

Effective Marketing Messages for African American Couples

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Marketing is an important component in transmitting a message. Effective marketing requires the development of a detailed strategy which must include understanding the audience and the best methods to deliver the messages. Marketing messages within any racial or ethnic group must be sensitive to inherent differences between dominant and other racial/ethnic groups.

A marketing strategy which targets a specific culture with the purpose of behavior change requires a specific approach. When the issue or topic is potentially volatile or touchy, the approach must appeal to the positive potential of the change, not the current negative circumstances. Healthy marriage is one potentially touchy issue that continues to be the source of much debate and disagreement. Many people perceive it as something personal and private. As a result, your message must not seem invasive or judgmental.

What is unique about marketing healthy marriage services to the African American population? Answers to that question vary. There are certain factors however that consistently surface. Some of those factors are:

1. The Institution of Slavery
2. institutionalized racism
3. a varied yet profound response to the first two factors.

In light of these realities, marketing pieces must incorporate these universal cultural orientations into the way the message is conveyed. The message has to encapsulate African American history's significant impact on the community's present condition and attitudes.

The orientation of the message should appeal to 4 senses:

1. sense of community and family
2. sense of African and African American heritage
3. sense of self-esteem and efficacy
4. sense of self-preservation through the transmission of prosperity.

The orientation of the message should also appeal from an economic perspective and a sense of acculturation into affluent society.

Age Demographics of African American Subpopulations

Teens	Young Adults	Adults
Ages 13-19	Ages 20-26	Ages 27 and up
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dating and hanging out • May be considering more serious relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be in serious dating relationships or living together • May be starting to have kids 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have pursued further education • May have progressed professionally

ACS data from 2002 provides information on marriage and divorce amongst African Americans. Consider the following:

General finding #1

Black males and females are more likely to be unmarried than Whites or Hispanics

Black Males	White Males	Hispanic Males
42.2%	27.5%	38.2%
Black Females	White Females	Hispanic Females
40.8%	21.2%	30.3%

General finding #2

Black individuals are more likely than Whites and Hispanics to be Divorced

Black Males	White Males	Hispanic Males
9.4%	9.1%	5.9%
Black Females	White Females	Hispanic Females
13.3%	11.3%	9.3%

An effective approach to marketing healthy marriage should highlight who is achieving the desired goal and why. This can be achieved by doing the following:

- **Testify!:** Share testimonials of role models who have achieved the goal of developing a healthier marriage, preferably role models from within the target group you are attempting to reach.
- **Model “the Message:”** Role models must represent a certain level of cultural congruence. The targeted audience should see themselves in the role model, and subsequently, in their success.
- **Be age specific:** Every age group will respond to different things so tailor the message by age demographic. Take into account the different desires and needs of those age groups. For example, the younger the age group the more important it is to have entertainment value in the way the message is conveyed. Older groups on the other hand can take a more direct message.

The mode of a message is as important, if not more so, than the message itself. A poorly communicated message can be compared to serving an expertly prepared gourmet dinner on dirty dishware. While the aroma and flavor of the food may be great, people may not be prone to eat due to the poor presentation. Mode is about not only getting people to come to the table but to also bite on the message! When considering your marketing approach it is a good idea to enlist multiple modes of communication. The more places you place the message, the wider the audience you can reach. The following are some of the more traditional, and often inexpensive, modes of communicating the message.

Radio

Listeners do not purposely tune in to hear marketing messages but still have to sit through them to get back to regular programming. As a result, radio is a great option for getting a message out. Religious programming can be particularly effective since churches in the African American community often

serve as gathering places and have substantial influence in their communities. Listening to the radio is often a passive activity and as such it has a more subtle, impact on listeners. Many radio stations will record the message for you using popular DJs and genre specific background music. This lends credibility to your message and customizes it for the target audience while providing a consistent message.

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Free radio time can be accessed through community programming or through the taping of short (30 seconds or less) public service announcements (PSAs). Radio stations are often willing to air live broadcasts at events like Healthy Marriage Resource Fairs. Attendees get a chance to meet celebrity DJs and your organization gets free airtime when the station promotes it will be hosting a live broadcast.

Television

Community/Public Access Television can be an effective tool for getting a message out to a targeted audience. The key is to have a broadcast time that appeals to the targeted subpopulation.

For the purposes of this type of marketing, let's consider the following to generally describe the subpopulations:

1. Teens (Ages 13-19)
2. Young Adults (Ages 20-26)
3. Adults (Ages 27 and up)

Research shows that the best times to communicate your message to the 3 subpopulations are Friday

evenings for young adults and adults. For teens, young adults and adults, early Sunday evenings are best.

Community Newspaper

Most African American communities have services from local African American newspapers. These papers often have history in the local community and as a result are a trusted source of news and information. They are sometimes available free of charge and easily accessible. Faith-based and/or urban-oriented newspapers are good options. Many local papers will advertise community events for free. Additionally, they are often looking for newsworthy or interesting stories. Offer to write an article about healthy marriage for African Americans; maybe highlight a couple celebrating their 50th anniversary. If the article is well received, you may be invited to contribute on a regular basis.

Bus Wraps

If you have an advertising budget, consider buying space on buses. Bus wraps are a great way to get your message out in low income communities. Placards inside buses or other mass transit systems offer an opportunity to provide lengthier messages as passengers have time to read the message while they ride.

Street Teams

Another idea for reaching families in low income African American communities is the use of street teams. Street teams are groups that distribute flyers or brochures at neighborhood spots like the corner store or community center after an event. Youth are particularly good at this approach, but neighborhood safety should always be the first consideration.

Beauty Salons/Barber Shops

African Americans often spend hours at the local beauty salon while having their hair done. These local gathering places offer a perfect opportunity to provide positive reading material related to healthy marriage. Books, magazines, brochures, even calendars of upcoming events will likely be appreciated. Educating the salon owner or the shop's stylists about your program may even result in referrals of clients. Clients often feel comfortable discussing their relationship with their stylists while receiving services so it can be an ideal time to market.

Churches, Mosques, Synagogues and other Houses of Worship

When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. organized the bus boycott in Birmingham, Alabama he was able to broadcast the message from the pulpit and gather support from members of his church and the greater African American community as a collective. Messages delivered from leadership at houses of worship are another effective way to share a marketing message. They represent an endorsement from the house of worship and its leadership and carry significant "weight" with members of the congregation. When approaching faith leaders, consider targeting those who broadcast their services on radio or television to access a broader audience for your message.

Shopping Malls

Many families spend their free time at shopping malls. Even people on a fixed income often see the mall as a gathering place to meet friends and browse or "window shop." Parents and their children often separate during these outings to visit stores of interest. A kiosk in a shopping mall would garner attention especially when strategically located near a lounge area where parents wait for their children.

Promotional Items

Items such as t-shirts and ink pens may work well as marketing tools. They are inexpensive to produce and easy to distribute. Eye-catching styles and catchy slogans will draw the individuals to the message.

Schools/Children

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Schools are always a good marketing location because parents will come out to support their children. Also, children have historically been effective allies in communicating important messages to their parents and the greater community. Research overwhelmingly indicates that healthy marriage is good for children. As a result, making children participants in marketing messages is a great strategy for your campaign.

Human Services

The African American community is disproportionately represented in the local Department of Human Services Systems. Data shows that there is an increasing level of male participation within this service population. Frequent service areas for this population include Crisis Centers, Foster Care Coordination Centers and Direct Family Services.

Criminal Justice Re-entry Programs

Research indicates that a disproportionate amount of African American men are incarcerated. One potentially positive aspect of incarceration is that it isolates an inmate from external distractions. They can use this time to think about areas that they want to improve upon once they are released like their marriage and family. Research further indicates that re-entry

clients, particularly male, are especially interested in relationship enhancement. After release, they typically want to work towards a new start by forging stability in their marriages and relationships.

Health Care

Many low income African Americans lack health insurance and must rely on health clinics and indigent care hospitals. Connecting with these health care systems may also provide access to low income couples during the magic moment. Magic moment refers to unmarried couples' time of increased interest in marriage during pregnancy. Research indicates that unwed couples are more likely to consider marriage at the time of a child's birth.

Job Readiness Programs

Because of the major economic issues plaguing families in distress, participants in job readiness programs tend to respond well to messages regarding relationship enhancement and healthy marriage. People who are working to increase their job skills are often doing so in an effort to improve their future outlook for themselves and their family. This is a great time to catch their attention with marketing because they often have increased openness to anything that can potentially advance their goals.

Sororities and Fraternities

College campuses are full of students who are preparing for eventual marriages. Data on students' attitudes towards relationships suggest an interest in improving related skills in this area. These attitudes also affirm the importance of marriage to this population and also speak to the effectiveness of this venue.

Community Resources and Health Fairs

The African American community has tended to respond positively to opportunities to learn about healthy relationships that lead to healthy marriages.

As the issue of healthy marriage gains notoriety, there are an increasing amount of venues where marriage and relationships are discussed. Fairs and conferences on the subject of marriage, health or other topics of interest to families are a great place to introduce your program and its services to potential participants.

This tip sheet includes a wide range of ideas for marketing to African Americans. Before wrapping up our discussion there are a few key points to take away from this tip sheet.

- Tailor your message to the demographics of your target audience.
- The messenger matters and needs to be someone who is trusted or considered a peer.
- Your program must take into consideration African American cultural identity in marketing.
- Different audiences can be reached at different times and through different modes.
- Faith leaders can be an extremely powerful resource in the African American community.

In conclusion, effective marketing messages are crucial towards disseminating marriage-related information in the African American community. These messages present an opportunity for couples to strengthen their families and build traditions that develop the family structure and ensure positive outcomes for children.

These ideas are based on interviews, collaborations and direct involvement with public information campaigns addressing the needs of a variety of cohorts within the African American community. A special thanks goes to Dr. Marjorie Lewis for her assistance in compiling this information.