

EDUCATION

How the fashion industry can successfully implement diversity and inclusion efforts

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LVMH-owned Fenty was founded by a Black woman and its advertising is reflective of this. Image credit: Fenty

By NORA HOWE

Accelerated by the global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, diversification of businesses and the amplification of marginalized voices have become a top priority for businesses and consumers.

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During a panel at the FT Business of Luxury Summit on Nov. 23 moderated by *Financial Times* editor Isabel Berwick, fashion industry experts discussed workplace discrimination and what fashion and media companies need to do to promote racial and ethnic diversity in a meaningful way. They addressed specific ways in which the fashion industry must transform to have a meaningful impact in the effort towards inclusion.

"What we have seen a lot in luxury fashion is performative allyship," said Lindsay Peoples Wagner, editor in chief of *Teen Vogue*. "Companies do the public-facing thing to make it look like they're woke, but they're not actually putting in the work to diversify the company structure."

"If you're going to be accountable for your actions and be transparent, that's great, but with that comes responsibility and with responsibility comes action," she said.

Diversifying fashion

The most pressing issue in the present workplace is diversity in staffing, according to Kimberly Jenkins, founder of the *Fashion and Race Database*. She has dedicated her career to exploring fashion history outside of the western lens and building a framework of studying fashion in more inclusive ways.

"A company that wants to have diverse staffing must acknowledge what obstacles are baked into the existing framework of the company that have created barriers for marginalized people," Ms. Jenkins said. "What accommodations are companies willing to make to create a more diverse environment and are they willing to reorganize the cultural structure of an organization?"

"Much of the resistance we see happening is due to companies knowing any significant change will necessitate great sacrifice or discomfort," she said. "From the fashion industry to academia, people are dragging their feet moving forward because of these things."



Black Fashion Designers exhibition by Ariele Elia and Elizabeth Way at Museum of FIT. Image credit: The Fashion and Race Database

In regards to the fashion industry pipeline, which typically requires years of unpaid internship experience, personal connections and pre-existing financial security, Ms. Wagner expressed concern that these expectations often exclude talented and qualified young people of color from becoming involved in fashion.

"Many companies have complained that they are not receiving enough applications from people of color, but the issue is that no one is taking responsibility for ensuring young people are educated about these opportunities," Ms. Wagner said. "As a leader, it comes down to how badly you want to create a diverse environment.

"You have to work a lot harder, making a concerted effort to find amazing and diverse voices it's about making sure people in our community will see and apply for job opportunities," she said. "For me, there was no option other than to have a diverse team."

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The panelists also discussed performative and active allyship from businesses, explaining that many industry leaders tend to push the responsibility of diversity onto their employees thus removing the burden off their shoulders.

"Allyship must begin with the leaders, so they can model what everyone in the company should be doing," Ms. Jenkins said. "True allyship and mentorship involves sacrificing and speaking up for people, pushing the door open and vouching for someone."

According to a Gartner report from August, many HR departments do not feel that efforts made to implement diversity and inclusion programs are enough to actually create a lasting, more diverse workplace. Nearly 90 percent of HR leaders said that their organizations have been ineffective or flat at increasing diversity representation ([see story](#)).

"So many companies are too eager to compartmentalize diversity and inclusion, when really a holistic approach is key," Ms. Jenkins said. "Employee groups are fine, but they should not be used as a crutch for leaders."

Meaningful change

In September, the Council of Fashion Designers of America, looking to address systemic racism and racial inequity in fashion, expanded its programming to create opportunities for Black talent. The CFDA has created a separate Black advisory board responsible for all CFDA efforts on inclusivity, diversity and equality.

Bonnie Morrison will join the CFDA in a newly created role to lead the strategy and execution of CFDA equity program initiatives with the goal of building opportunities for Black creatives and professionals in fashion and will help support and execute new initiatives such as the talent placement program created for Black creatives and professionals in the U.S. fashion industry ([see story](#)).

In another show of support, Cond Nast shelter publication *Architectural Digest* produced a digital designer show house exclusively featuring Black interior designers, encapsulating a year that has seen brands embrace online platforms and commit to diversity like never before. It is the latest initiative from the publication as it looks to better promote and drive conversations that foster diversity in design and architecture.

AD Pro, the publication's members-only platform, also published a [guide to allyship](#) for non-Black members of the design community ([see story](#)).

"Educate yourself, do the work and do not rely on marginalized people to implement diversity in your workplace," Ms. Jenkins said. "This is not something for the racial reckoning of 2020; this will not be a quick and easy fix.

"This will take time and effort," she said.