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## Getting African-American Kids Excited About Advertising

One percent of agency personnel are African-American. Spectrum Speakers is trying to change that.

*By Laurie Wiegler  
for Office.com*

The ad copy reads, "Who's going to teach him to shoot a basketball? Who's going to teach him how to handle his first crush? Not you. You're just here to teach him how to do ads that don't suck."

And so begins the pitch — a sort of plea, really — from the energetic members of Spectrum Speakers, a largely African-American collective of 16 ad professionals from across the United States. Its ad is aimed at African-Americans in advertising, urging them to volunteer to speak at local schools and universities.

The brainchild of an African-American creative director — Ed Crayton of DDB Dallas — Spectrum is an offshoot of a San Francisco ad group founded in 1990. The members of that group were concerned by the dearth of African-Americans in the advertising industry. They began sponsoring seminars featuring black speakers and designing award-winning public-service ads.

While the early Spectrum was novel and inspiring, the group was in need of a second tier, one that would help increase the number of African-Americans in the field by appealing to a younger audience. Currently, the lead agencies driving the youth-oriented effort include DDB Dallas, Dallas-based Shift, and a creative boutique called Adwurx in San Diego. Their efforts include not only posters but a television advertising campaign.

"(Black) kids just aren't aware of this business," says Crayton, who left San Francisco in 1993. "The kids look to Venus Williams and Tiger Woods, for example, and say, 'I can do that.'" Crayton says the same should be true for advertising stars and their effect on black kids.

To provide such role models, Spectrum Speakers began going into schools last November, reaching out to audiences, largely African-American, of students in elementary school, middle school, high school and college. The speakers show their portfolios and reels and answer questions, usually in under an hour, in presentations facilitated by a Spectrum coordinator. Most of the time this is done in the classroom, but occasionally larger gatherings are held in an auditorium.

Robin Barlow Jones, an African-American free-lance radio and television-commercial producer based in Oakland, Calif., explains the need for such outreach: "When Ed and I were young and starting in the business, we couldn't find mentors to help us get our footing in the industry, so he came up with the idea of starting this group."

When Spectrum Speakers began, there were challenges. "When we first started," Barlow Jones shares, "we spent a long time just trying to identify who the people of color were in advertising; and believe me, that took a couple of years."

She adds that, "When we started out (years ago), we definitely did not have the role models. There was no question about it. I was working in a company with one person of color of 40 people, and I worked there for seven years."

Indeed. Estimates show that even today, only 1 percent of advertising professionals are African-American.

"Maybe 1 percent," says Andy Berlin, chairman of New York City's Berlin, Cameron & Partners. "And if that, the 1 percent is often found in segregated efforts, so-called 'urban efforts,' in the urban division of an ad agency."

Berlin hired Crayton many years ago in San Francisco when Berlin was with an agency he co-founded, the high-profile Goodby, Berlin & Silverstein, now called Goodby Silverstein & Partners.

When asked about the minority issue and his rationale for hiring Crayton then, Berlin is adamant: "We didn't hire Ed Crayton because he was black. We hired Ed because we thought he was a really good and interesting thinker."

### **The power of role models**

Berlin offers, though, "We did have a sense that the advertising world, in its sort of traditional ways of developing and hiring talent, was overlooking a lot of interesting things – and among them were black people and Asian people and people whose educational background had led them to, like, poetry rather than a masters in business administration."

Berlin has been vocal about the need for diversity. At a recent speaking engagement for the Advertising Club of New York, called "Creatively Incorrect," Berlin, who is white, addressed the need for diversity and touched on how advertising lags behind society.

When asked for an explanation of why there are blacks in ads but not in agencies, Berlin says, "This has bugged me for a long time. It's extremely the case that the representation of African-Americans inside of advertising agencies has nothing whatsoever to do with the influence that African-Americans have on society or culture, let alone the simple numerical makeup of America. But I think it's deeper and more disturbing than that."

Part of the "disturbance" could be prejudice on the part of those in power, but Berlin feels the main reason is sheer ignorance.

"Like a lot of things that aren't right in society now, things like that (the lack of African-Americans in advertising) are wrong not because they are intentionally wrong, but because no one's thinking this stuff through."

One of those who has thought this issue through is Lena L. West, a New York City-based African-American businesswoman voted one of the "25 Women of Silicon Alley" by AlleyCat News in 2000. As president of xynoMedia Development – a business-development agency that includes corporate-identity creation among its business strategies – West is not an advertising professional per se but has definite opinions about Spectrum's mission.

"I would not be where I am today without role models," West shares. "So I think the need for groups such as Spectrum are absolutely key. I think this group is really cool. Kids need to see this field as an option. But to make a real change, I do think it will take different (and additional) types of programs and dedication from people in the industry."

And if Crayton has his way, Spectrum will encourage just those sorts of programs, as well as have a lasting impact – especially if the advertising industry supports not only the cause, but Spectrum Speakers itself.

"Basically, we're asking the whole industry to contribute either through providing people to speak to the kids, providing media donations or helping create great advertising for the program to reach people in the industry or the kids," shares Crayton. "The ad (mentioned at the beginning of the piece) is really working. It's run once and we've got calls from people in New York and Atlanta."