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COMMENTARY

Trainees as consumers? How marketing can revitalize sexual harassment and racial discrimination training

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Hayes et al. (2020) correctly argue that sexual harassment and racial discrimination training—or more broadly, diversity training—needs a shot in the arm. The authors identify several limitations of current training efforts, including that training often engenders cynicism. We agree, and we further argue that trainee cynicism, along with trainee dismissiveness, are key reasons why diversity training often fails to change hearts, minds, and behaviors, and may even backfire. We view training through the lens of marketing research and practice, and explain how imagining trainees as consumers and training as a product might help revitalize diversity training efforts. Specifically, we discuss how trainee segmentation and targeting might allow training developers to match trainees to a customized training product intended to reduce or eliminate trainee cynicism and dismissiveness, increase trainee receptivity, and ultimately improve training effectiveness.

Trainee cynicism and dismissiveness

Trainee cynicism refers to the belief that all actions are selfish and self-serving, and training dismissiveness refers to the rejection of scientific findings (Rynes et al., 2018). Trainees' political ideology may serve as a source of cynicism (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Conservatives are often cynical toward information about the gender pay gap because they see it as consistent with a feminist or liberal agenda (Greszler, 2018). Liberals are often cynical about the idea that women could "lean in" to close the gender pay gap because they see it as consistent with a pull-yourself-by-the-bootstraps or conservative agenda (Yoong, 2018). Further, trainees' prior knowledge of diversity issues predicts their willingness to participate in—or conversely, to dismiss—training programs designed to increase diversity competence (Kulik et al., 2007). Men with low awareness of gender bias are less likely than men with higher awareness to support gender equality efforts (Prime & Moss-Racusin, 2009). Diversity training efforts often strengthen the original opinions of cynical and/or dismissive trainees (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010), such as the Google engineer who penned a manifesto on the shortcomings of female engineers as a reaction to Google's unconscious bias training (Lipman, 2018).

Overcoming trainee cynicism and dismissiveness

We believe that in order to revitalize diversity training, applied psychologists must move away from the current one-size-fits-all approach to diversity training and must provide diversity training in smarter ways. This would require a focus on the trainee, with a particular attention on understanding what trainee characteristics predict trainee cynicism and dismissiveness. It would also require the development of tailored diversity training programs that simultaneously accomplish two potentially paradoxical objectives: appeal to trainees' beliefs and motivations, while at the same time produce the desired diversity and inclusion effects.

Hornsey and Fielding's (2017) theory of jiu jitsu persuasion outlines the theoretical underpinnings of this idea. They explain:

> Jiu jitsu is a martial art that coaches people to use the opponents' force against them. We make an analogous argument about persuasion and behavior change: Rather than taking on people's surface attitudes directly (which causes people to tune out or rebel), the goal of jiu jitsu persuasion is to identify the underlying motivation, and then to tailor the message so that it aligns with that motivation. For example, rather than trying to directly combat an attitude that is based on core values and ideologies, the goal would be to yield to those values and to use them to capture attention and trigger change. (Hornsey & Fielding, 2017, pp. 468–469)

Research supports the effectiveness of jiu jitsu persuasion. For example, individuals with conservative ideologies are more likely to embrace initiatives presented as free-market solutions than as government regulation (Campbell & Kay, 2014); individuals protective of their privileges are more likely to embrace initiatives with low- than with high-sacrifice consequences (Corner & Hahn, 2009); individuals who feel their in-group is under attack are more likely to embrace ideas free of references to their in-group (Jang, 2013); individuals who hold individualistic, self-help views are more likely to support efforts seen as good for business (Bain et al., 2012). In short, when a message is tailored to an individual, it is more likely to result in long-lasting attitude and behavioral changes (Petty et al., 2009). However, as scholars have already noted (e.g., Campbell et al., 2018; Hornsey & Fielding, 2017), the practical challenges of such an approach are tremendous. We believe that to overcome these challenges, applied psychology can learn from research and practice in marketing strategy, and specifically from efforts focused on *market segmentation* and *targeting*.

Lessons from marketing

Around the turn of the 20th century, John Wannamaker, an American advertising and marketing pioneer, remarked: "Half my advertising is wasted, I just don't know which half" (AdAge, 1999). This reflects a concern with the traditional marketing tactic of mass marketing, where one product is promoted to everyone in order to increase efficiency (Tynan & Drayton, 1987). Although mass marketing is still used, modern marketing strategy holds that marketers "cannot appeal to all buyers in the marketplace–or at least not to all buyers in the same way" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018, p. 188). Hence, mass marketing has given way to a new, strategic marketing approach—customization—where marketers design tailored products and messages to appeal to specific groups of consumers.

For example, digital billboards like those found in New York's Times Square change algorithmically in real time to match the crowd using information gathered from cell phones in the area (Germain, 2019). Netflix displays different "row art," or movie thumbnails, in order to appeal to specific users based on their viewing history (Zarum, 2018). Users of Facebook and other platforms receive customized messages based on their location, demographics, stated interests, observed behavior, or social media connections (Facebook, 2020). In brief, marketers take advantage of information about individuals to target specific segments of consumers with customized products and messages. In the following section, we explain how the marketing strategy of customization can be paralleled in diversity training.

Segmentation and targeting

Customization requires two steps: segmentation and targeting. Segmentation refers to dividing a population into different useful sets (Tynan & Drayton, 1987). The fashion brand Vineyard Vines

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used behavioral data to find a consumer segment that was interested in children's clothing; when this segment was emailed "Kids' Weekly Best Sellers," revenue associated with this segment increased by 81% compared with typical email campaigns (Sutton, 2018). By identifying a segment with a relatively homogenous interest, Vineyard Vines was able to craft a message that resonated with that segment, boosting sales. This message would have been irrelevant to much of the customer base, which is mostly interested in adult clothing.

Applying the concept of segmentation to diversity training, developers of training programs should understand how the population of trainees can be segmented into specific groups. The widely publicized Starbucks racial bias training demonstrated that trainees respond to the same message differently. One Starbucks employee was turned off by the message, explaining: "They told us we need to be 'color brave' instead of color blind, and it was the whitest thing I've ever heard . . . . Me and my coworkers of color felt uncomfortable the entire time" (Calfas, 2018). But another Starbucks employee found the message educational, explaining: "It first made me sad, and then it made me realize I'm not aware of that" (Rose, 2018). These differential responses may be predictable, presenting an opportunity to trainers to identify trainee segments—an important first step toward training customization.

The next step in marketing customization is targeting, or determining which segments to approach with what unique product or message (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). That is, once segments are identified, they should be analyzed to determine what level of customization or standardization is warranted (Baalbaki & Malhotra, 1995). Some segments may not justify customized messages or products and may only receive standardized, mass messages. But the additional cost of customization may well be worth it for other segments. Hence, choosing which segment(s) to target, and how to target it (them), is a strategic decision (Dibb & Simkin, 2010).

Applying the concept of targeting to diversity training, developers of training programs should understand which trainee segments to approach with what training product. For illustrative purposes, assume that three training segments have been identified: (a) trainees who are not aware that barriers to equality in the workplace exist, (b) trainees who are aware that barriers to equality exist and believe this is problematic, and (c) trainees who are aware that barriers exist but do not see that as problematic. These three segments could then be targeted with customized training messages that account for differences in awareness about and attitudes toward diversity. Specifically, the first segment may benefit most from a simple awareness-raising training; but, such training is not optimal for the second and third segments who are already aware that barriers exist. Instead, these segments would benefit from change-focused training. However, as the second segment already sees equality barriers as a problem, trainees might be most inspired to learn about specific actions they can take to effect change. In contrast, the third segment might respond best to "jiu jitsu"-style training where the message aligns with trainees' attitudes and uses this alignment to motivate change from within. Hence, targeting, or the second step in the training customization process, presents trainers with an opportunity to tailor diversity training to segments of trainees, hence avoiding the one-size-fits-all approach.

A caveat

Tailoring diversity training to segments of the training population can be a powerful tool in the trainer's toolbox. With the increased prevalence of online training, segmentation and targeting should be easier to implement. This delivery mode allows for a customized training approach that could be implemented seamlessly so that an algorithm chooses training modules for the individual. However, as marketers have learned, algorithmic segmentation and targeting are not without controversy. For example, Netflix has been criticized for racial targeting due to the results of some of its algorithm's selections (Zarum, 2018). Although we recommend training customization, when training topics are as sensitive as sexual harassment and racial (or gender) discrimination, ensuring the algorithm adheres to ethical standards is of paramount importance.

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Conclusion

In summary, we argue that trainee cynicism and dismissiveness are key reasons why diversity training often fails. To combat these threats to training effectiveness, we recommend borrowing from marketing strategy. Specifically, we argue for customized training based on segmentation and targeting, which allows the right message to be delivered to the right trainee. In matching training to trainees, trainers may reduce trainee cynicism and dismissiveness, which often reinforce discriminatory attitudes.

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