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Nicole Bernard's Bold Leadership Diversifies FOX Through Audience Strategy

By Edward Rice, III

Special to the NNPA from the Los Angeles Sentinel

Reimagining the established business functions of a worldwide entertainment conglomerate is a huge undertaking to say the least. When FOX Executive Nicole Bernard was identified for such a task, she was initially cautious and for good reason.

"FOX Audience Strategy was launched three years ago. I was asked to take on this role and in doing so I coined the term that named the department 'audience strategy,'" recalls the Senior Vice President of Audience Strategy. "The thinking behind the department was the chairman's need, his recognition that the domestic demographics in this country were changing so dramatically and his thoughts were 'how can we create content for and distribute content to audiences we don't know?' The demographics are shifting so drastically that if we don't find the most strategic and engaging way to not only find out who they are and engage them around our brand then our businesses will be in trouble. It's really about business growth."

The result is an innovative approach to a required business initiative that will perhaps reshape the way the industry looks at inclusion.

"We set about thinking about a business operating unit that would align from a business perspective core community values with our business interests. That was very important to me because originally what I thought was being offered to me was a traditional diversity job and I was not interested in that," said the DC native.

To clarify, Nicole explained that while she continues to believe in the ideal and the platform of diversity, she simply was not impressed with the mechanisms and the initiatives that in her opinion seemed to fall flat.

"I just thought the approach had become antiquated, outgrown. It became more of a 'tail wagging the dog' situation where now the viewer, consumers, the masses, the marketplace are this and the only place it looks different are businesses," claims Bernard.

According to the Howard University graduate and mother of twins, the ultimate goal is to engage broader audiences because that is the business equivalent to growth.

"You want more people watching, buying, and downloading what it is you're creating. No matter what vernacular is used to describe them and that's this very big pool, which is people," she stated. "So the question is how do we create opportunities to engage people across our businesses in ways that truly serve as resources for those businesses? As I thought about it this was going to be the bases of what we're charged with."

Proposing diversity as a tool to expand the current audience appeared to be a savvy business strategy but as the FOX executive soon discovered the concept was more difficult for some to grasp than expected.

"I had friends and colleagues who work in more traditional diversity and inclusion departments say to me, 'Nicole don't you think this is going to be confusing?' And this came at the height of my comfort level letting me know I was on the right track of moving away from this idea not just in name alone but theory," she insisted. "I said in return, 'What's so confusing about audience strategy to you? Why would you think it's confusing?' And the response I received was how will people know where to go when there's a problem? And I said therein lies the issue. If you view diversity as a repository for problems that's why people's eyes glaze over and all the initiatives feel like lip service; because in essence you're teeing up your business to be a repository for problems. As opposed to how I look at it, it's a platform for opportunity. Diversity by its true definition simply means more. An array of - isn't that what we're here to do, galvanize more? We want business growth. That's what it's all about." She continued, "That's when it became clear to me that audience strategy would act as a resource - a repository for opportunity, a resource for all of our businesses."

"Our division works across all the entertainment properties," Bernard explained. "So my role grew to creating a department that would service all of the FOX entertainment businesses, which include all of the broadcast, cable, sports, digital, tv and film entities."

With limited staff and budget at her disposal, providing such a specific service to such a broad cross section of businesses was going to be a challenge. Thus, one of her very first tasks was determining the need.

"I went in and interviewed all the chairmen and we spoke about the shifting demographics in America," said Bernard. "I would hear a lot for example, 'We saw the 2010 census and what do you think we should be doing to galvanize Hispanics around box office or how do we drive more Hispanic viewership to our programming at the network - how do we engage them?' The first thing I said is to stop having an us vs. them conversation and realize that this IS your general market now," she said passionately. "Hearing these conversations informed us on what the need was; a resource is only a resource to the extent that it's servicing a need. What we realized is that we have to start with a perception shift. Work on shifting perceptions within the four corners of the studio about what true and authentic engagement is - not the patronizing outreach, which is a one sided communication where its, 'look at us you underserved people and we're here to help you - but in fact we need you because without you, we don't exist.'"

What ensued according to Nicole, became a conversation about engagement. "When we thought about it we broke it down into needs and recognized that perception shifts lead the charge there. If we change the way people think about things (even though a lot of times they don't realize they think about it in this way) that they stop seeing diverse as remedial or 'green' or a nicety or a social conversation that we must do and have and turn it into an opportunity to engage with more people who are not so different, they're just people," she said. "Now it's a business conversation, now you're looking at the bottom line because you're broadening your audience, which means more. You increase your viewership, you increase your consumers, you increase your ad revenues, and it increases your bottom line. This is not a social conversation."

"We decided we would bring to the studio in general or to specific businesses, really innovative strategic partners who could service, let's say the film business with really dynamic opportunities to market to bigger audiences that nobody had thought about before," she claimed. "Not because they're not bright, they're really good at what they do but because we're simply used to doing business in a certain way; erroneously continuing to define general market and mass market as more homogeneous than it really was. We wanted to create intimate environments for business conversations that would spark ideas and spark business connectivity to diverse vendors who could change business. What then happened was a very natural shift in assumptions."

One such dynamic opportunity was the partnership between FOX and Bakewell Media, via The Taste of Soul. While FOX has maintained a consistent presence at The Taste



FOX Executive Nicole Bernard

of Soul over the years, Bernard saw the event as a chance to further strengthen connection to the African-American community.

"It was all about being forward thinking and bringing forward thinking opportunities either individually or collectively to the African-American community," Bernard revealed. "There was a joint dedication to that and both FOX and Bakewell Media believe have existing brands that on their own do that but together the potential is really great."

Taste of Soul was the impetus of what will hopefully evolve into a long and fruitful collaboration. For Bernard, gone are the old days of sponsorship of just writing a check to say you were there. Her concern was how to turn sponsorship into authentic engagement that drives business back to business so those sponsorships, those business engagements are truly valuable. Her first step in ensuring that FOX's involvement in the Taste of Soul: a Los Angeles Street Festival, was valuable this year was going behind Starquest. The Taste of Soul talent competition. "That was a no-brainer," she exclaimed. "From American Idol to X-Factor, FOX is the home of the big talent competitions so this made absolute sense. Initially, they were just asking for talent but I felt we do better than that then I came across this and couldn't believe we hadn't thought of it. It was so obvious."

As the Audience Strategy continues to broaden the reach of FOX across all its entertainment properties, partnerships like this prove valuable to local and national markets.

"It's not just about Taste of Soul but what it represents. It demonstrates a critical value African Americans bring to FOX and the richness of FOX," Bernard says. "It demonstrates marketing business value around a very dynamic wealthy constituency and we share a thinking that while there are elements of that engagement that might be local, there's an easy concept of business integration that would bring an immediate value add for our sponsorship dollars." The national platform, states Bernard very bluntly. "That is our brand and the content that amplify that and connect them to the FOX brand and programming that made the marriage make sense. Its thinking about how we work together to amplify the Taste of Soul."

What Ms. Bernard is alluding to are the plans currently underway as a direct result of a joint venture, to take the Taste of Soul on the road. The goal of the project is to develop a roots campaign, which means creating local content for and engagement with African American audiences across the country. This level of exposure not only puts Taste of Soul on a fast track with FOX audiences but it also connects FOX nationally with a recognizable African American brand, that says FOX is about us and engages us.

"The bottom line of all this is the recognition of the tremendous value, that we have had," says Bernard in between bites of trail mix. "That the value be recognized in mass, not be questioned any more, that it is plain spoken. I'd love for the collective to see this partnership as a roadmap to acting in concert either around this initiative or others because it's business for us all. It's the value proposition. When we recognize the value in our community then it's like a domino effect. Everybody recognizes it."

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Created by the Durham City-County Sustainability Office Greener Durham, the program is designed to educate residents about ways they can save energy, conserve water, reduce waste, and connect with nature - and then give them prizes for taking those actions.

Participants register at www.ChargeAheadDurham.org and are sent three actions or "missions" per week to complete. The charges come with detailed instructions, links to videos, and needed materials, an estimate of the environmental impact, and other helpful information. Missions range in difficulty, cost, and time involved, though most are low or no cost efforts.

"In developing this program, we looked at ways we could make it easier for people to take positive actions to help the environment," said Durham City-County Sustainability Manager John Freid. "Many people say they know they should do more, but aren't sure what should be a priority, are afraid they might do something the wrong way, or they have a hard time finding the time to take simple actions. We give participants the specifics on what to do and incentives to get it done."

For more information, including a list of prize sponsors and examples of charge ahead missions, visit ChargeAheadDurham.org or call (919) 560-7999.