

Q&A: Building an inclusive industry and hitting the metaverse with Penguin Random House

Article

Sanyu Dillon

Executive Vice President and CMO at Penguin Random House US



Insider Intelligence spoke with Sanyu Dillon, executive vice president and CMO at Penguin Random House US, about brands building cultural fluency, entering the metaverse, and building digital communities with younger audiences.

Insider Intelligence: What defines inclusive marketing and how can brands be better at being culturally fluent?

Sanyu Dillon: Inclusive marketing means moving away from connecting with communities exclusively around cultural moments—it should not be a flash of the hand, and you also need to reach different communities on the platforms that they use. It is being culturally fluent, which for us means having a deep understanding of readers, enabling us to be authentic in our communications.

For example, we created our Instagram platform “alwaysblack” to highlight Black authors. It’s curated by Cree Myles, who is a bookstagrammer and speaks authentically to her community. The platform now encompasses events and a newsletter. It’s not just for Black History Month—it is an ongoing conversation that happens on a daily basis.

Consumers are wary about brands virtue signaling and being performative about their diversity values; brands can do better than just using DEI initiatives as marketing content.

II: Which retailers are doing this well?

SD: Etsy and Pinterest are interesting in the way they’ve focused on diversifying the creators on their platforms. Similarly, Target has done a great job of diversifying its product mix, ensuring it’s highlighting products from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) founders via meaningful in-store merchandising.

II: Switching gears, how will you expand into the metaverse?

SD: The metaverse provides us with an interesting opportunity to build literary worlds where the next generation is hanging out. It’s a natural fit because when you finish a book and you’ve just entered a world, you want to stay in that world. We hope to create book clubs and explore opportunities around creating avatars. In the past, readers would finish a book and have to go somewhere else to connect with the authors and the fans. With the metaverse, there’s an opportunity to go deeper into that world with other fans alongside you.

II: How are you expanding mediums to foster digital communities and reach younger consumers?

SD: #booktok is such a phenomenon! Our focus on social media platforms is building long-term partnerships with influencers, rather than trying to run a transactional relationship that’s tied to a specific campaign or product. We’ve seen that it’s more authentic with a younger

audience, allowing us to build an ongoing relationship and conversation with our consumers versus showing up at the obvious moments and then going quiet and dark.

Given that we have an awareness of the moments that people want to experience around books, our job is to deliver that in very clever and interesting ways. For example, people are spending a lot of time on social media; we want to tap into that desire of breaking the scrolling habit by launching an upcoming campaign called “Stop Scrolling, Start Reading,” reminding people that they can put their phones down and pick up a book to be transported into an experience.