

OPINION TRADE SECRETS

Be the change you want to see on diversity

By Jamie Biesiada   | Jan 27, 2021

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The travel industry's diversity problems have been well documented in recent months: Executives and advisors are mostly white. Attendance at trade shows (when they could be safely held) was mostly white. Diversity in advertising assets is mostly nonexistent.

Travel is far from alone here. The country's struggle with systemic and overt racism has accelerated since last summer, when focus on the deaths of Black people at the hands of police sparked a larger, and much needed, movement for justice. These issues won't be solved overnight. And we can't forget about them as time puts distance from the start of that movement. We all need to play a part, including in the travel industry.

In my previous column ("The financial argument for a diverse client base," Dec. 21) I talked about the importance of having a diverse client base. Now I'd like to turn to the industry itself, specifically the travel agency community. What can the average travel advisor do to combat racism in travel?

For starters, acknowledge the issue. We know that there is a gap in how white and Black people in the industry perceive its diversity. A Travel Weekly survey conducted last fall found that 61% of white respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the industry is diverse and inclusive. But among Black respondents, the same percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed.

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For steps beyond that, I spoke with Black Travel Alliance board member Ursula Petula Barzey and luxury advisor Cathy Brooks-Oliver, owner of CBO Custom Travel in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Brooks-Oliver advised her peers to share the results of important surveys -- like MMGY's recent "The Black Traveler: Insights, Opportunities & Priorities" report, which found Black leisure travelers spent \$109.4 billion on travel in 2019.

She is sharing them with her host agency, Protravel International, as well as the Virtuoso committee for diversity and inclusion, which she sits on.

Talking about issues like this, she said, is the easiest thing we can do, and it's free.

"These numbers speak for themselves," she said.

Barzey recommended first educating yourself through books and online research (talk to your Black friends, she said, but don't turn them into your sole educator or advisor), then acknowledging your privilege.



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"No one is saying you have had an easy life, because we do understand that millions of Americans -- white Americans -- come from working class, poor backgrounds," she said. "But if you walk in the door, no one is going to automatically judge you based on the fact that you have kinky hair. You don't have to deal with those types of challenges, so just acknowledge your privilege. It's not a bad thing."

Some other recommendations from Barzey: Listen with compassion when Black colleagues talk about trauma they've experienced at work. Be empathetic and hear them.

Hiring managers should make sure their pool of potential employees is a diverse one, she said.

And finally, a message to everyone: "Speak up and say something, especially in cases where you hear comments that are racist or sexist in the work environment. It may not be in a business meeting, but if you're out for a social kind of thing and you hear someone making a racist joke, no – it's not banter, it's just inappropriate."

As Barzey pointed out, the Black Travel Alliance is designed to champion Black people in travel. But diversity also encompasses age, ability and more, and what Barzey said can apply to those groups, too.

"Be conscious of what's happening in the world, what's happening in the U.S.," she said, "and then do the right thing."

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