



by Matthew Jones

While there is still much to learn for many marketers trying to create enduring and profitable inroads into ethnic markets, it's safe to say that most industry leaders have finally accepted the importance of reaching out to diverse audiences. The remaining question for these companies, however, is *how*.



Damon Haley, senior vice president of **Urban Marketing Corporation of America (UMCA)**, believes he and his partner, **Carl Washington**, have answers to that question. Ever since the two men founded their Los Angeles based agency, they have handled urban marketing campaigns for industry giants - including **Nike**, **HBO** and **Sega**.

"With the browning of America, and with the world getting smaller through technology and digital communications, many brands live or die with the latest trends," said Haley. "Our job is to translate those trends into dollars for our clients."

Haley has a long history of translating great ideas into dollars. Before joining UMCA, Haley spent four years at **Chevron Corporation**, and four years as Nike's Western Region Marketing Manager. Today, Haley is using his knowledge, contacts and experience to help UMCA grow. Nike is one of UMCA's largest and longest-running clients. Other UMCA clients include **Essence Communications**, **Sean John Clothing**, and **Bad Boy Entertainment**. On the music side, they also represent **Def Jam Records**, **Warner Brothers Records**, **Artista Records**, and **Columbia Records**.

UMCA will likely see annual billings approach \$6 million this year,

up from about \$3 million in 2002. The agency has eight full time employees, and is supported by a select pool of freelancers and strategic partners from **Chicago to New York**.

While growth can be a good thing, UMCA is careful about the projects it accepts, and the clients it works with.

"It's all about integrity," said Haley. "It's got to make sense for us and the client. We have to add value, and (clients) have to utilize us to our highest potential. At the same time, we have to turn down jobs that aren't good for our own brand."

That commitment and approach has served UMCA well, as it has grown in size and reputation since its formation in September of 1999. Today, UMCA is emerging as a leader in urban marketing – a field that the agency intends to redefine.

A Unique View – A Unique Approach

Over the past ten years, the word "urban" has become synonymous with "Black" in most marketing circles, and most corporate attempts to reach the "urban" market have centered on the African-American community. UMCA, however, takes a more holistic approach to the word. Instead of focusing just on the color of the target market segment, UMCA concentrates on the environments that nurture urban cultures and trends.

"We lived through the sports legends era, where **Michael Jordan** was the king," said Haley. "About ten years ago, Hip Hop culture was driving a lot of what was going on – it completely permeated the urban market. As part of our solutions approach, we provide value added insight and service to interpret the urban markets, and help figure out what's coming next."

UMCA prefers to look at the urban market more in geographical terms, focusing on the dense areas within top U.S. markets. The agency specializes in analyzing and interpreting how a cluster of cultures interact, rather than honing in on any one ethnicity.

"With the African-American market, it's seems like the general market is just infatuated with our style, but there's more going on than that," continued Haley. "Take a truly urban area – in any given market - that's where you have the most cultures mixing. It's a place where you have high interaction with different ethnic groups. One kid decides to wear a baseball hat a certain way, or a certain style of Air Jordan shoes, and suddenly, it's all over the suburbs."



If that seems like a random observation, it's not. According to Haley, there is an art and science behind this phenomenon. "We're getting to the broader, general market, in essence, through the urban market," said Haley.

Overall, urban and diversity marketing aren't the hard sells they once were. Clients seem to be more willing to embrace this approach to brand building, but they often require some level of coaching and education through the process.

"There seems to be a greater level of sensitivity now, particularly with a culturally savvy client like Nike," said Haley. "The numbers don't lie, so they know what's going on. We tend to have younger clients – a lot of the times around 32 to 45 years old, and they're charged with building a business. They tend to be willing to look to us for the answers."

According to Haley, part of the process includes looking not only at how the brand fits into the culture of the target market segment, but how the product itself fits into the larger culture.

Often times, the road to figuring this out extends well beyond the immediate brand team. For many of UMCA's brand strategy meetings, the agency strives to include representatives from marketing, product development, manufacturing, and anyone else who has insight and decision making responsibilities for how the end product will look and operate.

"Take a product like a car," said Haley. "If you want to sell a car to a member of the African-American community, then you need to understand how cars fit into our culture. You need to know what we want from a car, and how we want it to look. You might have a car that we aren't interested in, but then add some rims and some sounds, and suddenly you might have something there..."

UMCA – Influencing the Influencers

Understanding how product and culture merge is a key element of UMCA's approach, but they're not the only marketers to work off of that philosophy. Taking that concept one step further, however, UMCA has created an entire network of influencers across the major markets in the country – something that Haley said is uniquely their own.

Influencers, under the UMCA model, are those individuals to whom people look to for what is cool, or in. They can be the most popular high school kids, the city's hottest DJs, or just your typical attention magnet. The one thing they have in common: these are the people who set the trends. They are plugged into the social fabric of whatever city they live in. UMCA knows who these people are.

"There are essentially three groups of influencers that we primarily work with," said Haley. "You have the high school age kids. Then, you have the 'new adults' – the 19 to 22 year old segment. Then you have the 'on the go' adults, ages 22 to 30. We end up putting a lot of focus on that group."

Working with a network of nearly 1,000 people in 12 markets across the country, UMCA brings its clients directly to the people who matter the most for their brands. Through special events, traditional marketing means, and even product give-aways, UMCA puts the brand where clients want. While they have dozens, maybe hundreds of influencers in each market, they rarely work with more than 25 or so at a given time, for any given program. After all, how cool and exclusive can something be if more than 25 people have it first?

The formula is working for UMCA. For instance, the agency recently pulled together a major event for Nike in Long Island City, New York. It was a major Saturday night event, with significant investment. Unfortunately, the event was rained out. To keep the Nike from facing a total loss, the agency tapped into its network of influencers, and was able to recreate the event the next day. Without any traditional advertising or public relations vehicles, UMCA reports that more than 500 people turned out for the event. It was all word of mouth – and all through the top influencers in the market.

Sports have always transcended cultural and ethnic lines, and UMCA has done a lot in that arena, as well. That's probably no surprise, given their long history with Nike.

On September 7, **MTV** will air ***Battlefields: Ball or Fall*** – the culmination of a multi-city basketball tournament that brings the winners from each market together to compete in New York. The Nike-sponsored event has one ultimate goal – to find the ***King of the Court***. UMCA pulled together the entire event – from the production to the advertising/public relations to the event coordination.

What's next?

Never one to ignore the question of what's next, Haley says he has his eyes set on the wireless communications industry as a key area of growth.

"I'd love to get my hands on **Motorola**," said Haley. "I'd love to ask them 'what's your strategy for all your products? How do you

want to marry your brand and services to your target over a lifetime?”

But it’s not just about the billings for Haley, or just about landing big names. He truly loves asking the questions.

“Take a car company, say, **Honda**,” said Haley. “I’m fascinated by looking at how they move a customer from a Civic, to an Integra, and up the line to an Acura. That’s where the real work is. That’s what we like to do.”

The End
