

Nissan's Black History Month ad campaign under fire

Auto company accused of offending African-Americans with slogan

By Hazel Trice Edney
WASHINGTON (NNPA)—Nissan North America Inc. has ended its controversial billboard ad campaign that sparked protests by activists who characterized the ads as an insult to African-Americans.

Nissan sponsored billboards in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Atlanta, San Francisco and Los Angeles that referred to "Black History Month," with the word "history" crossed out and replaced with "future."

Company officials said the campaign was one phase of its "Black Experience" series, which ended Feb. 14. "The changing elements of the campaign have always been a part of Nissan's plan, and the Black Future Month billboards are now being replaced with the next in the series," a Nissan statement says.

"The new billboards speak to perseverance, freedom and hope."

Several Los Angeles-based activist organizations, including the National Alliance for Positive Action and the National Black Anti-Defamation League, staged protests saying Nissan was disrespecting Black history by dubbing it "Black Future Month." They did not object to focusing on the future but

were upset that Black history was minimized.

"We received obviously negative feedback from the billboards, but we have also received intensely positive feedback from those 'Black Future Month' billboards," says Terri Hines, a company spokesperson. "Those billboards were in no way intended to insult or disrespect Black history and what that means to African-Americans."

Hines says the ads were created for Nissan by True Agency Inc., a Black-owned firm based in Los Angeles and New York. Nissan hired the newly formed agency last summer to handle its advertising campaigns targeting African-American and urban consumers.

Hines claims that several Black organizations, including the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, have supported the ad campaign.

However, Rainbow/PUSH disputes Hines' version of events.

Glenda Gill, bureau director of the Automotive Project for Rainbow/PUSH, says Nissan removed the billboard in response to concerns voiced by Rainbow/PUSH.

"They took the billboard down because we called them about it and we actually talked about it so they took the bill-



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— Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. President of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition

board down," says Gill.

Some national leaders were also upset that the Nissan campaign, which was kicked off in January, does not include Black newspapers and radio stations, the most effective vehicles for reaching the African-American consumer.

Their one-word question: Why? "I don't have an answer for that," replies Hines. "We don't have any print in any newspaper, whether it's Black or mainstream." She says there are no radio ads, either. Instead, the advertising promotion is placed in Black and White-owned magazines, on billboards, on television and the Internet.

Jerome Mondesire, president of the Philadelphia NAACP and owner-publisher of the "Philadelphia Sun," says Nissan's action is typical of some companies.

"They're only reflective

of the overall racist attitude that so many large corporations in America have," Mondesire says. "They'll take our money but won't do business in our newspapers."

Hines says Nissan's decision to exclude Black newspapers and radio from advertising is only for the "Black Experience" campaign.

"I think it's awfully shortsighted of the company," says NAACP Board Chairman Julian Bond. "It strikes me that if you want to reach Black readers, you've got to use Black media. Sure, we read Time magazine and the Washington Post, but we read the Afro-American, Ebony, Jet and Crisis Magazine."

Independent studies show that Black readers give more credence to ads placed in Black publications than those in non-Black outlets.

Additionally, John "Jake" Oliver Jr., president of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), a trade association that represents more than 200 Black newspapers, observes that when a company places an ad with a Black newspaper, consumers know that firm is interested in reaching and respecting that segment of their base.

"It's important for advertisers to have their message delivered through vehicles which are the most trusted by the consumer," says Oliver.

On the other hand, if an ad is placed with a non-Black publication, that message could be intended for anyone and is not as likely to resonate with African-American consumers. Oliver says the automotive industry, particularly Nissan, has a bad record overall when it comes to advertising with Black newspapers.

"All of those companies

ought to advertise in Black newspapers and Black-owned radio," says the Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., president of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, which has held a series of meetings with Nissan and other car manufacturers about economic policies that are unfair to the Black community.

"The Black Press is the medium. The Black Press is the one that made the Emmett Till story big. The Black Press made the Rosa Parks sit-in big. The White press began to embrace it because the Black Press embraced it. So at its best, it's the advocate. These mediums of communication are invaluable."

Regardless of the merits of the debate of the billboard controversy, Jesse Jackson says the larger issue of how the Black media is being treated must be addressed by Nissan.

"No campaign conducted by a corporation in any of our communities should be insulting to us," Jackson says. "While I don't think it was intentional, I think it was insensitive."



MAYOR LUNCHEON WITH THE CHAMBER

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