



February 2022 Commemorations of U.S. Black History Month: Key Communications Considerations

Two years following public demonstrations and demands for companies to meaningfully address systemic racism, many leaders tasked with communicating an organization's U.S. Black History Month (BHM) 2022 messages and programming are likely approaching the month with a mixture of eager anticipation and considerable caution.

While many may look forward to authentic and enlightening conversations with colleagues during BHM 2022, some stakeholders may react with scrutiny and skepticism. At some point during BHM programming, leaders could be asked some version of: *"What have you done to address inequities within this organization and in other spheres of your influence?"* Or: *"What progress has our company made since the commitments it announced in June 2020?"*

This February presents an opportunity to share how the organization has advanced diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives or to make relevant announcements that connect to their DEI vision and strategy. When implementing programs and drafting communications, organizations should prepare a strategic response plan to address potential questions and criticisms that their messaging might lack sincerity and meaningful action, or worse, that programming is careless and offensive.

Following are best practice approaches when planning BHM activities and "hot buttons" to avoid when communicating to internal and external audiences.

Best Practices

- Engage the Organization's Senior Leaders and Internal Influencers. An organization's BHM activities should draw the full participation and engagement of all employees, but especially the board (particularly DEI champions and diverse members), senior executives and mid-level managers whose involvement will naturally spur interest – and ideally, engagement – from all individual contributors. The lack of visible support and participation by leaders will send a strong signal about how important these efforts truly are to an organization.
- Engage the Black Employee Resource Group (ERG). Diversity and talent management professionals and the DEI committee (or in the absence of a formal council, a culturally- and functionally-diverse group of workplace champions and influencers) should co-create the programming and solicit feedback from Black employees – particularly the vocal and engaged influencers – whose input can not only help sway collective opinion, but also drum up enthusiasm for the programming within the organization. They can also be extremely helpful to provide a feedback loop during the month and flag any areas for the company to adjust over the 28 days of BHM. It is also important to note that Black employees should not be made to feel obligated or coerced to lead programming efforts – or feel that it is solely their responsibility to educate the organization. Again, this is another area where visible senior leadership is critical.

- Ideas for BHM Activities and Programming.
 - *Distinguished Speaker Panels and Fireside Chats.* Organizations may host speaker series or keynote lectures which feature industry leaders and trailblazers from inside and outside the organization discussing their inspiring career journeys, such as how they overcame professional obstacles or rebounded from mistakes, who were their allies and mentors and the lessons learned.
 - *DEI Education and Training.* BHM presents an opportunity to (re)consider the training and curriculum that an organization has developed around managing diverse teams, interrupting bias in the workplace and building skills around facilitating difficult DEI-related conversations within the organization.
 - *Cultural Events and Activities.* Profile the “Hidden Figures” of Black History. Delve deeper to shed light on the unsung heroes and undertake the time and care to design programming that explores the origins of big ideas that were conceived by, but rarely attributed to Black Americans. Black people are not a monolith, and [recognitions should consider the full tapestry, history and breadth of the Black diaspora present in America](#): African-American, Multi-racial, African, Caribbean, Afro-Latino, Afro-Asian and Black Europeans. Even within these groups there is great diversity and divergence of perspectives. The programming that is implemented should also consider the regional and local profile of the stakeholders in that area of the organization and elevate the stories, icons and accomplishments relevant to their lived experiences.
 - *Initiatives to Build the Black Talent Pipeline.* During BHM, companies can participate in virtual recruitment fairs and career panels in partnership with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, where speakers can discuss tactics for entry and advancement within the industry and provide guidance on navigating obstacles. It should be reinforced here that BHM should not be the only time a company hosts these types of diverse recruiting events.
 - *Employee Volunteerism.* Some corporations provide [volunteer time off \(VTO\)](#) and other service days where employees can work in underserved communities in partnership with social justice non-profits. Ensure that these activities are not sporadic, “one and done,” “check-the-box” gestures, but are integrated into larger CSR efforts as longer-term partnerships to deliver meaningful and lasting impact by addressing the root causes of inequities.
 - *Corporate Philanthropy.* A company may wish to offer [financial support to non-profits focused on racial justice and equity](#). However, prior to making charitable contributions and commitments, it should conduct due diligence and thoroughly vet speakers and their advocacy organizations for any potential public statements and stances concerning controversial and divisive topics which may not be aligned with the corporate donor’s values.
 - *Movie Screenings, Virtual Museum Tours, Podcasts and Book Reviews Followed by Facilitated Group Discussion.* In consultation with an organization’s DEI executive or an

external consultant, organizations may introduce literature designed to deepen awareness and build knowledge on the lived Black experience in the form of [podcasts](#), [books](#) and [movies](#) that enlighten and inspire pride. In lieu of in-person gatherings due to the current health crisis, for example, the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington, DC offers 90-minute virtual tours of its many exhibits. Ideally, these events are accompanied by a discussion facilitated by an expert. Since many of these sessions will convene virtually, it is advised that organizers arrange small breakout groups, and prepare rules of engagement and discussion prompts to encourage thoughtful curiosity and earnest exchange of ideas and reactions.

- *Social Media Activity and Company Websites Dedicated to BHM Commemoration.* Some companies post inspirational quotes by historical figures or build [web sites](#) that provide a [spotlight on employees](#) and other heroes who broke the color barrier within the organization or industry. [Make sure the quotes and images are correctly attributed.](#)
- *Support Black-Owned Businesses.* Many organizations make commitments to forge new and deepen existing relationships with Black-owned businesses. They will partner with diverse supplier networks, provide education and conduct audits to determine what may be the legal, financial and regulatory barriers to entry for diverse vendors.

Controversies to Prepare for and “Hot Buttons” to Avoid

- Criticisms that BHM Panders to Political Correctness and Promotes Division. Organizations should be prepared to address concerns from stakeholders who question the need to celebrate Black History Month at all. A tough Q&A should be developed that answers questions and perhaps even critical comments. Possible responses may:
 - Point out that BHM commemorations recognize the accomplishments of Black Americans and their important contributions to society which often had been credited to others or relegated to the recesses of scholarship on American history.
 - Mention that the month presents an opportunity for everyone to examine how certain legacies of racial injustice persist in systems and institutions and have led to unfair outcomes, including the historical exclusion of Black and other minorities in many organizations and industries, particularly in leadership.
 - Note that BHM reminds us to consider the big and small ways we can use our influence to bridge those divides and promote deeper mutual understanding.
- Offensive BHM Displays and Education Projects. There have been incidents of organizations that created tributes in high traffic areas where historical figures were hung with string (evoking lynching) as well as performances and education curriculum which included offensive language and imagery.
- Ignoring Black History Month Altogether. Companies need to acknowledge the significance of the month and be mindful they do not focus all messaging on [or spotlight the experiences of white people](#). Companies should review their calendar of events and organizational announcements to ensure at least one or a few of the marquee moments that draw the

attention of all community members include deliberate and substantive messaging and programming around Black history.

- Exploiting BHM for Profit. In marketing and merchandising efforts, companies ought to be careful to not signal the brand is only promoting BHM campaigns purely for financial gain. The backlash can be more swift and severe when the brand has had either no demonstrated record or reputation for social justice advocacy, when there are recent examples of actual or perceived discrimination and inequities that would rebut these performative gestures, or when the execution of the campaign reinforces stereotypical depictions and racist tropes.

Given the highly sensitive nature of these issues, thorough research and careful delivery of programming should be promoted horizontally and vertically throughout the organization. Activities should be grounded in timely topics and shed light on the rich and complex diversity and intersectionality that exists within Black communities and prominently feature Black figures – both traditional and widely popular, as well as the lesser-known individuals who have made great impact.

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