

# Does PR have a diversity problem?

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## *A look at Black female representation in PR*

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Everyone is finally talking about diversity and particularly anti-Black racism. Hundreds of days worth of protests have emboldened this conversation.

The people want to know more about the composition of teams, specific actions to address race-based barriers and how leaders are taking steps to make concrete changes. Organizations are increasingly under the spotlight to demonstrate action on these issues, and they're looking to communicators to give guidance on how to engage in dialogue. Increasingly they're noticing what I noticed a few years ago, their communications teams are not diverse.

In 2018, I researched whether there was a lack of Black women in public relations, and if so, what was keeping them out. Limited research about Canadian public relations led me to draw on data from the U.S. which uncovered four key insights:

### **PR's image is lily-white**

A study conducted on movies and TV over a 15-year period showed women in public relations were portrayed as attractive, social, stylish, and mostly, if not all, white.

Studies on reputation and image made it clear:

If we only see one image of the ideal public relations practitioner, we become programmed to believe the field is only for that one type of person.

This common reputation, image and identity can greatly impact the way PR is valued as a business function.

### **PR teams are not diverse**

- PR teams are mostly composed of white females, yet leadership teams are largely male.
- Disparities are even more obvious when it comes to racial and ethnic groups.
- Practitioner demographics don't proportionately reflect the diversity of the country.
- Black women are underrepresented in senior management.

### **Gender and racial barriers still exist**

- Women account for more than two-thirds of all practitioners, yet still make an average of 6 per cent less than male practitioners.
- Factors like ethnicity and race impact where women are placed in the gender-power scheme, where white women are placed higher than others.
- Black women face dual discrimination, are more likely to be in worst situations when it comes to job level, income, security and satisfaction, and overall have more barriers that exclude them from getting promoted.
- Although discrimination is of course a barrier, so too is a lack of Black role models and mentors to emulate, learn from, or create support groups with.

### **Diversity is vital**

- There should be as much diversity inside the organization as there is outside for the organization to be the most effective.
- When organizations or in this case PR, neglects to embrace diversity it can miss huge opportunities not only to reach diverse publics, but it can become more vulnerable to possible crises.

### **Study participants**

I privately interviewed 21 Black female practitioners about working in Ontario PR. Participants worked mostly in intermediate and middle management levels, in a range of industries, between the ages of 31 and 54 years old.

#### **THEIR ANSWERS BELOW, MIRRORED PREVIOUS RESEARCH:**

**Mentors:** Most participants had mentors, but many were not Black, and those that were, did not work in public relations.

**Inclusivity:** Participants felt PR was not inclusive, it was white-dominated, and many told stories not of explicit exclusion, but of a knowledge that they were not “part of the club.”

**Barriers:** Many cited being held back by managers, discrimination, and motherhood as barriers to their advancement.

**Covert racism:** Participants described that their experiences with racism were mostly not direct, yet they experienced microaggressions; subtle, engrained, and unconscious biases; and having felt they were discriminated against, but couldn’t prove it.

**Code-switching:** Participants described being held to a higher standard; having to suppress their voice as to avoid the “angry Black stereotype;” and changing their hairstyle and wardrobe in response to negative comments, microaggressions, direct sabotage and to appear non-threatening.

**Mostly white leadership:** Almost all spoke about their organizational leaders being mostly white, and therefore not having a comfortable space to talk about their race-salient experiences.

**Deterrents:** Participants mentioned a lack of Black role models, leaders, and professors, and not having the right network as deterrents to entering PR.

### **The bottom line**

The reputation of and representation within PR is narrow and *could be* deterring black women as they may not consider it a field with which to enter and excel.

All participants agreed, diversity is vital to the effectiveness and credibility of PR. Therefore, it’s crucial to encourage more people of all races to pursue careers in the practice and to create spaces where diverse practitioners feel safe, included and empowered to do their jobs effectively.

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