

“It Starts With You”

An Interview with Trisch L. Smith, Global Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, Edelman

EDITORS' NOTE Trisch Smith serves as Edelman's first Global Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer. In this role, she strives to drive diversity and foster inclusion to ensure development of innovative solutions that reach and resonate with clients' key audiences and achieve business success. During her 20-year tenure with Edelman, Smith has managed stakeholder outreach, reputation management, community engagement and public affairs campaigns for Fortune



Trisch L. Smith

500 corporations, nonprofits and associations, including Chevron, Toyota, Starbucks, Girl Scouts of the USA and Walmart, among others. She has also led the firm's award-winning multicultural client services offering. Smith sits on the Board of Directors of Color Comm: Women of Color in Communications, the Public Relations Council and the Board of Advocates of the Women's National Basketball Players Association, and has served on the boards of the National Black Child Development Institute and Mentoring USA. She has received several awards, including being featured as one of the "Top 100 Most Influential Blacks in Corporate America" and one of the "Most Influential Women in Corporate America" in Savoy Magazine. In 2019, she received the inaugural Aduweek/ADCOLOR Champions award for diversity and inclusion. In December 2018, she was named a Woman of Excellence and P&L Executive of the Year by the National Association of Female Executives. In March 2017, she was awarded the Spectrum Circle Award for Innovation in Media. In 2016, she was recognized in the Financial Times as one of the "Upstanding 100" for top diverse executive

leaders globally. Smith earned a bachelor's degree in communications from Morgan State University in Baltimore and a master's degree in broadcast journalism from the University of Maryland, College Park.

FIRM BRIEF Edelman (edelman.com) is a global communications firm that partners with businesses and organizations to evolve, promote and protect their brands and reputations. Its 6,000 people in more than 60 offices deliver communications strategies that give its

clients the confidence to lead and act with certainty, earning the trust of their stakeholders. Its honors include the Cannes Lions Grand Prix for PR; Advertising Age's 2019 A-List; the Holmes Report's 2018 Global Digital Agency of the Year; and, five times, Glassdoor's Best Places to Work. Since its founding in 1952, Edelman has remained an independent, family-run business. Edelman owns specialty companies Edelman Intelligence (research) and United Entertainment Group (entertainment, sports, lifestyle).

How do you define the role of Chief Diversity Officer and how important is it for the role to be engaged in business strategy?

The Chief Diversity Officer is an organization's executive-level diversity and inclusion strategist. They are people connectors, culture shifters, change makers and organizational builders. This role oversees company-wide diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to curate a work culture where all employees are welcomed, treated equitably, feel safe and can thrive in their work environments.

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) is a business imperative and key to any business strategy. As such, Chief Diversity Officers are critical members of the leadership team, particularly when organizations are working to grow or evolve their business, enter new markets, effectively leverage talent, or re-engage key internal and external stakeholders.

For many organizations, establishing the DEI leadership position has become a quick band-aid solution for DEI issues. However, it is not the only answer. There are real systemic challenges that require overhaul to drive change. Additionally, the DEI leader cannot be successful unless the CEO and C-suite leadership – in most cases, white men – are committed to real progress, considers the experiences of diverse employees, and works to dismantle bias at all levels. Everyone from the top-down has to be committed to and be held accountable for transforming the organization and shifting culture.

Will you provide an overview of Edelman's diversity and inclusion strategy?

Our DEI strategy focuses on our colleagues, our clients and our communities. It is divided into five pillars: Employee Growth & Development, Education & Awareness, Thought Leadership, Strategic Partnerships, and Business Impact. At Edelman, we are committed to maintaining an open and welcoming workplace that fosters collaboration, drives diverse thinking among our employees and partners, and creates a culture that respects, embraces and celebrates DEI every day.

By maximizing and leveraging the perspectives of our diverse workforce, we can create a dynamic and vibrant environment and ensure that Edelman is a place where every person can thrive. We can also provide more innovative

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and creative solutions that reach and resonate with our clients’ diverse audiences. The world is changing rapidly, and our DEI work will continue to evolve and accelerate to meet our employees’ and clients’ needs.

How engrained is diversity and inclusion in Edelman’s culture and values?

At Edelman, we are in relentless pursuit of an equitable, impactful, respectful and culturally-curious workplace that drives innovative thinking, cultivates diverse ideas, and promotes true collaboration among our colleagues and our partners. Each day and on each project, our goal is to ensure that our colleagues bring all of who they are to our firm – shaping cultural moments and movements at Edelman, with our clients and for society.

Does having a diverse and inclusive workforce lead to better business performance?

Absolutely. Diversity efforts are often most effective when approached as a key component to a company’s business strategy. DEI should be addressed with the same priority and urgency as other critical business objectives, including investments in resourcing, expertise and full-time leadership in order to be the most impactful. Last year, leveraging our Edelman Trust Barometer, we conducted a survey to glean insights about people’s thoughts on systemic racism and other DEI issues and we found that now, more than ever, consumers and employees are holding companies accountable for their actions. Two-thirds of consumers globally now self-identify as belief-driven buyers. They are exercising brand democracy, supporting those products that stand with them on important issues. Four in ten workers would avoid employers that fail to take a stand against racism.

Young adults, age 18-34, specifically call out choosing or selecting an employer based on workplace diversity and public activism for racial justice. In addition, 77 percent of the U.S. population says it is deeply important that companies respond to racial injustice to earn or keep their trust. This is even higher for people of color.

How do you engage your employees in Edelman’s diversity efforts?

As an industry leader and advisor to the world’s largest organizations, we believe that we have a fundamental responsibility to join the discussion and help in driving solutions when it comes to advancing DEI. The last year has underscored the need for cultural awareness and understanding in the workplace, in communications and in outreach efforts. In June 2020, we created a Social and Racial Justice Task Force to expand the efforts of our U.S. Multicultural practice to authentically and strategically inform our clients’ DEI and racial justice commitments and communications. This work is a driver in integrating multicultural perspectives into all the work we do for our clients at all times – not just in crisis moments.

In addition, our Employee Networks act as a powerful tool to promote DEI across our organization. Each Edelman Employee Network helps to build internal community within the larger global Edelman network and provides a place and space where employees share, learn and grow. Through our networks, employees actively recognize and celebrate their rich and vibrant cultures, perspectives and contributions, and groups come together during key milestone and heritage months. The groups have helped our employees stay

connected and support each other as we all navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic and continued acts of systemic racism. This past year, we’ve held conversations with several employee groups in the wake of events, including the Georgia spa shootings, the Dereck Chauvin verdict and other moments. Additionally, the groups help to inform our client work and serve as a resource and valued partner to client teams.

Is it critical to have metrics in place to track the impact of Edelman’s diversity and inclusion efforts?

When you approach diversity, equity and inclusion as a business imperative, like any other business strategy, people will get engaged once they see the impact it can make on your work and business success. This work has to be a business priority with clear goals. We’ve made a commitment to more inclusive hiring practices, mandatory trainings around inclusive leadership and unconscious bias, expansions of our employee networks, among other things, to improve the overall employee experience. One meaningful change is for companies to embed DEI KPIs in performance reviews – measure it and reward progress.

How valuable has it been to have the commitment of Edelman’s management team in its diversity and inclusion efforts?

It is absolutely essential. We would not be able to set meaningful goals and create innovative programming and initiatives without the support of senior leadership. To drive change, everyone must take on ownership and be held accountable. When we counsel clients and each other, we often say “it starts with you.” Everyone at all levels in the organization has to be committed to being the change they want to see. ●

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