

Remembering D. Parke Gibson, Founder of D. Parke Gibson International

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Summary

D. Parke Gibson was a pioneer in multicultural public relations, a data analyst, and a social advocate - simultaneously. Gibson leveraged the power of community to bring visibility of African-Americans in the world of business, at a time where they were fighting to be seen with equal human rights under the law in the United States.

Disclaimer: The term Negro is used throughout the paper only in reference to Gibson's language of his work at the time.

Early Beginnings

Gibson, the Seattle-native was born in the 1930's. He was a graduate of the City College of New York and received an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from King Memorial College in South Carolina. Gibson served four years in the U.S. Air Force before settling in the East (*Western Advertising Week*, 1962.) He was married to a woman named Patricia with "two stepchildren, Dale Hall and Frank Turner, and a brother, Everett" (*The New York Times*, 1979.) This is all that has been publicized on Gibson's personal life.

Fast forward to the 1960's, Gibson launched the first, Black-owned marketing and public relations firm, *D. Parke Gibson International*, specializing in the "Negro" market. Through his firm, he counseled corporate clients in industries such as travel, hospitality, transportation and consumer goods on strategies to grow and retain the Black consumer. Additionally, Gibson collaborated with Columbia Pictures in the development and production of roadshows called "Oliver," "Funny Girl," "To Kill a Mockingbird," and "For the Love of Ivy" (*Variety Magazine*,

1969.) Besides spearheading his own firm, Gibson was also director of *Ebony* Magazine and a daily Negro newspaper (*Western Advertising Week*, 1962.)

The Relationship to Boston University

On my visit to the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, the staff explained to me that Howard Gotlieb would often write letters to individuals who were influential across all industries at the time without any relationship. Gotlieb did not have a prior relationship with D. Parke Gibson that would serve as reasoning for the D. Parke Gibson Collection Inventory to be donated to the university. This collection includes some of the most distinguished manuscripts, correspondence, and published articles throughout Gibson's career highlighting the complexity between race and marketing in the United States in the 1960's. Some of those materials include:

- Correspondence between Gibson and MacMillan on *The \$30 Billion Negro Market book*
- Article: *Race Relations: A Plan To Avoid Social Disasters*
- Speech: *Containment or Communications?*
- Speech: *Ten Ways To Improve Community Relations*

Strategic Data Analyst

Gibson was among the first to understand the importance of comprehending and implementing data through a cultural lens to create impactful content. Using his personal knowledge of the Black experience, he was able to create culturally-relevant, business-savvy decisions and reporting not only for his own firm but also for major corporations. For example, *The Gibson Report* was a marketing guide on

the Black consumer market providing quarterly insight on how to effectively develop the \$30-billion market. In addition, *The Race and Relations and Industry* was a periodic report on “equal-opportunity compliance, community relations, and problem-solving” in industrial race relations practices. Under President Truman’s administration, executive orders were issued to “establish fair employment, abolish discrimination in the armed forces, and establish compliance procedures for government contractors” (Collins, 1983.) Gibson’s race and relations report were his contribution to abiding to the laws of the time. Both of these reports were instrumental in using data to inform and address issues of the racial disparity in correlation to marketing campaign success.

The Power of Community

Gibson’s leverage of data was particularly significant at identifying a different type of African-American consumer during the 1960’s. Due to the “Negro population increasing, better education attainment, and higher salaries” (Gibson, 1964) - this new persona was more concern with “quality and luxury” rather than pricing. This introduced a business opportunity for major American corporations.

Gibson’s first book, the *\$30-million Billion Negro Market* was an attempt to deconstruct and reshape the “one-dimensional Negro life” (Gibson, 1965) in America. Through his book, he analyzed the behavior patterns of the Black community against the different social sectors. Black bodies produced the labor that permitted the economic development that in return made the United States the wealthiest country in the world. However, the invisibility of the Black experience within American history was a major factor for Gibson’s work. His *\$70-Billion in the Black: America’s Black Consumers* book, was a marketing analysis of income and spending habits of Black Americans in the 1970’s. One of the concepts that he

explores is the “second-class syndrome” within the Black community and its relationship with consumerism mentality. He discusses the idea that recognition and empowerment of the Black dollar often translated to a “less than” perception of those same goods for the white market. It is a sentiment that is still relevant in today’s society - that being pro-black correlates to being anti-white.

As a solution to this double-edged sword, Gibson created “community relations.” Community relations concentrated on the usage of identification, recognition, and invitation (Grocery MFR, 1967) of the Black consumer to encourage expenditure and growth of any market segment. He explains the importance of “orientation,” meaning representation of the Black experience through advertising images and public relations to effectively sell and retain the Black dollar.

Though Gibson’s lifework was to bring the Black experience forward, he was very concerned with the issue of “tokenism” of the Black community and was often revising ways to improve his own guidelines and advise on how to best market to them. According to his *In the Negro Market...Ten Ways to Improve Community Relations* speech, he speaks to the importance of community-interest organizations, usage of Black-oriented media, and the youth for optimal campaign success.

Social Justice Advocate

Throughout his career, Gibson published several articles and led various speeches throughout the United States discussing the relationship between race and marketing. The article “*Race Relations: A Plan to Avoid Social Disasters*,” was a direct response to the 1967’s race riots taking place in several cities across the U.S. Through the article, Gibson seeks to explain the correlation between lack of

accomplishment and brand relevance in the Black community. As a solution, he emphasizes the necessity for senior management to create content that builds confidence and trust among the Black audience.

In his *Containment or Communications - There is a choice* speech, Gibson discusses the social, economic, health, and educational institutions that had historically isolated and ignored the Black community. He argues that in order for any corporation to successfully establish their relevance to the Black market, there must be a “new wave of communication... between the White and Black community” (Gibson, 1969.) Corporations cannot expect to replace White faces with Black ones and expect a good return on investment. Gibson emphasized that there was zero-guarantee that acknowledging the Black consumer would result in financial benefit for corporations but that was risk that Gibson encouraged corporations to take, as a long-term investment. Brand loyalty was and continues to be a privilege not a *right*.

The Beginning of a Legacy

On May 14, 1979, the New York Times published an obituary on the 49-year-old, D. Parke Gibson naming the cause of death a “sudden” heart attack in his New York office.

Though he died young, D. Parke Gibson’s work and influence brought visibility, inclusion, and relevancy of the Black community across all industries. In a decade where race riots and racial tensions were at an all-time high, Gibson leveraged the power of community to put the Black lived experiences on the forefront of the conversation.

Gibson was a creative visionary that understood social inequalities for the Black community. In five steps, he created business solutions to help bring forward a more inclusive and authentic representation of minorities. His work and advise are based on the following steps:

1. Evaluate your potential market and how your company fits in
2. Understand and speak to the consumer's needs and desires without using stereotypes
3. Study your competitors in the space and how your brand and or company differentiates
4. Create an authentic communication strategy with your consumer. Use platforms that are relevant to them
5. Inviting your consumer to buy

Throughout his work, Gibson often emphasized that "Negro-oriented programs are not segregation-in-reverse, but simply provide what the Negro wants - recognition!" (Needs of the Negro Consumer, 1967.) Race aside, corporations should continue to strive towards customer-oriented programming that focuses on the authenticity of the audience that is being targeted to begin building a positive rapport and brand loyalty. Today, these steps are not only practices but expectations.

Gibson's career desegregated the Black dollar in the United States. He walked a thin line between being a Black man who counsel White corporations on how to sell to the Black community and being *Black*. This is an enormous challenge - let alone for an individual. However, his work taught us that change is a collective, conscious, and never-ending effort.

Today, Gibson's work would have been characterized under multicultural marketing due to the nuances of minority audiences. The challenge we continue to face is that even when marketing to different audiences, companies must be cautious of differentiating them from the collective effort. Per Gibson's words, "public relations is a tool of communications." We're living in a digital media era where credibility and authenticity are at an all-time low. We must continue to use public relations as a tool of creating communication avenues with appropriate audiences. We must continue to include our audiences and gear our efforts towards them. Our world is becoming more and more diverse and our communication must reflect the racial, social, and cultural complexities of our society.

D. Parke Gibson was an example of Black resilience and leadership. His work challenged the status quo at a time in history where African-Americans did not have status. Gibson's work was about representation in the media, something that we continue to fight for and are in desperate need of.

Appendix

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