehensive with clear company goals and benchmarks.

Eighteen companies were ranked as excellent and had an entire section of their website dedicated to DE&I. Most of these were large Fortune 500 companies with thousands of employees such as Levi's, Target and Proctor & Gamble. Johnson & Johnson had some of the most comprehensive information available. It is clear that DE&I is not a new initiative for these companies, and they have been working many years on their culture. Nine companies were extremely vague concerning DE&I. For example, Peppercom received a ranking of 1 because the agency released a statement that "unequivocally denounced racism," but failed to provide further detail about how the company would participate in ending these systemic injustices. Peppercom's only action step was, "We'll be engaging with an organization that supports bringing equality and justice to the Black community and examining how else we can have impact in the immediate future." Presence of an updated statement or DE&I content was not found anywhere else on the website at the time of this study.

V. Discussion

Presence of DE&I on Company Websites

Given that all of the companies have signed the DAA, it is clear that they want to be perceived as being committed to diversity. However, for many of them, the word diversity was nowhere to be found on their websites, much less any information about what they are doing or what they plan to do. Half of these agencies did not release any sort of acknowledgement in response to Black Lives Matter or racial inequalities in the industry in 2020.

Based on websites alone, DE&I does not appear to be a priority to many DAA signatories. A lack of DE&I information on the website makes it appear as if the company is not doing anything. It is highly possible that they might be working internally on DE&I goals, but if it is not mentioned on the website, key stakeholders will not be informed, and thus assume that it is not taking any action. This could be detrimental to a company's identity. For communications professionals who are searching for jobs, the website may be the first place they will look when researching the company. Potential clients will also look at the website to determine if they want to partner with an agency. Failure to provide any information about DE&I, especially in the wake of a national movement against racial injustice, is harmful for a company's image and gives the perception that it is not a priority. DAA signatories have already made the commitment to accelerate DE&I progress in the industry, so it would be beneficial for these agencies to publish their goals and commitments in order to remain transparent.

Roughly half of the companies did have information that aligned with the DAA's ADOPT-CHAMPION-TRACK commitment. Although this framework was never explicitly mentioned in any of the websites, 51% of DAA companies outlined company goals that align with it (generally: hiring and promoting diverse talent, creating an inclusive culture internally, tracking and releasing diversity numbers). Regardless of all of the other variables examined, having these commitments be accessible on the website is important, because it provides substantial meaning and action behind words. Companies that release specifics are attractive to stakeholders because of their clear goals and detailed action.

Trends Among Agencies

DE&I seems to be a new challenge that many public relations and communications agencies are still trying to navigate. Increased pressure from stakeholders who now engage publicly with consumers online has made them realize that they need to make a change if they want to keep up with the evolving world. These agencies may have lacked prior DE&I efforts, which might be why they did not release any information until 2020.

The findings in this study show that most of the larger agencies seem to have slightly more DE&I content on their websites, which makes sense as they seem to set the industry standards. However, the comprehensiveness and location of this content is widely varied.

BCW, one of the largest communications agencies in the world, did not provide any clear information on its website. The initial BCW statement, released on June 11, 2020, was very comprehensive and outlined the specific actions the agency would take, however, as it was incredibly difficult to locate, this sent mixed messages. Inclusion & Diversity is identified as one of BCW's "Strategic Solutions," otherwise known as an area that the agency specializes in. After clicking on this section to get more information, there was a link to its June 11 DE&I press release at the very bottom of the page. DE&I goals were not embedded in the company mission statement, and the information was hard to find, which ultimately results in confusion or lack of awareness of public stakeholders.

Another example of poor accessibility was Ketchum, another of the largest global communications agencies. The first thing visible on its home page was "We're On This Revolutionary Road Together," with information about the company's new D&I officer. In the linked article, Ketchum addresses its commitment to DE&I, however, it is notable that comprehensive information is not available anywhere else on the website. Ketchum's official statements are available on a blog page (several clicks were required to find it), but the language and action steps used are quite vague.

Agency websites are typically minimalistic, which allows them to showcase their creative work. This may be why DE&I content is most commonly located in the news or blog sections of the website, in order to keep in line with the overall style. However, people looking at the website would not be able to find DE&I easily without scrolling past all of the current blog posts on other topics. Assets such as blog posts or press releases are published chronologically, so the location of content about racial injustice as a blog post seems to categorize it as a passing trend, as opposed to something the company sustains long term. The fact that 51% of companies released a statement but only 44% had DE&I goals in their mission statements or corporate values also speaks to this fact.

There is no sense of consistency throughout DE&I content on any agency website. Some agencies have robust information but it is challenging for the average person to easily locate on the website. Others only have a single vague statement of support towards Black Lives Matter on their home pages.

VI. Conclusion

This study has limitations, as it includes only a small sample of the world's numerous companies and PR agencies. However, it gives insight into the current state of diversity, equity & inclusion in the industry and how organizations are communicating their responses to the public. Even companies that have clearly committed to DE&I, as verified by their Diversity Action Alliance membership, do not have websites that fully reflect their goals. After the fight for racial justice in America was heightened during mid-2020, companies were forced to quickly react. The findings of this study show that some companies published comprehensive information about their DE&I efforts, while others failed to release anything. Moving forward, it is essential for companies to be proactive instead of reactive when it comes to racial injustice. This is not a cultural trend that will fade away over time. Specific action plans and organizational changes must be communicated with stakeholders. People are expecting that companies be transparent, and ultimately business will be jeopardized if a company does not make it clear that DE&I is a priority to them. Saying nothing at all, even by companies that have signed the Diversity Action Alliance, makes a bigger statement than they likely intended. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

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Appendix

A. *DAA Signatories Included in Study (86)*

Axis	History Factory	Padilla
Accenture	Horizon Therapeutics	Peppercom
Affect	Hotwire Global Communications	PepsiCo
BCW	ICF Next	Procter & Gamble
Beehive Strategic Communication	IPG's Constituency Management Group	Prosek Partners
C Plus C	Idea Grove	Quad
Citizen Relations	Ink Communications Co.	Racepoint Global
Current Global	JPA Health	Ragan Communications
Day One Agency	Johnson & Johnson	Red Havas
Development Counsellors International	KWT Global, LLC	Rogers & Cowan PMK
DiGennaro Communications	Kaplow Communications	SHIFT Communications
Edelman	Ketchum	Southwest Airlines
Enbridge	L3Harris Technologies	Stagwell Group
Evoke KYNE	LaForce	Story Partners
Exelon Corporation	LaVoie Health Science	Taft Communications
Experian	LaunchSquad	Target
Finn Partners, Inc.	Levi Strauss & Co.	Tenneco
Finsbury	LinkedIn	The10Company
FleishmanHillard	Litzky PR	Vault Communications
Furia Rubel Communications	MSL Group	WE Communications
G&S Business Communications	Makovsky	Walker Sands
Gagen MacDonald LLC	March Communications	Weber Shandwick
Genpact	Mars, Incorporated	Westinghouse Electric Company
Germinder & Associates, Inc.	Medtronic	Zeno Group
Glen Echo Group	Mower	rbb Communications
Golin	MullenLowe PR	
Hill + Knowlton Strategies	National Association of Manufacturers	
Havas Formula	Novant Health	
Hawthorne Strategies	Orangefiery	
Highwire PR	PAN Communications	

B. DAA Signatories Eliminated from this study (29)

ACLU	JWM Talent/Monday Talent
Brilliant Ink	Jacobs Consulting & Executive Coaching
Butler University College of Communication	Joyful Planet, LLC
Cal State Fullerton	Judith Cushman & Associates
Cheer Partners	PRowl
Cherlene Wheeless LLC	Page
Duke University	ROI
Forum-Group	Temple PRSSA
Foxtel	UF PRSSA
Glen M. Broom Center for Professional Development in Public Relations	University of Colorado Boulder
High Note Consulting	University of Florida Public Relations Department
Institute for Public Relations	University of Georgia
Integral	University of Tennessee Knoxville, College of Communication and Information