

Let's buy commitment, not blackness

TONY BROWN
Syndicated Columnist

NEW YORK -- Recent events have turned the spotlight on Worlds of Curls, a black-owned hair-care manufacturing company, located at 3111 N. Alameda St., Compton, Calif. 90222.

A black executive of this company, along with a white executive from Revlon, insulted the black Community in an Oct. 13 *Newsweek* article detailing a white takeover of the \$3 billion black beauty market.

Blacks, black pride and commitment to the black community can drop dead, for all the Worlds of Curls' advertising manager cares. He simply wants black people's money.

But like 20 other black-owned companies that manufacture hair-care products, Worlds of Curls belongs to AHBAI, the American Health and Beauty Aids Institute. This black trade association has developed a "Proud Lady" logo to identify the products of these black companies.

If you know the products are black-produced, you will know that the firms are "deeply committed" to the economic stability of the black community, AHBAI argues. AHBAI's theory is that blackness should stimulate the consumer to stop Revlon and Alberto-Culver from swallowing up the remaining 30 percent of the black hair-care market; the two already have 70 percent (up from 41 percent five years ago).

Worlds of Curls is a black-owned company, but does that necessarily translate into commitment?

If the firm is committed to blacks, why has it not fired (and made the firing public) an employee who contradicted what AHBAI stands for? Why has

Worlds of Curls not made a formal apology to the black community, as Revlon did?

"Please note that the statements made by Mr. (Harold) Augustus were unauthorized by the company's chief executive officer, Mr. Frank Davie, and do not reflect the policy or sentiments of Worlds of Curls Inc.," Lafayette Jones, AHBAI executive director, wrote to me.

"I would appreciate it if you would in future statements about this issue make it clear that Worlds of Curls' viewpoint was terribly misrepresented in the article ("Targeting Black Dollars: White-Owned Companies Muscle Minority Firms Out of the Hair-Care Market," *Newsweek*, Oct. 13). Worlds of Curls, like all the other black manufacturers of ethnic hair-care products, will not be driven out of this market," he wrote.

My response to Mr. Jones is as follows:
Your letter has added to my confusion about Worlds of Curls vis-a-vis the black community.

How can I clarify the company's position? I have no idea what it is.

How was Worlds of Curls misrepresented? Has Mr. Davie publicly responded to Mr. Augustus? Has he repudiated the statement or fired Mr. Augustus?

Are you suggesting that the statement made by Mr. Bottner was authorized by Revlon? Is that the difference between the Revlon insult and the Worlds of Curls insult? I think not.

What, Mr. Jones, is the issue? Buying from black people just because they are black or support-

ing businesses that support the black community? Black people owe Worlds of Curls no more allegiance than they owe Revlon or Alberto-Culver.

Although your letter is incorrect when it asserts that I asked two audiences not to support Worlds of Curls, it is true that I questioned how they could use one standard with Revlon and another with Worlds of Curls. Officials from both companies are guilty of racist exploitation in their utterances.

Simply put, Mr. Jones, being black is not enough for me. I don't need to buy it. What I buy with my money is commitment to my community.

Mr. Davie is quoted in *Black Enterprise* as welcoming Revlon and Alberto-Culver to a share of the black beauty market. The vice president of Luster Products, another AHBAI member, also shares this view. That seems to contradict AHBAI's position.

Another contradiction: *Advertising Age* (Oct. 27) reported that Worlds of Curls "is seeking an agency for its \$3 million to \$5 million account." Two black agencies were invited to pitch, but Worlds of Curls "says it 'wouldn't rule out' " white agencies, *Advertising Age* concluded.

If AHBAI is asking that the black consumer spend \$3 billion with blacks who manufacture hair-care products -- because they are black -- why should blacks not demand an apology from Worlds of Curls (whose advertising manager said: "I'm not like the black fathers with the black pride and all. The bottom line is to make money.")? And how can Worlds of Curls not hire a black advertising agency?

The black hair-care manufac-



urers have a problem that goes deeper than the threat from Revlon or Alberto-Culver. These two firms can only succeed with the help of the black consumer. It is the black man and woman who are determining the future of this \$10 billion industry.

And it is the black man and woman who must be served, and whose community must be respected and financially supported, if the threat to AHBAI is to be dissipated.

Buying black is not a support system. It is a slogan to take money from the black consumer and put it into a few black hands. Black hands that hand all of the money to white hands are no more beneficial to the black community than white hands that hand all of the money to white hands.

Worlds of Curls, like some of the other AHBAI members, seems obsessed with the white market, perhaps running the risk of alienating their black foundation.

An excellent *Charlotte Post* article by Jalyne Strong quoted a local expert who said that the problem of black manufacturers in the industry began some time

ago, when the black manufacturer abandoned the black dealer for larger chain and supermarket stores.

Isaac Simpson, owner and founder of Simpson's Beauty Supply stores in Charlotte, told the city's leading black newspaper: "Black manufacturers sold out, rather than having tried to cultivate the small black dealer." Simpson suggested that black manufacturers are now expecting a loyalty that they themselves did not give.

That impression is pervasive -- and growing. AHBAI would spend its time much more efficiently in addressing this concern than in asking blacks to buy because the seller is black. That argument lacks the force of logic.

I am committed to Bronner Brothers because it saved a black farm, to Soft Sheen because of "Black-on-Black Love," to M&M because it supports black colleges, to Johnson Products because it sent 1,600 black students to college, to Pro-Line and many other AHBAI members because they support black people.

I do not support any company, black or white, that does not

make it abundantly clear that the black consumer deserves respect and financial support.

If Revlon and Alberto-Culver will do the right thing and significantly put back into the black community the way they significantly take out of the black community, I will spend up to 50 percent of my health and beauty aids budget with them, and encourage others to do likewise.

And unless an AHBAI member supports the black community, it will be driven out of this market. Those AHBAI firms that support the black community will be preserved by the black community. Revlon and Alberto-Culver do not have the power to do so, but black people do.

An apology and clarification of its policy toward the black community from Worlds of Curls might be the AHBAI's first step back. If Mr. Davie needs a national TV platform to do so, I'll provide him with one.

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Men lacking? So what?

To The Editor:

This is a somewhat late response to a series of articles the *Chronicle* published regarding the lack of single black men.

In a sense, I was quite surprised at this *Chronicle* for getting on this bandwagon when so many other issues face the black community today.

Basically, I am of the opinion that this is a dead issue, long ago exploited by the likes of *Time*, *Ebony* and countless other articles, essays and television programs.

I do not deny that sheer numbers support the fact that there is a degree of imbalance; I'm just saying -- so what? I can't do anything about it! As much as I'd like to clone Denzel Washington, Amad Rashad and the many other perhaps lesser-known fine and gifted black men I've met in my life -- I can't do anything about it.

I am not, however, going to brood over it or become negative over the fact that I'm 31 years old, single, unattached and live far away from home roots. This is my life, I've chosen this, and I will and do make the best of it.

What am I lacking within

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myself? Not much -- a man, perhaps, and having one would be nice -- but is he going to add a quality of life I don't already have now? Well, maybe, that is if he was not only fine and gifted (and by fine I don't solely mean outward appearances) and available but also very wealthy -- let's be real, this man does not exist for too many women, white or black.

Rather than dwell on the negative situations and "buy into" statistics that may or may not be fully representative of the real picture, people -- especially single people -- should first of all get to know and like themselves alone. Once this self-understanding is achieved, it is so much easier to know exactly what is wanted from another individual, and further, if that individual is scarce, i.e., the ever-illusory professional black male, then facing possible alternatives can be so much easier, and at times there are more alternatives.

This does not mean, however, that black women should be less demanding or begin to accept less

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Funerals, hair care and the death of black business

The writer is the executive editor of the *Chronicle*.

AS unlikely as it may seem, someday you might be buried by a white undertaker.

Oh, the place might look like Gilmore's or Hooper's or Johnson's Home of Memory. The music in the chapel might sound the same, and black fingers might caress the organ keyboard. But white fingers will count the cash.

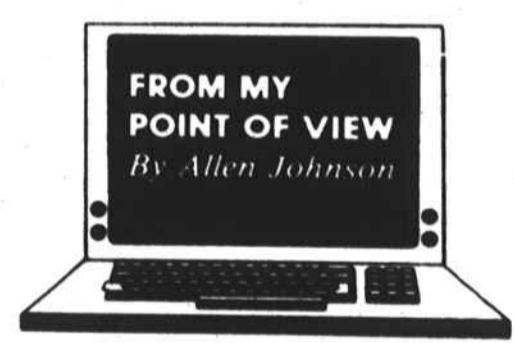
And those dollars will leave the black community as surely as the dearly departed has -- and their chances of returning there will be as remote.

The state of the black economy has worsened to the point that even businesses with seemingly captive black consumers -- such as funeral homes -- may fall by the wayside.

Witness the black hair-care market, which steadily is being absorbed by white firms.

Used to be that only blacks manufactured hair-care products for one another, but no more.

Although blacks spend generous amounts of cash to straighten, soften or curl their tresses, they only spend 30 percent of those dollars with black



health and beauty firms.

The trend heated to a boil recently when Operation PUSH launched a nationwide boycott against Revlon, a white cosmetics firm that produces a line of hair-care products for blacks.

A Revlon executive started the furor by predicting the demise of the black-owned hair-care industry and smugly questioning the quality of such products that are manufactured by black companies.

Also at issue was the firm's investments in South Africa, said a PUSH spokesman.

Although the executive later apologized and the firm has since divested its South African holdings, PUSH refuses to lift the boycott and has planned mock funerals for Revlon products nationwide, including perhaps Winston-Salem.

There are several angles to the unlikely national debate given the

sprays and greases that we put on our heads:

- Again, the unwillingness of black consumers, sometimes through ignorance, others through obstinance, not to patronize their own businesses.

- The issue of divestment in South Africa.

- The power of black consumers to make political statements with cash.

- The manner in which black industries quietly and unwittingly aid their own demise.

If the funeral-home analogy still sounds outlandish, consider the fact that another so-called captive black industry -- hairstyling -- has quietly become whiter, as if tinted by Grecian Formula 16 in reverse.

That seemed unthinkable years ago, when we devised our own special pomades and hot combs and curling irons to do something with our kinks.

Even today most white hairdressers seem hard-pressed (no pun intended) to handle black hair.

But black hairdressers who work for white salons don't.

"Blacks work for whites and they're taking black customers to white businesses," says Jim Conrad, a black salon owner who operates two shops in Winston-Salem and says he had to close two others for lack of employees, not business.

"I've been advertising for a year and a half," Conrad says. "I could hire 15 today."

Of course, white hairdressers generally don't work at black-owned shops, so the exodus has involved basically a one-way street.

Thus, if a white hairdresser can't give you a Jheri curl, maybe his black employee can.

A white funeral home might do the same thing: Hire black employees who know the trade and siphon black business that once had seemed certain to remain in black hands.

They might one day even handle the funeral of black capitalism.

Imagine the eulogy: "Lord bless our dear, departed black businesses. They lived such miserable, thankless, troubled lives. And forgive the black consumer. Surely he knew not what he did."

Payne

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suburban cops are aliens not so much for residency as for their inability to identify with those in the inner-city areas they police.

It has been nearly impossible to corrupt officers by debasing a segment of the community they care about collectively. To profit from such crimes with innocent victims would be to take "dirty money."

Organizing a precinct to sell heroin, say, in white Staten Island, would be as difficult as getting it to extort money from the local nunnery.

But staff a predominantly white precinct in a black, poor community, and no victim, no matter how young, is deemed too innocent. Cops of the 77th, sometimes smashing in doors with axes and sledgehammers, burglarized shops, after-hour clubs and homes. They reportedly stole televisions, cars, garbage cans, cocaine, cash and other valuables.

By taking payoffs from drug dealers, and sometimes pushing cocaine themselves, the cops fanned the murderous crack

epidemic raging among the poor and black youth of Brooklyn.

Had the victims been beloved and respected by the city's powerful, its police and its media, Commissioner Ward's rotation plan -- untried -- would likely not have been judged an "overreaction." Instead, the 28,000-member force staged a work slowdown. And Ward's armed men and women, except for the 2,500-member black Guardians Association, are demanding his head.

Day and night, police radios

crackle Ward's name in racial epithets of the foulest kind.

Presided over by an insensitive mayor, a blatantly bigoted police force and a media insipid on the issues, black New Yorkers have no way of telling the outside world what they have painfully come to conclude:

New York City has displaced all competitors as the most racist city in America.

Les Payne is an assistant managing editor at *Newsday*.