

eBOOK

CHAPTER 2

THE BEAUTY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SALON & BARBERSHOP MARKETING

How brands can capture the
attention of Black consumers
by stepping out of the frame

By Wil Shelton





CHAPTER 2: Understanding the Role of Salons and Barbershops in Black Culture

Next to church, salons and barbershops are places African American consumers frequent most. They are sanctuaries where Black men and women can literally and figuratively let their hair down and relax. This deep community connection to Black salons and barbershops began in the 1800's after abolition when slaves who once cut the hair of white men or women were suddenly free to run their own shops in their own ways. Many chose to serve other Blacks rather than continue serving white clientele. This created safe spaces where African American people could discuss the things that mattered to them without having to speak or act a certain way to appease white people.

By the 1930's, American hair salons and barbershops were so central to Black culture that they were even on the frontlines of civil rights activism. Women in particular used salons to gather supporters for political campaigns. A salon chair represented a place at the political table; a way to stay informed and share opinions. In many ways, salons were the first Black Twitter.

According to the article making waves, “With a source of income that came largely from the black community itself, black beauticians were financially autonomous and outside the control of white employers. Additionally, black beauty parlors were independent, black-controlled spaces free from the surveillance of white supremacists; the parlors provided shelter for civil rights organizing in an otherwise hostile environment. Finally, it was the profits from these shops that paid the rental on the buses that sent marchers to Washington, D.C., printed T-shirts and protest signs, supported movement leaders who lost their jobs and homes, and bailed protesters out of jail.”¹

Today, salons and barbershops still offer a safe haven where Blacks go to celebrate the very roots of their culture without outside interference. They are a source of outreach offering everything from movie screenings to blood pressure screenings; the original Uber Eats, where our neighbors might sell hot, homemade meals; and a common thread for families who may bring their children there and later their children’s children.

The stylists and barbers who oversee the shops play a key role. They know how to rinse away Black pain and style it into armor that helps African Americans navigate the cultural and political landmines they face every day simply because they are Black.

A day at the salon or barbershop can empower, revive, and reconnect Black men and women to ourselves and to who it is we want to be. This is critical, because how African Americans choose to style their hair can be as much a political statement as a personal one.



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Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson pointed out in *Slavery and Social Death*: “Hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery, although like many powerful symbols, it was disguised, in this case by the linguistic device of using the term ‘black,’ which nominally threw the emphasis to color. No one who has grown up in a multiracial society, however, is unaware of the fact that hair difference is what carries the real symbolic potency.”²

African Americans are often judged by how we wear our hair, and many a debate has raged over whether Black women should straighten their hair or embrace their natural looks—either choice being a statement on cultural pride. Furthermore, styling and shaping Black hair requires special skill sets, because it can be stubbornly unmanageable, prone to breakage, and always a message to society about how much, or how little, a Black person should be respected.

On the other hand, Black hair is an adornment that offers many options for styling. It can be silky and straight, kinky and coily, worn as an afro, or augmented with a weave. It’s also a mechanism that can instill confidence and inner pride. So Black men and women must have deep trust in their barbers and stylists to ensure they get the look that best communicates who they are and where they want to go in life. Never, ever would a Black woman walk into a salon without a recommendation (or five), and they are much more likely than women of other races to be loyal to one salon once they have reached a level of comfort.

For these reasons, African American women spend an average of two to four hours a week getting their hair done, and they are predisposed to spending in the salon environment. African Americans spend nearly nine times more than our non-Black counterparts on hair and beauty products and \$473 million in total hair care.³ While few sources parse those numbers out, it’s safe to say that an average African American woman may spend \$1200 a year on visits to the beauty salon. That’s a lot of time in the salon chair!

African American men feel the same about barbershops, which offer a place to relax and speak freely. That unique environment is one reason why LeBron James chose a barbershop for his HBO series, *The Shop*, in which athletes and entertainers come together to speak candidly. It’s also why marketers should take Black barbers seriously as micro-influencers among African American men.

As Cedric the Entertainer’s character Eddie says in the infamous movie *Barbershop*, “In my day, a barber was a counselor. He was a fashion expert. A style-coach. Pimp. Just a general all-around hustler!” Many African American men still see their barbers that way, and they turn to them for recommendations on everything from new music to upcoming films to what’s worth watching on TV.



So urban salons have a unique edge when it comes to connecting with Black consumers. Stylists and barbers see many of their customers weekly for hours on end, and they are actively conversing with them about what's new and interesting. To truly influence African American consumers, entertainment brands must be a part of these organic conversations.

According to Nielsen, the path to purchase starts when consumers learn about products through advertising; the recommendations of friends, family, and online communities; and the consumer's own searching.⁴ A tremendous amount of product discovery takes place in barbershops and salons. The key to earning Black consumer spend is reaching Black consumers as they research and discover the products they want and need, and that's where urban salon marketing comes into play.

Going deeper, there are three key reasons that barbershops and salons are an effective outlet for out-of-home (OOH) marketing. They also happen to overlap with three imperatives for successful multi-cultural marketing in general. These are:

- **Authenticity**
- **Location, Location**
- **Representation**



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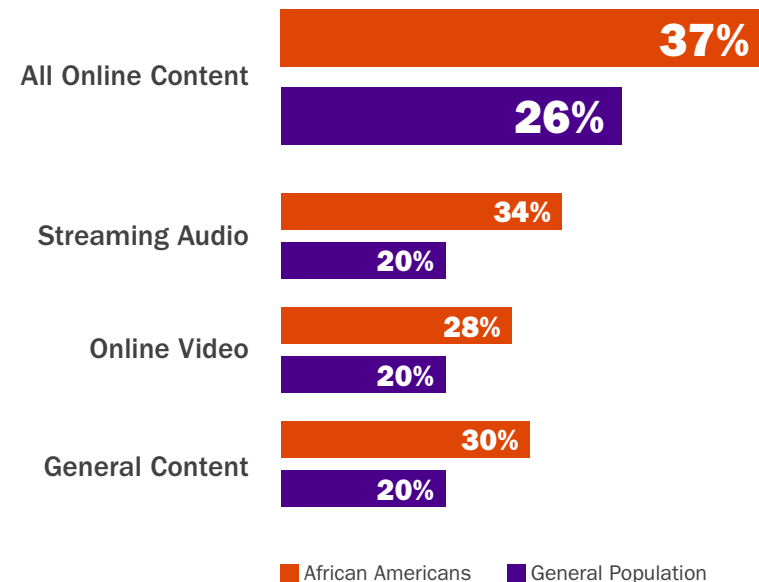


Authenticity

Authenticity in African American marketing is critically important because Black consumers have a higher level of community and cultural pride and will not respond if marketing campaigns don't reflect how they see themselves. Statistics show African Americans have stronger ties to their communities and take greater pride in their culture than the general American population. Seven in ten say their ethnicity is a significant part of their identity while just 48% of other ethnicities say the same.⁵ Cultural pride plays a significant role in African American purchasing decisions, and Black consumers respond more favorably to marketing that highlights their ethnicity and takes their culture into account.

For example, 37% of African Americans prefer content that is targeted to their ethnicity versus 26% of the general population. This is also true of their streaming audio (34% versus 20%), online video (28% versus 20%), and the web in general (30% versus 20%).⁵ The takeaway is that whatever platform you use to market to African American consumers, it's critical to understand the importance of that channel within Black culture.

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African Americans are also more discriminating about the brands they support—and for good reason. Corporations make a lot of promises to Black consumers; promises that have been breached time and time again. They have been breached by subtle (and not-so-subtle) racism in poorly planned advertising campaigns; at the point of purchase where we may find products made for us locked away to prevent theft; associates who offer different levels of service based on preconceptions and blatant prejudice; and in the work cubicles and C-suites across America, where African Americans still struggle for representation, recognition, and fair compensation at those very same corporations.

Meanwhile, corporations tend to approach multicultural marketing from a fixed perspective—often that of white men. In a 2019 survey performed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, it was revealed that less than one percent (0.7 percent) of advertising and promotion managers in the United States were Black.⁶ That means that a majority of the time, non-Black marketers are deciding what will resonate with Black consumers.

The result can be advertising that is based on bias, stereotypes, and limited personal experiences. When Burns Group, a New York advertising agency, asked 500 African Americans, “How are you represented in advertising (if at all)?” the answers gave a clear picture of how a limited perspective can impact the effectiveness of marketing.⁷ Here are just two examples, though they are not taken in their entirety:

African American people are rarely represented in advertising and when they do it's only one specific “look” of African American. We come in all different colors, shapes, sizes, and hair textures, but it's never represented the way it should be. We are often overlooked and not recognized at all.

Black people are often represented as accessories to white or non-white people in ads. The inclusion of Black people in advertising doesn't feel authentic.

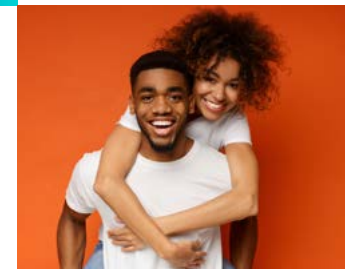
Comments like these are the result of an outdated approach to multicultural marketing that focuses only on demonstrating cultural inclusivity and not on cultural relevance. In other words, African American talent may be included in photoshoots or television commercials to indicate that a company values diversity, but the representations tend to be one-size-fits-all and are largely symbolic.

Time and time again, this hollow approach to reaching multicultural consumers has fallen short, and yet many companies and advertising agencies keep at it because they don't know how to do it differently. My answer is that you can't see the full picture when you are in the frame. Marketers need to get out of their own ways and focus on the goal of capturing truths that will resonate with their target markets.

CULTURAL INCLUSION	CULTURAL RELEVANCE
Representative versus interactive	Engaging and reflective of consumer's culture
May use African Americans as "props" to demonstrate diversity within a group	Uses a range of African American talent and represents reality (range of skin tones; hairstyles; etc.)
Sees all African Americans as similar	Understands and respects unique viewpoints and cultural differences
Brand-centric: Multicultural marketing focuses on showing diversity	Customer-centric: Multicultural marketing focuses on making authentic connections

Brands must find authentic ways to prove they understand and respect Black culture—and then they must walk the talk. Because you can't just paint African American consumers with general brush strokes to create an effective marketing campaign. To really be successful you have to treat them as priority consumers and utilize highly personalized tactics that truly resonate.

African American salons and barbershops are one venue that can help bridge the divide and bring corporations closer to Black communities. When brands gain access to this environment, they are able to shift perspectives from telling African Americans who they are to becoming part of an existing world view, illuminating their brand within an African American environment versus asking Black consumers to join a club that isn't culturally relevant to them.



African American refuse to be invisible, and they reward authenticity—advertising that highlights and truly resonates with Black culture—with loyalty and support. And, unlike many other consumers, African Americans are adamantly vocal about what they like and will share their recommendations with one another to support brands they trust. That's why it is paramount that companies invest in African American marketing tactics that speak to this high-value audience in highly relevant, personalized ways that show they are listening and working toward an ongoing relationship with Black audiences.

Location, Location

Americans—particularly African American consumers—spend a lot of time and money on out-of-home pursuits. Nearly a quarter (21%) of our time in fact. Yet, global entertainment brands have a blind spot when it comes to OOH marketing, spending just 9% of their budgets to meet their audiences where they are. Why the disconnect?

Reaching African American consumers out of home and in places they feel comfortable enables entertainment brands to play off of activities their audiences are already engaged in. For instance, OOH campaigns executed in Black barbershops and salons can do more than reach individuals who happen to be there. They also incite those individuals to evangelize, whipping up excitement within the exact demographic you want to reach. Not to mention all of the “free” advertising you will get from unleashing your new brand ambassadors onto city streets all over the country wearing your branded t-shirts or baseball caps and carrying branded tote bags, coffee mugs, or other swag.

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Another benefit of salon and barbershop marketing is how granular these venues allow brands to get with which customers they would like to reach. Some salons cater to a younger demographic, others to more mature women. Meanwhile, barbershops are often styled to bring in certain demographics, too. If you walk into an urban barbershop that's playing the latest hip hop tracks at top volume and creating cutting-edge hair designs for young Black men, you can pretty well guess what types of entertainment—and in-store marketing tactics—will go over well there.

Compare this approach to an ad campaign that may miss the cultural mark because it lumps all African Americans into the same category. It's easy to see why it's time to dedicate a larger portion of your consumer spend to (one of the most reliable tools in the OOH arsenal) authentically executed, highly targeted, out-of-home African American outreach.

Today, companies can hire a consultant that leads a task force of representatives in key markets to gain access to the Black beauty culture. The consultant knows local salon and barbershop owners on a first-name basis and is already part of the African American community. They are welcomed into these sacred spaces with open arms; especially when they arrive with bags full of swag—samples, promotional posters, t-shirts and even branded hair styling capes—meant to spark conversation and excitement among salon customers.

By channeling their messages through salons and barbershops, marketers can get people talking and inspire them to continue the conversation online, creating natural, fluid narratives, and relevant discussions that will more likely lead to purchase or buy-in.

Representation

Finally, empowered by the Black Lives Matter movement, African American consumers are demanding that the companies they buy from have Black men and women in their ranks, all the way up to their C-suites and executive boards. This is one way they can ensure that those who market to them understand and respect their culture and support the communities they live in.

From legacy corporations to Silicon Valley startups, a large majority of American companies—and the advertising agencies that represent them—still staff their halls and fill corporate seats with one type of person: Caucasian American men. Historically, this has resulted in a “white echo-chamber” of voices that are often out of touch with the demographics of America. Non-Hispanic whites make up 73% of the American population, and more than half of those are women, which means *white men represent just 35% of the U.S. population*.⁸ Companies that believe 35% of the population should speak for the other 65% are lacking in innovation. The other 65% of people are consumers who make choices about where to buy and from whom, so it’s time to get real about who is at the helm of a corporation.

Words are simply not enough anymore, and while symbolic actions like giving employees a day off on Juneteenth were a step in the right direction, that also doesn’t go far enough. Groups like Instagram’s Pull up for change, which asks brands to show the diversity in their C-suites and boardrooms, are making it clear: action is the only reaction that’s meaningful.⁹ And that’s a good thing. It’s time that brands do a deep dive into their own hiring practices and cultures to understand how they



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are recruiting for diversity and, more importantly, what kind of environment diverse hires experience once they get to work. Are they experiencing micro-aggression? Are they able to advance through the ranks in the same way that white men are?

As Marc S. Pritchard, Chief Brand Officer at Procter & Gamble says, “One way to accelerate systemic change involves demanding that the creative supply chain—i.e., brands, agencies and production crews—fully reflects the world in which we live by truly representing people of colour.” Or, as I like to put it, every invoice should include a Black voice.

In short, it’s time to bring diversity to the corporate table in real and measurable ways. We cannot become adjusted to the injustice. American consumers are diverse. Allowing your company to make decisions and create marketing messages within a white echo-chamber will always result in hollow communications that miss the mark. Innovative global companies and ad agencies stand out because they have already made a commitment to diversity, and they are able to connect with different cultures and viewpoints because they look at consumers through a multi-faceted lens. These companies don’t run as much risk of offending those they are marketing to because they aren’t speaking a foreign language. The reality is, organizations shouldn’t be afraid to embrace diversity. They should be afraid not to.

If your company is not there yet, it’s time to get real. Being transparent about where you are in terms of diversity and then creating a timeframe for change will help ensure that your efforts are recognized and that any missteps that happen are seen within the context of your overall willingness to do the hard work. No company is perfect, and mistakes will happen, but it is those companies that are willing to lean into the discomfort that will see the greatest gains.

Download the **BLM Response Guide** for tips on optimizing D&I in 2021 and beyond

Leveraging the influence of Black salon and barbershop stylists is not a replacement for the hard work that needs to be done inside of corporate America, but it can help bridge the communication gap that a lack of diversity creates. As spokespeople for your brand, Black salon and barbershop stylists will bring diversity to the table and help you gain respect while you’re building that diversity on your own staff and help maintain a connection to the Black community after you’ve succeeded.

About **Wil Shelton**

Before he was the President & CEO of Wil Power Integrated Marketing, Wil was a salon owner and hairstylist who saw an untapped opportunity in a space where word-of-mouth is a daily occurrence and consumers are both captive and receptive to input. Over the past 20 plus years, Wil has grown his company into a global marketing agency that taps into the unique culture of salons and barbershops to build a bridge between today's brands and hard-to-reach, multicultural customers.

Today, Wil boasts a vast network of over 100,000 African American salons and barbershops nationwide, giving his clients the ability to reach over 100 million consumers annually. Since its inception, WPIM has proven to over-deliver on value and responsiveness. As more and more brands set up multicultural departments, Wil is able to provide them with a proven roadmap for success.



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NOTE: Nielsen statistics may have been recently updated.



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