

Executive Insights: An Interview with Bill Imada, Chairman and Chief Connectivity Officer at IW Group

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Abstract

I discussed the latest marketing trends with Bill Imada, Chairman and Chief Connectivity Officer at IW Group and the co-founder of the National Millennial Gen Z Community. Mr. Imada shares his insights about the latest demographic shifts facing marketers and the need for companies to have a multicultural approach in their marketing strategies. He highlights the importance of making long-term investments in reaching diverse audiences from within the communities where they live and work, despite potential backlash. He also advises marketing students to continuously invest in building and maintaining their personal brands. Mr. Imada's insights set the stage for his closing keynote address at the 5th annual Rutgers Business School Marketing Summit, held on November 17, 2023, focused on the future of marketing.

What is IW Group and what is its focus? What is your role at the organization?

IW Group is a multicultural and intercultural advertising, marketing, and PR firm that focuses on the fastest growing demographics here in the United States and Canada. We are part of Interpublic Group (IPG) and are also members of Worldcom PR Group. IW Group has offices in Los Angeles, Dallas, New York City, and San Francisco.

The primary mission for IW Group is to create campaigns that excite our clients, but also resonate deeply with our staff and the audiences we are trying to reach. We do this through multichannel-omnichannel approaches leveraging digital marketing, targeted advertising, social influencers, generative AI, and a variety of other tools, both new and traditional. As Chief

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Connectivity Officer, my responsibility is to help companies and brands stay ahead of the changing demographic profile of our country.

What do you think are the most dramatic demographic shifts marketers should be concerned about today?

One important demographic trend relates to the shifting age composition of our multi-generational society. Today, Millennials are the largest living adult generation, and Gen Z is right behind them. Companies are seeing four, five - even six - generations living together and working side by side. This is especially true with multicultural consumers. As a result, more companies are staying engaged with consumers from an early age up to their golden years. This provides opportunities for longitudinal relationships between brands and their customers. Brands are not just doing one-off marketing campaigns any longer. They are looking for opportunities to really understand and connect with consumers and stay a part of their lives throughout their lifespan.

A related demographic shift is the rapid growth of multicultural audiences in the United States. In fact, Gen Z is the most diverse generation yet. And among diverse audiences, we saw 100% growth of multicultural audiences in a period of just five years from 2014 through 2019. And that level of growth is continuing to this day. Furthermore, the U.S. population is expected to become “majority-minority” in less than 20 years. This means that no one race or ethnicity will be in the majority. It is essential that companies have a multicultural plan in place to keep pace with population shifts in the U.S.

How has IW Group responded to these major demographic shifts?

Since IW Group is a multicultural agency, we directly engage diverse communities to really understand our consumers. We also have a deep appreciation for different generations and diverse cultures and how they influence our approach to multicultural marketing. Their experiences are unique and often different from the mass market. Therefore, we encourage our clients to engage in storytelling to learn more about the unique experiences diverse consumers bring to our country and to our local communities. We also want companies and brands to share their stories and find ways to align their brand experiences with the diverse consumers they are hoping to reach. Storytelling should then evolve to story-doing and story living. Consumers want to see brands take decisive action in their communities. They want brands to play a role that enhances their lives and the communities where they live and work. Storytelling isn't just about words; it has to be expressed in actions and deeds.

As part of an effort to move college students and early-career professionals from storytelling to story-doing, I co-established the National Millennial Gen Z Community, a global network that affords younger consumers a platform to influence our country's businesses and institutional leadership. Today, the Community has grown to over 40 states, and is being observed by students and academic leaders in more than a dozen countries. Our clients also benefit because they are hearing directly from Millennials and Gen Zers. This direct interaction between young-adult consumers and marketers is critical to understanding the needs, interests, and aspirations of all parties.

Similarly, we created a national chamber of commerce to keep multicultural marketers connected to one another and to diverse business owners and entrepreneurs. Leaders from corporations, foundations, governmental agencies, and nonprofit organizations are part of this national chamber, allowing members an opportunity to share their challenges and seek viable solutions in a more collaborative environment. Today, this national chamber has partnerships with more than 100 other local and regional and business organizations nationwide.

Can you tell me more about the National Millennial Gen Z Community? How do young adults engage with this network?

The inspiration for the National Millennial Gen Z Community came eight years ago, after I received several research reports from Fortune 100 companies, foundations, and think tanks. These organizations claimed to be experts on youth and young adults. One day, I decided to take these reports home, thinking they would be good bedside reading. I found these reports fascinating, but also confusing.

One report talked about Millennials and Gen Zers not wanting to buy property or automotive insurance. The data indicated that young adults did not need insurance because they didn't plan to own a car. Furthermore, the reports posed questions such as, "why would young adults want a car when they have alternative forms of transportation such as shared ride services?" Another data point mentioned that young adults were unlikely to buy homes or use hotels, since they had other options such as short-term home rentals. Yet another report seemed to contradict the data outlined in the first two reports, stating that Millennials and Gen Zers were all about making money so that they could afford to consume material things such as cars, homes, and property insurance. The reports, when placed side by side, offered conflicting conclusions about brand loyalty, media consumption habits, salary transparency, and more.

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To get the real story, I handed the stack of reports over to our summer interns who were from seven different universities across the country. Without giving them any background about these documents, I asked them to simply look through these reports and come back to me in a week or so to share their thoughts. At the end of the week, they told me they owned up to 20% of what was written about their generations. I then asked, “What about the other 80%?”, our interns felt there was significant bias by the researchers in every report. They also felt that many of the major research studies were conducted by large academic institutions on the East and West Coasts, and that online surveys didn’t always reveal the true stories about their generations. The interns emphasized that their cohort of younger Millennials and Gen Zers didn’t always revolve around large urban centers such as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Houston. Rather, young-adult consumers are found in every part of the country, including rural areas and small towns. Our interns felt overlooked and underrepresented in these research studies – especially if they lived outside of major cities.

When I challenged our interns to use their voice and speak up about the realities of their generations, they responded that they didn’t have power because Gen Xers and Baby Boomers ruled the narratives at agencies, companies, foundations, and governmental organizations. When these interns insisted that they didn’t have a voice, I strongly disagreed with them. I said young adults do have a voice. They just need to find a way to use it.

This discussion with our interns is partly why I co-founded the National Millennial Gen Z Community. I wanted to ensure that we provided an opportunity and platform for young adults – particularly college- and university-age students – to express themselves. As the Community was being formed, we agreed to utilize our connections to set up discussions directly with executives of major Fortune 500 companies, governmental agencies, foundations, and nonprofits. As a result of our efforts, the Community now consists of diverse students from several colleges, such as Rutgers University, who serve as representatives from their respective states. Faculty and administrative advisors from each campus select up to four students annually, including undergraduate and/or graduate students, who reflect the population of the campus and campus community.

Participating students have an opportunity to engage in video conferences and travel on field trips to meet with business executives (typically VP and above). These students are engaged in dialogue with other students from different backgrounds, and actively participate in problem-solving exercises with corporate, foundation, nonprofit, and governmental leaders. We’re always looking for more campuses to participate in the

Community. Any interested faculty or administrators from non-member campuses may contact me directly for more information.

What advice would you give to marketers striving to stay relevant and meaningful to their audiences in our increasingly multigenerational and multicultural world?

First, I encourage brands to stay closely engaged with their customers and prospective customers. At IW Group, we are intentional about staying connected in culturally relevant and meaningful ways with diverse customers and community leaders. This includes serving in leadership roles in community-based organizations and investing in the next-generation of rising leaders. I'm hoping to see more companies do this on a regular and consistent basis. If marketers are serious about making an impact in the communities they serve, they need to be there for the long haul.

Allow me to offer an example. When the Black Lives Matter movement started after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, an array of companies rushed in to do something for Black Americans. The first thing that came to their minds was to donate funds and resources to the top 10 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Although this was a wonderful gesture, many of these companies didn't understand or even recognize that there are more than 100 HBCUs nationwide. If these well-meaning companies really wanted to make an impact on diversity, equity, inclusion, and more importantly, belonging, then they should have looked at the other 90+ colleges and universities within the HBCU system and invested in those institutions as well. Offering a couple million dollars one time and then walking away does not allow you to understand the true needs and aspirations of diverse consumers and what they experience every day of their lives. But living, breathing, and being a part of these communities will help you become better marketers and communicators. Our agency not only makes an investment in diverse communities, but we also serve on the boards and advisory councils that are part of these communities. If you really want to elevate and advance diverse communities, you need to devote time, energy, and resources to them.

My second piece of advice is for brands to actively LIVE diversity by having diverse talent within their ranks. Ask yourselves: Are you hiring people who look like your target audiences? Does your agency devote time and resources to support diverse groups? While no agency can do it all, we, as marketers, must do a better job including everyone in addressing the challenges we face in an increasingly diverse world. We must also recognize that having a diverse team affords us an opportunity to see complex problems and issues from multiple points of view. Our agency celebrates diversity and

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sees it as an asset. And, while many of our clients focus on Asian American consumers, we often receive great advice and counsel from our team members who are not of Asian heritage.

My final piece of advice would be to focus on long-term investments. Stay the course despite missteps and backlash that might come with them. The brands that really invest the time, resources, energy, and budget to reaching diverse audiences, are often the ones that see success. The companies that aren't so successful dip their toe in the water, pull it out when it gets too hot, and run the other way. Even if companies make mistakes or stumble along the way, the ones that are successful learn from their mistakes and try again. We have worked with many of our clients, such as McDonald's and Walmart, for years. These clients stay the course, even if there have been multiple leadership changes in marketing, advertising, and public relations over the years. Furthermore, companies who stay on course can learn more about their customers and prospective customers. Our smart clients pay close attention to life-changes that happen to all consumers over time. And these companies do well for this reason.

What advice would you give to students who wish to launch a successful career in marketing?

The lines have really blurred between marketing, advertising, communications, corporate relations, public affairs, and government relations. Therefore, to be a good marketer, you must pay attention to all the aforementioned areas and learn how they intersect and work in concert. Nowadays, the consumer sees your brand and judges you based on the totality of what you do or what you don't do.

One easy way to enhance your knowledge of marketing and related disciplines is by listening to podcasts and audio books. Students are digital warriors and active consumers of vlogs, podcasts, and other social media content. It is easy to take a moment to listen to a podcast when they're driving or riding to school on the bus or subway. Many podcasts are short form – 20 to 40 minutes long – and they can really bring to life what students are learning in the classroom. And there are quite a few podcasts to choose from on Spotify and other media platforms. One of my favorite podcasts is called "Marketing Over Coffee." But there are dozens to choose from.

I recommend that students set goals for themselves as they plan out their career paths and daily lives. I have a goal to read a book every quarter. I also set a goal to listen to one or two podcasts per month. Furthermore, I prepare a "To-Do" list each morning. And I make it one of my goals to get through 95 to 100% of that list each day. I recommend making personal resolutions. Make a resolution that you're going to learn something new about marketing

and related disciplines every day. It works. And this could work for others, too.

I also want to make sure that marketing students recognize that they are brands themselves. As they manage their own personal brand, they need to do whatever they can to enhance their brand every day. I want students to recognize that as they're learning – in the classroom, through internships, in their communities, via podcasts or something they've read online – they are building equity in their personal brand. It is very important to nurture and protect their personal brand. Students should also do their best to be mindful of how they represent themselves on their personal social media platforms. Additionally, they should keep their LinkedIn profiles robust and up to date because this is one of the first places employers will look when evaluating them for new opportunities, internships, and jobs. Anything a student can do to enhance their personal brand will make a difference in their lives. But they also need to understand that a post that taints their personal brand could also hurt them in the future.

Executive's Bio

Bill Imada is Chairman and Chief Connectivity Officer of IW Group, a public relations and marketing agency specializing in the multicultural markets in the U.S.A. For more than three decades, Bill and his team have played a critical role in reaching the growing Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and other diverse markets. Bill and his agency represent clients such as Apple TV+, AARP, BeamSuntory, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Edison International/Southern California Edison, Jack Daniels, Janssen, Lexus, Lionsgate, McDonald's, Nielsen, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Walmart, Walt Disney, Warner Bros. Pictures Entertainment, and many others. Bill serves on the boards of the Advertising Educational Foundation, Coalition for Asian Pacifics in Entertainment, Institute for Public Relations, LAGRANT Foundation, National ACE, PBS Southern California, and the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations. In 2022, Bill was inducted into the PR Week Hall of Fame. This year, Bill is a finalist for the American Advertising Federation's Advertising Hall of Fame (2024).

Interviewer

Stacy Schwartz is an award-winning marketing professor at Rutgers Business School and the founding director of its fully online Master of Science in Digital Marketing program. She enthusiastically brings 25+ years of digital marketing industry experience into the classroom, developing and teaching courses related to marketing principles, digital marketing, and social media marketing for both graduate and undergraduate students. She also develops and leads executive-level

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modules on eCommerce, social media, and mobile marketing for RBS Executive Education Mini-MBA programs. Stacy has worked with a wide range of consumer- and business-oriented brands, with a focus on digital marketing. As a learning and development consultant to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), she launched the first ANSI-accredited professional certification programs in the digital media industry. She served as VP of Marketing at Virgin Mobile USA, Web Director at Hospital for Special Surgery, and in a range of leadership roles at internet advertising pioneer DoubleClick, which she joined as its eleventh employee in 1996. Stacy was a recipient of Harvard Business School's Service Leadership Fellowship award and co-authored two case studies for Harvard Business School Publishing related to the nonprofit sector. She is a Webby Awards judge with the International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences, and also serves as board president at Sharsheret, a national nonprofit organization. She earned an MBA from Harvard Business School and a BA with Highest Honors in Advertising from Penn State University.

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