

MONITOR Memorables

Vince Cullers Pioneer in Black-Owned Advertising

Vince Cullers—a close friend and admirer of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—was considered by many as *the* pioneer in major minority-owned advertising. When he founded Vince Cullers Advertising in 1956, it was the first Black-owned full service ad agency in America.

A native of Chicago, Cullers graduated from DuSable High School where his art teachers and others provided ongoing inspiration, encouragement and motivation for him to succeed in life. He served with distinction as a Marine Corps combat artist during World War II and invariably many of his subjects were about his own people in whom he had developed immense pride. Following his duty in the service, he attended the Chicago Art Institute and majored in business at the University of Chicago.

Cullers began his career in 1953 as a promotional art director for *EBONY* magazine. Working as marketing consultant and advertising artist for several agencies, Cullers thought he wanted to go full time at an agency at some point. He eventually was offered a job with a major agency but “unfortunately, the racial climate was such that I subsequently declined.”

When Cullers started in the business, the general condition for Blacks in advertising—then as now—was not that good. “White-owned and White-oriented (or White-focused) agencies were not hiring Black professionals in any great capacity,” he recalls, “so you almost had to open your own firm if you were Black and wanted to work in the field.” When asked whether White firms have changed their hiring practices to any significant degree, Cullers says, “Black employment within major agencies does not exceed one or two percent, currently. So the problem of racism certainly has not gone away.”

All of these factors led Vince Cullers to open his own agency with his wife, Marian. He spent his first 12 years in the business developing and promoting his philosophy to so-called “general” market



Vince Cullers

advertisers that “selling Black” requires “thinking Black” and that “the American marketplace was a two-faceted one, not a general market. The majority part of that marketplace, I would have to explain, was of those who could identify as White in American society. The other part was comprised of those whom society has never allowed realistically to identify as White, and that was the area of my specialization.”

As a result, Cullers became known as

a key go-between for the country’s business community and its then \$28 billion Black consumer market. Still, many major advertisers did not consider the Black consumer a unique or viable segment and thus many major advertisers were reluctant to spend their ad dollars with a Black agency. So, in the early days, he often found himself as a consultant to White agencies that were seeking advice on marketing to the Black consumer.

Undaunted, for several years Cullers

performed this role while using his own agency to fill another need—that of passing on his knowledge about the business to young Blacks anxious to move into all areas of advertising. “For many years,” he says, “we actually functioned as a business and a training ground for many young Blacks seeking their first exposure in the advertising business. We would train them and they would get experience and move on.” Cullers admits that it may not have been the best way to develop a business but “when I look back it was one of the most gratifying periods of my career.”

This unusual man continues:

In the late 1960’s, Black people found a positive self-awareness that translated their life experience into a new distinct commodity—Black pride. It crystallized the unique advertising focus necessary to influence the Black consumer that I had recognized so many years before. Those businesses that were astute enough to recognize this change that was developing in the Black community were able to take advantage of it through the use of Black agencies. Big corporations began to realize the need for special market programs for Black people. Advertising that had been tolerated by the Black community before was now being scrutinized as offensive and stereotyped. Simply substituting Black people in commercials that had concepts of White people was not enough.

Cullers’ first major client was the Lorillard Company of New York. That occurred as a result of some of the pressures exerted on White companies in the 60’s by civil rights organizations, like Breadbasket (now Operation PUSH) and the NAACP, to establish better relationships with Black businesses.

When Lorillard came to Chicago looking for a Black agency, we had a three-man staff and were doing all types of advertising with the exception of televi-

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