

# Urban Trends

*A quarterly newsletter published by*

**MEE**<sup>®</sup>  
MOTIVATIONAL EDUCATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT

## Communicating with African American Women

African American women make the vast majority of day-to-day buying decisions in their households. Marketers who target them need to understand the best persuasion techniques for effectively influencing those decisions. Whether it is a product, a message, or a service being touted, here are a few communication rules to remember.

### NEEDED:

#### A NEW COMMUNICATIONS STYLE

Focusing on low-income communities of color requires a new communication style. Any strategy should be founded on a keen understanding of the unique communications realities of African American women. While Black women have many of the same universal values, and in fact may be more conservative (in certain instances) than the mainstream, they do have a different communication style. Word-of-mouth (see article on page 3) is a big part of the acceptance/approval process within this ethnic culture. Black women interpret marketers' messages through their unique worldview, which incorporates dealing with the daily realities of racism, sexism, poverty, etc.

#### THE POWER OF PEER INFLUENCE

Peer leaders can bring credibility to a message, product or service. Identifying women in the community who are seen as "peer leaders," and enlisting them on your behalf can be a very smart move. When you utilize women as spokespersons who talk and look like those you are trying to reach, you are well along in making sure that your message is heard and accepted. Peer leaders can bring together other women who are willing to share their relevant experiences. Whenever possible, they should be incorporated as your key message senders.

African American women welcome the opportunity to join with their peers to discuss



subjects of interest. In fact, walk into any hair or nail salon and within minutes, you can find out what is on the minds of African American women. Almost no subject is off limits in these female-only, closely bonded environments. Here, women share their dreams, their disappointments, and their frustrations in an open and non-judgmental setting. Even in our focus groups, women report feeling enriched by the deeper dialogues they have participated in, regardless of the subject matter. Women often comment that they wish they had the opportunity to share and discuss like that more often. Providing these types of opportunities, especially in an awareness or prevention campaign, is a very effective communications tool.

MEE has used events such as invitation-only house parties, community forums, and support groups to bring women together to learn more about complex issues. These types of events are great opportunities for identifying potential peer leaders for the next round of message dissemination. It's often easy to see who has that special "something" that inspires confidence and trust among her peers. After recruiting and training women who have the "gift of gab," they become a valuable asset to awareness or marketing efforts.

Parties and other gathering places for African American women are also great opportunities for distributing product samples and gathering information. Such gathering spots would include community centers, food outlets and service programs.

#### LOW/MODERATE INCOME BUYERS

We know that poorer African American households are often single-parent homes headed by a woman. We also know that African Americans, in general, are heavy consumers of certain media and products, and that they consistently exhibit a high degree of brand loyalty.

Therefore, African American women are now increasingly targeted in the marketing of certain products. They make daily decisions about many products related to their family and to household necessities. In many cases, if you want your product to have an influence, you must educate and appeal to the mother or grandmother of the household.

#### GENERATIONAL INFLUENCES: PASSING VALUES DOWN

Using mothers or family matriarchs to help craft messages or to serve on advisory panels during the creative process can be a very smart move, because of their extraordinary influence within their families. Mothers and other older relatives, for instance, are a key source of information for young women about sexual health and reproductive issues. Even in adulthood, women continue to look to their mothers for guidance and nurturing. Having some of these "advisors" participate in your research and planning process can provide a unique window to the hearts and souls of today's African American woman.

From product research, we know that African American women are doing the regular food shopping for their families. There

*...Continued on page 2*

# From The Editor

**Communication:** As we enter into this 21st century, we examine the factors that influence communication within urban, African American culture. In this issue of *UrbanTrends*, we delve into specific communication dynamics, strategies and message senders.

While economics and access to information technology continue to play a defining role in how our communities address their socioeconomic issues, word-of-mouth is still most utilized. In African American homes, the female matriarch continues to influence the purchasing decisions of her family members. From soft drinks to clothing to electronics, marketers now target most of their media campaigns toward women.

Black urban radio is a powerful tool through which social and political messages are communicated to a wide cross section of the urban public. Radio on-air personalities, the new celebrities, have become a driving force in shaping and influencing the African American opinion because of their ability to reach inner city populations. With syndicated early morning radio such as "The Tom Joyner Morning Show," on-air personalities are viewed as savvy, public relations professionals who disseminate news and other issues relevant to African Americans.

The year 2000 presents opportunities for reaffirmation, refocusing on purpose and growth in which the possibilities are limitless!!! As MEE seeks to expand its understanding of urban culture, we welcome your comments and suggestions regarding this newsletter. Visit our web site at [www.mee productions.com](http://www.mee productions.com) to retrieve back issues of *UrbanTrends*.

Sincerely,



Ivan Juzang  
President

## African American Woman (continued)

may be generational gaps between what mothers and their children would choose for colas, for example, but what Mom buys when she goes to the grocery store is going to be the determining factor in what the younger generation drinks, at least when they are at home. Thus, playing on the mother's preferences can provide a big boost to sales.

Low-income African Americans are attracted to products that they believe are pitched to people like them – the "regular" guy/gal, as opposed to the privileged or professional class. In the Cola wars, for example, African American focus group participants overwhelmingly felt that working-class African Americans drink Pepsi, while Coca-Cola targets the mainstream or higher-classes. When they went to the store, they made the purchase that they felt reflected their daily reality.

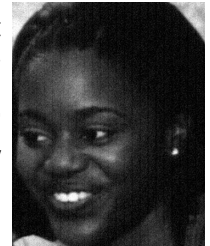
### THE EXPERT'S ROLE

According to our research, Black women do look to another group for guidance and information: "experts" on the subject at hand. Of course the "expert" still must be someone who has credibility in the community. Therefore, African American professional women, community advocates and other role models should be recruited as "experts" to pass on important messages. Though these "expert" women may not always have intimate personal experience with the subject at hand, if they can create the perception that they have the community's "best interest" at heart, they can still be highly effective. It is important, however, that these

experts not be perceived as having been co-opted by "the system." Community-based role models are important, because in many cases they will have the same background as your target audience, but are now serving as examples of the behavior you want the target audience to adopt.

### DESIGNING YOUR MESSAGES

For print materials, keep your message to the point. This audience does not like to have to figure out the "message behind the message." In an environment where too much is often said behind one's back or between the lines, straightforward, honest presentations are appreciated and embraced, even when "the truth" may not be an easy reality.



In addition, using simple language is important for both print and radio ads. In health-related campaigns, always deliver information in laymen's terms, using simple words and phrases, and avoiding medical jargon. For print materials, bold and vibrant colors are a must; using bullet statements and shorter sentences. Include pictures and voices of "real" people who look and sound like your target audience. Otherwise, the message will be tuned out, turned off, or dumped with the trash.



∞ The National Center for Health Statistics has completed a study of happiness and found that Black women are the least happy of all Americans. These findings, published in March 1999 by *Advance Data*, a publication of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), found that White men are the happiest, followed by White women and Black men. The study, which queried 44,000 adults across the nation, also found that some Black women experience bad feelings at rates 3-times higher than their White counterparts. When asked, Black women cited lack of appreciation, cooperation and respect as the major factors that made them unhappy. Even highly educated Black women were less happy than White women of the same educational level. Researchers for the CDC acknowledge that their survey results may be inconclusive and concede that there is no explanation for the extent of the unhappiness among Black women. Perhaps this degree of unhappiness is due to the fact that Black women are treated worse than any other group; have made the necessary sacrifices to save their families which has taken an emotional toll; and are mothers of children who are most likely to die before age of 21. The sheer wonder is that these women who reportedly feel so bad, are still able to accomplish so much, including loving the ones who cause them so much pain. (*Washington Post*)

# Urban Radio Disc Jockeys: Still Powerful Message Senders




Over the years many have believed – with the proliferation of cable, satellite television, computer games, and the Internet taking more of America's "entertainment time" – that radio would go the way of the dinosaurs. However, radio still continues to be a powerful medium. Radio has survived, and even thrived, in urban areas of the world, but it would merely be a "static" medium if it were not for the personalities that help to color and shape it. In particular, urban radio disc jockeys remain powerful "message senders" with their audience.

Urban DJs exhibit a lot of power behind the microphone, and have the opportunity to relate to and greatly influence their listeners:

they announce everything from the weather, time and traffic to the latest celebrity gossip. (Most DJs, incidentally, are considered celebrities by their listeners.) DJs regularly interact with their audience, and are powerful representations of the oral communications culture which is so prominent among African Americans. Listeners can call to request songs, give their opinions, or win prizes.

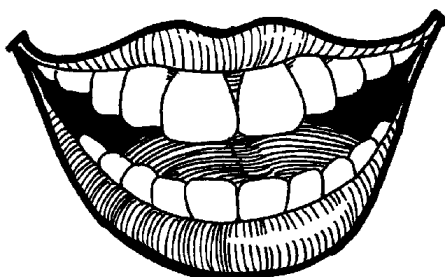
The urban radio DJ is very often someone right from the community; someone who shares the same background as his or her audience. This familiarity means that they are never perceived as "outsiders" but as peers. Urban DJs do much more than play tunes that listeners can nod their heads to. They also inspire, educate and motivate. Tom Joyner, for example, is not only one of the

most entertaining and popular syndicated DJs in the nation, he has helped to initiate boycotts and has voiced opinions against companies that he has felt do not hire African Americans or respect their buying power. In this manner, he has shown that he protects and respects the community, which makes him a powerful message sender.

The urban radio disc jockey is the consummate communicator, the "storyteller" or griot of old, viewed as celebrity, authority figure and a "hip" member of the community, passing information orally to a captivated audience. The special qualities that they bring to the communications process, including affordability, portability, high-watt talent and charisma, means that the urban radio DJ will remain "on the air" well into the new millennium. 

⌘ Tom Joyner, host of the popular syndicated urban radio program, the Tom Joyner Morning Show, understands that Black radio has a powerful purpose in the community. Not only is Black radio in existence to entertain the Black community, but also to provide valuable information. Recently, Joyner, in conjunction with Tavis Smiley, the show's regular commentator, galvanized the show's 7 million, mostly African American listeners to pressure CompUSA to expand its advertising with Black-owned media. Joyner and Smiley informed listeners that Blacks spend \$750 million a year on computer products. Listeners were urged to send in receipts to show that Blacks shopped at CompUSA, the largest retailer in this country. Several boxes of receipts were sent to CompUSA, but Joyner received no reply. Next, Joyner read an insulting letter on the air that he said was on CompUSA stationery. Unbeknownst to Joyner, the letter turned out to be a hoax and the campaign looked as if it might be in trouble. Joyner and Smiley did not back down, but instead increased pressure on CompUSA. This resulted in more back and forth, deadlines, Smiley blasting ABC Radio Network for threatening to cancel Joyner's show, amid angry calls from fans to both ABC and CompUSA. Finally, James Halpin, president and CEO of CompUSA, appeared on Joyner's show and promised to hire a Black-owned ad agency and to give a 10% discount to those who had sent in CompUSA receipts. (*Time Magazine*)

## "Word of Mouth"



In African American culture, part of the process for generating "word-of-mouth" includes an understanding that when engaged in an argument, you debate the person, not the idea. The persuasive process is interactive, with opinions floated and developed through give-and-take conversation and debate. Ideas that withstand the various perspectives of the peer group are deemed to have earned legitimacy and, therefore, will be shared by others. By engaging in serious debate, the participants bring respect to the issue.

Corporations and groups that have come to appreciate the buying power of urban populations often struggle over the most effective way to communicate with them. Creators of traditional media campaigns are often unsuccessful, because they fail to understand and incorporate the cultural influences, social values, and attitudes of inner city African Americans.

In understanding that African Americans process information differently from the mainstream, MEE has repeatedly designed campaigns for African Americans that generate "word of mouth" from inside the community. For many African Americans, messages that originate in the dominant culture are automatically suspect, yet being perceived as an insider is no easy feat.

African American culture places a high value on realism – being genuine in your dealing with others, and "telling it like it is." An obvious and clumsy attempt to get insider status runs the risk of being rejected even more

quickly than a message coming directly from a mainstream perspective. One strategy that MEE uses to generate credible "word of mouth" is the use of peer group leaders to help spread the message. This is effective whether we are addressing a public health issue, promoting a television show, or spreading the word on a new movie.

An initial challenge of any communications campaign, therefore, is to get that conversation started and to provide a relevant connection, making the message worthy to address and eventually embrace. MEE has learned over the years that a media campaign must continuously and actively work to engage its audience in a way that projects respect, invites the audience as a group to initiate discussion, and promotes reaching a shared understanding and agreement on the validity of the messages presented.





## Key Cultural Insights for African Americans

MEE's research has revealed a number of insights on African Americans that provide a keen understanding of their values, attitudes and social cues.

Knowing and understanding these key insights to African Americans is important for any communicator who wishes to design effective messages, products or advertising for this audience. By not having an "insider's view" of African American culture, and by not understanding the motivations and "what lies beneath" their behavior, many message designers fail in their attempts to reach and influence this group.

For more than ten years, MEE has worked with a variety of African American populations. We thoroughly understand the importance of having an "insider's view" of the culture, and have an acute understanding of the communication style that Black audiences primarily subscribe to. MEE has successfully incorporated the following cultural insights in both our public health and private sector work:

### *Spirituality:*

Spirituality and religion have always played a significant role in the lives of African Americans, and women in particular. No matter how bad things are going, nor how hard life gets, most African Americans feel like they can always count on a "higher power" for support and solace. This belief in the power of prayer has been passed on from generation to generation, along with other rituals such as the use of natural family remedies in medical and personal healing. Some African Americans put such faith in spiritual healing, that it has more value in their lives than medicinal healing. The medical condition can be near fatal, yet they strongly believe that, like a popular gospel song rejoices, "He may not come when you want Him, but He's always right on time." (From the Fall 1999 issue of UrbanTrends (page 2), an article on spirituality entitled *Going Into the Light: The Spirit Still Leads appears.*)

### *Acknowledging the Power of Tradition:*

Most African American families have a strong woman who serves in the role of the family matriarch. The family matriarch is the woman who passes on the oral family history and the family traditions. She is the woman who

invokes reverence and respect from all members of the family. She may not be a woman of advanced education or age, but she possesses wisdom beyond her years and is willing to impart that to her family. Her wisdom is based on her various personal experiences and the impact that they have had on her life. The African American family comes to its matriarch for her honest advice and personal guidance in all issues. For the African American family, she represents stability during periods of change, perseverance and strength in times of adversity, and dependability through their times of need.

### *Relationships:*

The African American family often moves beyond modern-day concepts of the traditional nuclear family with a mother, father and two siblings. The African American female's support network goes outside of the immediate family to include girlfriends, boyfriends, close friends, neighbors and all people genuinely interested in guiding a child on his/her journey to becoming a socially-responsible adult. Many families consist of so-called "aunts" and "uncles" that are of no blood relation to that particular family, but who exhibit all of the care and concern that is natural to biological families. This extended family often becomes a part of a child's immediate family, taking on the same roles and responsibilities of biological aunts and uncles. This concept of an extended family is a true manifestation of the African proverb that teaches, "It takes an entire village to raise a child."

### *Self-Pride/Self-Image:*

With the anthem "Black is Beautiful," a whole movement began in the African American community of appreciating, delighting in, and being fulfilled with one's existing beauty. It was no longer about one skin color being more attractive than another, or one hair texture being better than another. It was now about all of our many individual differences being unique and beautiful.

Many African American women believe in accentuating their natural beauty through cosmetic and fashion expressions. It is not at all uncommon to walk the streets of one neighborhood and see, in the span of a few minutes, several African American women of different hues, wearing hairstyles from

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## Cultural Insights (continued)

dreadlocks to french rolls, and in clothing from traditional African lapas to the latest from Donna Karan. African American women take great pride in the image of themselves that they present to the world.

In the past, most African American communities have had at least one beauty shop to cater to the community's needs. Today, one would be hard pressed to find an African American community that does not have several beauty salons, nail salons, and other shops that cater to the image-accentuating needs of African American women.

### *The Role of Music:*

As African Americans trace their heritage, music will always be found to have played a major role in the daily existence of their communities. From the rhythmic beat of the drums in an African village, to the Negro spirituals sung by slaves conducting their duties on the plantation. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement to the Motown Sound to the Hip Hop Generation, music has always been a major component of African American culture.

Music is almost always the background for any event in the African American community. At church, family events, community block parties, festivals or any other kind of social gathering, it is very natural to hear gospel, jazz, R&B, blues, soul or hip-hop music as a backdrop to the day's happenings. Music is a form of communication for the attendees of these events, and the most successful events depend on music to act as a bridge to the message that is being presented.

In today's society, music is one of the most universal forms of mass communication. Many African Americans listen to up to 4

hours of radio per day. Through this music, the social, political and economic conditions of society are communicated to African Americans. In addition, African Americans are heavy movie consumers, and the soundtrack of a movie can be as appealing as its content in drawing consumers to theaters. Music serves as a guide to consumer decision-making, an interpreter of social issues, and a gauge of community attitudes. Without this, many African Americans would feel lost and disconnected from the African American community that they inhabit, and the various societies that surround them. (The Spring 1999 issue of UrbanTrends has an article entitled *Insights on Music* (page 3) which expands on this information.)

### *Storytelling-Based Entertainment:*

Whether African Americans are being entertained by comedians, movies, radio programs or music, they are expecting to be told a story. African Americans want stories to which they can relate to because their own worldview is based so much on personal experience. Many Black women enjoy hearing stories and watching "sequel-type" entertainment on television (e.g., soap operas, mini series, sequel-oriented advertising). National and local theater plays are gaining in popularity in the African American community, particularly among women. Since the mid-1980s, there has been an explosion in gospel-based plays, the primary audience being Black women. Storytelling-based entertainment is probably the most common and effective way of entertaining the African American community. They do not just want to hear the end of the story or the punch line; they want to hear everything that led up to that end point.

☞ A consumer research study by LeoShe, Leo Burnett's unit that focuses on marketing to women, has found that there are many different types of mothers who approach their parenting duties in distinctly different ways. The report, "Multiple Mom: Four Strategies," have identified four types of mothers: 1) "June Cleaver: the Sequel" types are traditional stay-at-home moms; 2) "Tug of War" moms, those women who are forced to work and aren't happy about it; 3) "Strong Shoulders" moms are single-mothers age 18-24 with a positive view of their lives and little support from their children's fathers; and 4) "Mothers of Invention" are women who enjoy motherhood and find creative ways to balance career and family life. The report explains that women's perceptions of motherhood are influenced by several factors including education, income, and support from the child(ren)'s father. Marketers must fine-tune their messages in order to target their products more accurately to these women. Researchers found that the four types responded differently to the same marketing message and that current strategies apparently do not take into account the fluctuating perception of women's roles in the home and workplace, or their real values and attitudes. Currently, advertisers use the same lingo for all moms, but industry experts note that companies should be willing to create different ads for their products in order to reach a larger cross-section of the population.

*(American Demographics)*



## What's Next...

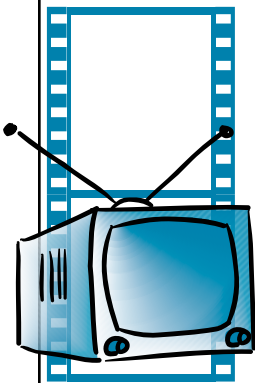
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⌘ Funkmaster Flex, the premier radio personality on New York's Hot 97-radio station, has become a radio superstar because he long ago understood the power of urban music and culture. Flex has blazed his own trail by keeping in touch with both the underground and the mainstream. He keeps his ear to the street and the street keeps its ears on what Flex is playing on the radio and in clubs. By being the #1 DJ in his time slot on Hot 97 and remaining dedicated to a cutting edge street sound, Flex has been able to diversify his talents and become a thriving entrepreneur. He is a DJ/host for Hip Hop Sunday nights at Manhattan's Tunnel Night Club; founder of the Big Dawg record pool; a gold recording artist/DJ for Loud Records; CEO of Franchise Records; a chart topping producer; national spokesperson for Starter Sports Gear; and producer of the groundbreaking Funkmaster Flex Mix Tapes. (<http://www.funkmasterflex.com>)

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