

the leading men of 2007

instinct
November 2007

the Howard Buford branding man

HE BRINGS ADVOCACY AND ADVERTISING
TOGETHER FOR THE URBAN MAJORITY



When most people think of a successful advertising agency, the first words popping into their heads are not usually authenticity, integrity and advocacy. But for Howard Buford, founder, president and CEO of Prime Access, a Manhattan-based agency specializing in marketing for African-American, Hispanic and GLBT consumers, those words are at the heart of nearly everything he does.

Opened in 1990, Prime Access specializes in marketing to what Buford has dubbed the "Urban Majority." "I think the term is empowering," he says. "It gives people validity and existence in the world. The idea of being a minority is being different. But I look around and all I see are people who are just like me."

Buford also recognizes the power behind the Urban Majority market, and its power to lead and transform society. "Many of the trends we saw emerging from the 1990 census have been played out over the years," he explains. "In terms of fashion trends and trends in language, brands and high-image products there has been considerable influence. The Hispanic market had wide influence in styles of cooking, food and taste, while in the African-American market we saw trends in fashion, music, language and other products."

According to Buford it should be no surprise that the gay market also exerts its own influence by being a trendsetter and the first to embrace new products. "Usually when clients are interested in the GLBT market, they are seeking early adopters of a brand," he says. "For example the GLBT market is clearly

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an early adopter of technology, the Internet, iPhone and every use of technology you can imagine." He adds, "To a large degree, GLBT consumers serve as arbiters of change for the general market." In other words, if we buy it, they will come.

But selling to the GLBT market is more complicated than in years past and requires a level of sophistication far beyond a vague reference and knowing wink to a gay audience. "Early on, if a marketer extended even the smallest branch to the community in terms of advertising, if they did something gay vague and winked at the audience, [the GLBT market] would just jump on it," says Buford. "Now just winking at the audience has the opposite effect. It's actually seen as homophobic."

Prime Access holds focus groups to learn more about the market. "The one piece of information that is very clear regardless of geography, gender, age or any other segmentation is the loud and clear voice that audiences want to see things that portray and reflect their lives. By far that's the most effective marketing that can be done."

The son of parents who were very active in the Civil Rights movement, Buford sees parallels to the GLBT community's quest for equality. "I think there are an awful lot of similarities in the pursuits for equality. Certainly African-Americans who are about human rights get that," he says. "Coretta King really got that. Martin Luther King really got that and understood it. Even though there is a religious heritage inside the African-American community that is a real challenge, many people understand the similarity, or at least understand the principles are the same."

Where others see differences, Buford finds community. "An important thing to remember is that these are not mutually exclusive audiences," he says. "Each audience has segments of the other in it. That is something we always remember about the Urban Majority and it really lends an authenticity to our work."

An active volunteer, Buford's community service for African-American and GLBT causes includes having served on the board of directors of Gay Games IV and being a founding member

of the Audre Lorde Project, which provides a center for GLBT people of color in New York. He also remains proud of the six years he served on the board of directors of GLAAD, including three years on its Executive Committee.

Looking ahead, Buford sees growth and increased awareness for the GLBT market. "[GLBT] consumers have become more demanding," he says. They want messaging that is clearly meant for them and speaks to them directly. But they also want to know the big picture about the brands they are buying. They want to know about their support to the community overall...I really see a winning-over of GLBT consumers is going to take a sincere effort on the part of companies who are reaching out to them." —JIM VER STEEG