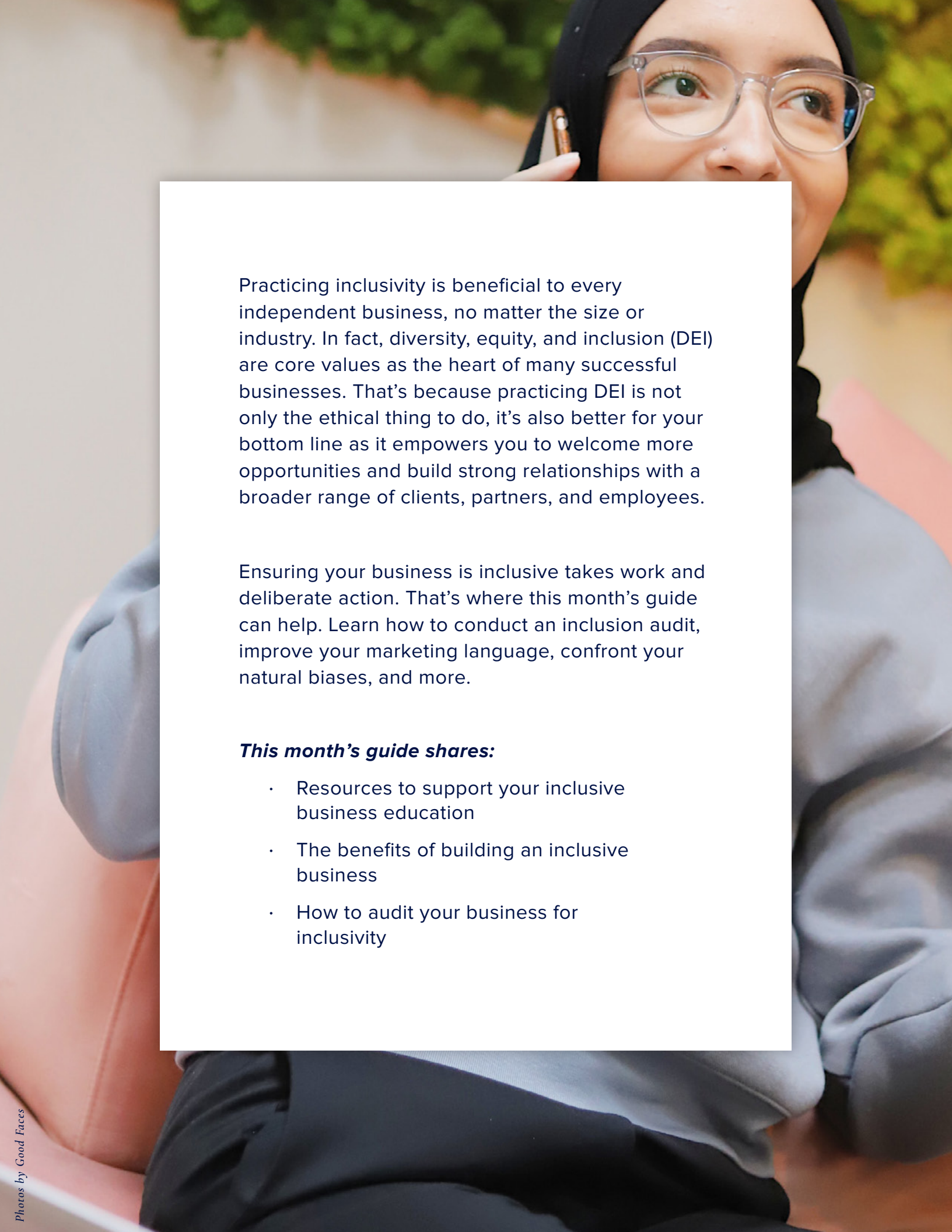




How to Build an **Inclusive Business**

HoneyBook | **RIISING TIDE**



Practicing inclusivity is beneficial to every independent business, no matter the size or industry. In fact, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are core values as the heart of many successful businesses. That's because practicing DEI is not only the ethical thing to do, it's also better for your bottom line as it empowers you to welcome more opportunities and build strong relationships with a broader range of clients, partners, and employees.

Ensuring your business is inclusive takes work and deliberate action. That's where this month's guide can help. Learn how to conduct an inclusion audit, improve your marketing language, confront your natural biases, and more.

This month's guide shares:

- Resources to support your inclusive business education
- The benefits of building an inclusive business
- How to audit your business for inclusivity

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WHO WE ARE

GET FEATURED

We believe in elevating the voices of our community, and we'd love to elevate yours! Submit content for an opportunity to be featured in next month's Rising Tide Society monthly guide. therisingtidesociety.submittable.com/submit.

HOW TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE BUSINESS

1

INVEST IN INCLUSIVE BUSINESS EDUCATION. To build a thriving business you need a culture of belonging that helps everyone come together to do their best work no matter their background. Jessie Sutherland shares tips for how you can do this on [page 2](#). Go beyond sharing on social media and learn how to practice genuine diversity and inclusivity from Chanda Daniels on [page 5](#).

2

GROW AND LEARN BY DOING. You may be one of the many independent business owners looking to prioritize diversity and inclusivity in your business. Akua Konadu joined forces with her mama to make intentional gifting easier and is sharing her experience of creating an inclusivity-focused business on [page 8](#). When was the last time you performed an accessibility audit on your business? It's never too late to optimize your processes and make them accessible to as many as possible. Claire teaches you best practices for improving client accessibility on [page 11](#).

3

ENSURE SUCCESS WITH AN AUDIT. Improving your processes starts with understanding what's going well and where there is an opportunity for improvement. That's where an inclusion audit comes in. Though it may feel like a daunting task, Amber Aziza is breaking it down for you on [page 15](#). As you audit your diversity initiatives, Jenna Teague shows you how you can broaden your language to be inclusive to all gender and sexual identities so that you're no longer leaving potential clients out on [page 19](#).

A NOTE ON INCLUSIVITY

We recognize that inclusion is an important but infinite topic that cannot be adequately covered in a single guide. To make inclusion feel more manageable, this resource aims to amplify the voices in our community and provide some suggestions for how to make inclusion a continuous, ever-evolving process.

HOW TO CREATE A CULTURE OF BELONGING IN THE WORKPLACE

Jessie Sutherland



Technology and social media have brought the world closer together, but they've also deepened the divisions that drive us apart. This is why it's more important than ever for us to learn how to create inclusive businesses that allow us to do our best work collectively.

Without a culture of belonging, diversity can result in silos, conflict, bias, discrimination, and polarized teams. When a business takes time to build and nurture a culture of belonging, magic happens, resulting in individuals who feel like they belong, and are more willing to learn, take risks, and do their best work. Having a sense of belonging has a direct impact on our overall happiness and well-being.

When a business creates an inclusive culture, it's easier to recruit diversity, retain and develop talent, and generate the kind of collaboration that leads to innovation. As teams connect, they are agile and responsive to changing contexts in their businesses, communities, and beyond.

Therefore, it's important to understand effective strategies for building and tending to a culture of belonging in your business. When the going gets tough, your team will be able to solve

problems and reach sustainable solutions together. Even when the unexpected occurs, strategies to build belonging will keep you, your team, and your business on course. You will know where to focus your efforts for greater impact with less effort and lasting results.

THREE INCLUSIVE BUSINESS STRATEGIES

Building a culture of belonging is a journey. In the beginning, you may have a clear idea of what you don't want—conflict, racism, bullying, lack of collaboration, or low engagement, for example.

Many independent business owners understand the end goal—an inclusive workplace culture that results in high-performing teams, collaboration, innovation, strong problem-solving skills, and an environment where everyone feels valued for their contributions. What is less clear is how to make that happen. We've developed our award-winning [Belonging Matters](#) roadmap to guide you on this journey. We're sharing three key inclusive business strategies to get you started.

1. START WHERE YOU ARE

The first step toward adopting inclusive business practices is to assess where things are currently. To help businesses, we created our [Culture of Belonging Temperature Checklist](#), which allows leaders to get an accurate sense of where they are now so they can better focus their efforts and build a robust culture of belonging.

Here are the three areas we believe all leaders need to assess:

- **Your leadership style and strategy:** Figure out which strengths and gaps you have as a leader. Building a culture of belonging is crucial for your success as a leader and as a business working with diverse communities and in a global market. Do you know what builds or erodes that feeling of belonging for yourself? Do you feel confident engaging your team and facilitating change when addressing polarized divisions, conflict, bullying, or discrimination?
- **Your team:** Your team's experiences of belonging (and not belonging) combined with their ability to solve problems and collaborate effectively can make the difference between failing as a business or thriving. Do you listen to your team's experiences and act on what you hear? Does your team need a greater sense of belonging, effective problem-solving skills, or tools to unleash more of their strengths and talents?
- **Your social change strategy:** Having clear and successful strategies for facilitating lasting change when problems emerge will enable you to not only overcome challenges as they arise but also build trust. It will also grow your reputation with your team and the clients you serve. Does your company have a clear roadmap when challenges emerge? How do you encourage your team to adopt the principles and practices needed to build an inclusive business environment?

Once you know [where you are starting from](#), you can take steps to draw on your strengths and put into place a learning path to ensure you have all the strategies, knowledge, and skills required to build a business culture where people feel they belong and can do their best work together.

2. BUILD UNITY ACROSS POLARIZED DIVISIONS

We're all aware at some level that divisions happen in our communities at every level. Whether a result of political polarization, cultural differences, or disinformation, every business leader needs to know how to build unity across people who may not see things similarly.

When we learn how to build this unity, it is much easier to connect, build inclusive workplace spaces, and foster collaboration for a common business outcome. As a result, you will not only attract and retain talent, but you will also be able to navigate and thrive during uncertain times.



Photo by Christina of Wocintechchat

At the heart of this strategy is being aware of our worldviews and being mindful to not impose them on others. As we build on this awareness, learn to suspend judgment, and ask curious questions. We can each create the conditions for synergy, collaboration, and innovation.

3. ADDRESS BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

Bias and discrimination wreak havoc on teams, businesses, and client relationships. It is through our relationships that we either interrupt bias or let it flourish, either by keeping silent or making it worse.

The first step in effectively addressing bias and discrimination is to understand its impact and dynamics. From the perspective of creating a culture of belonging, bias and discrimination lead to cultures of exclusion where some people are sidelined. This happens when systems work together to push people to the margins.

There are three common “roles” that people take on which allow bias and discrimination to flourish: bystanders, target(s), and perpetrator(s). When we understand how our actions and inactions can contribute to keeping bias and discrimination embedded in our workplace culture, we are able to more easily address it and make a difference.

By understanding these roles (bystander, target, and perpetrator) and learning effective strategies to counter them, we can address bias and discrimination:

- Within ourselves and the systems we influence;
- As bystanders and the systems we influence;
- As targets and the systems we influence; and
- As leaders and the people, culture, policies,

and practices we influence.

Rooting out bias and discrimination is not simply about taking stellar anti-racism training—it also involves ongoing reflection and learning so that you and your teams can adopt practices that effectively build a genuine culture of belonging.

ACTIONABLE STEPS TO BUILD A CULTURE OF BELONGING IN YOUR BUSINESS

Building a culture of belonging requires a combination of strategy, skill, and process. The building process may take time and tenacity, but you can start right away.

It’s important to start where you are and build belonging one step at a time. Through trying out and customizing different strategies, you’ll gain an understanding of what works best for you and your team. By focusing on people and your shared values, you’ll delight in seeing how your business thrives through challenging and changing contexts.

With the *Belonging Matters* roadmap, you will have everything it takes to encourage diversity, build belonging, and ignite the kind of collaboration that generates innovation.

To help you, we created a free [Culture of Belonging Temperature Checklist](#) so that you can confidently build your inclusive business culture.



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A photograph of two women sitting at a table, looking out a window. The woman on the left is a white woman with long brown hair, wearing a light-colored top. The woman on the right is a Black woman with glasses and a blue top. They appear to be in a professional setting, possibly a meeting or interview. The window behind them shows a cityscape.

BEYOND THE BLACK SQUARE: SIX STEPS TO PRACTICING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Chanda Daniels

Photo by Christina of Wocintechchat

Despite how it may seem, the terms “diversity” and “inclusion” are not mere marketing buzzwords. These are core values that should be genuinely embraced and practiced by all business owners.

When George Floyd’s murder was caught on camera, it brought the topic of racial injustice to the forefront. Although racism has plagued minority communities throughout history, the video evidence forced society at large to confront it. This included brands that quickly took to social media to express their solidarity, condemn racial prejudice, and affirm their commitment to inclusivity and diversity.

Many took to social media to post the now infamous black square. But what began as a well-intentioned way for privileged voices to “silence” themselves and make space for BIPOC voices to be heard, instead shone a light on the deep inequalities that exist across corporate America. The diversity many brands claimed to champion didn’t extend to the boardrooms.

The hashtags and black squares revealed widespread cognitive dissonance. After all, how can a company say they champion diversity and inclusivity when those values are not reflected internally?

While the black square was a trend, diversity is not. Businesses must go beyond a hashtag to make a difference — it’s time to embrace diversity and inclusion as a core value, not just a fad. Here are six things to remember when striving to prioritize diversity and inclusion in your business.

1. DIVERSITY IS NOT UNILATERAL

While the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain at the hands of law enforcement launched a nationwide conversation about police brutality against Black people, it’s vital to understand that diversity and inclusion initiatives are not about welcoming Black folks to the table. It’s about inviting all people to the table.

There are many dimensions of accessibility that often get glossed over due to a large focus on racial matters, but DEI also encompasses gender, sexuality, age, religion, disability, income level, and other identity factors. Embracing certain communities while excluding others is not acceptable. For instance, a racially diverse board with transphobic views cannot be considered diverse or inclusive.

Authentic inclusivity means you accept people for their values and what they have to offer—not how they look, who they love, or other surface-level attributes.

2. AFFINITY BIAS IS NATURAL—AND SURMOUNTABLE

Think about the six people you trust the most, not including family members. You'll likely realize those people share certain qualities with you: age, skin color, weight, etc. This concept is known as affinity bias, suggesting people tend to connect with those who share attributes with themselves. We do this automatically, and while not inherently bad, it can limit your ability to open up to new perspectives.

While it is good to see yourself in others, affinity bias causes people to lose sight of the value in those who aren't like them. In that, you miss out on other talents, skill sets, and perspectives because you've grown too comfortable with people like you. Fortunately, you can break the habit and overcome affinity bias by accepting it as reality and taking intentional steps to change how you operate and engage with others.

3. THERE'S MORE TO THE WORLD THAN WHAT YOU KNOW

As you go through business (and life), be intentional about looking for resources and support beyond your typical comfort zone. For instance, if you're interviewing a potential hire and think, "this person is just like me,"—consider it a red flag and remind yourself to look for other applicants with different backgrounds.

Similarly, seek out other avenues for opportunities. For example, you can engage with your local church or community center instead of the Facebook Group with hundreds of members just like you. Again, accepting your affinity bias and actively pushing your

boundaries allows you to open yourself to new opportunities, ideas, and connections.

4. DIVERSE COMPANY CULTURE IS ONGOING

While it's kind to donate money to meaningful causes, diversity is more than writing a check and calling it advocacy. It's about instilling those values within your company and training your team to embrace inclusive measures. Consider how you can support minority employees on their terms and how you can foster like-minded values throughout all members of your team.

A great place to start auditing your internal efforts is in your hiring process. Where does diversity factor into the equation? Are you considering a person's background beyond how they look? What accommodations are made for those from underprivileged communities? An organization cannot foster diversity if it's not an intentional part of its hiring process.

Think about how you can instill DEI into your culture every single day. It's not as simple as responding to tragic headlines or waiting for Black History Month or AAPI Heritage Month. It could mean hiring a BIPOC chef to cater team luncheons or bringing in a disabled educator to train the team. There are different voices to speak on every topic, so welcome them into your company and demonstrate diversity on the ground level.

5. SHARED INTERESTS OFTEN BEGET DIVERSE GROUPS

When you look past surface-level characteristics, you'll realize you have common interests with others that go far deeper than your skin color, age, or size. Local organizations for hobbies and disciplines are excellent places to find people who don't look like you but share your interests.

It could be a networking association for entrepreneurs, a book club, a knitting collective, or another group of people who like the same

things as you. While you all may bring vastly different backgrounds, you'll share one thing in common, and that overlap can drive meaningful relationships.

If you're wary about meeting new people, set a time limit for yourself. Research the guest list to find a few people that interest you, and commit to staying for a set time. Of course, you can stay longer if you're enjoying the atmosphere, but you can also head out at your planned time if you're not feeling it.

6. NEW OPPORTUNITIES AWAIT YOU EVERYWHERE

The secret to expanding your network and filling your life with colorful connections is to be ready and open to possibilities. It's usually as easy as saying hello to someone who interests you, whether a barista in a coffee shop or a friendly stranger on the sidewalk. If the idea of shooting your professional shot makes you nervous, let it go. Everyone is nervous! We all want to be liked and find friends who care about us. There's a good chance that the person you want to talk to feels the same as you.

The next time you see someone who interests you, walk up, acknowledge them, and see how it goes! It helps to start with a compliment to bring a smile to their face, allowing that to evolve into a conversation.

And to broaden your horizons, don't be afraid to change up the scenery. Go to a coffee shop in a new neighborhood or visit an art gallery across town. Every city has unique and diverse areas, so get out and explore. Sit down and talk to people — you'll be surprised to see how much can come from a few simple conversations.

When leaders don't accept or address their inherent affinity biases, they miss out on an entire world of people and all they have to offer. As a result, they lose out on opportunities to change their lives, their families' lives, their employees' lives, and the future of their businesses.

Instead of remaining stuck in circles of people who look just like you, take a step outside and embrace the beautiful tapestry of human experiences around you.



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HOW TO CREATE A BUSINESS CENTERED AROUND DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Akua Konadu

It's safe to say that 2020 was the year that exposed us to a lot of harsh realities—everything from the pandemic to entrenched social prejudices in our country. It also highlighted the lack of diversity and inclusion in many brands and businesses, which forced many to take long overdue action to correct this.

As an African American woman, I often come across brands that I'm interested in purchasing from until I look at their social media. While scrolling, I instantly become disappointed—I don't see anyone who looks like me. After that, I never end up purchasing.

There is a reason representation matters. Too often, people from marginalized communities are overlooked and unaccounted for. Though 2020 was a year that brought hardship, it also inspired many to create spaces where people of all backgrounds are seen and valued.

Hence the birth of [Ama & Akua](#)! Ama & Akua is a gift box business I started with my mama. We offer a curated selection of gifts by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and LGBTQ+ creators. Throughout the process of launching, we have learned many things about creating a company centered around diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI).

If you're looking to make your business more inclusive but don't know where to start, you

have come to the right place. Through my experience, I'll help you learn how to create a business centered around diversity and inclusion.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Although they mean different things, diversity and inclusion are consistently used interchangeably. Diversity represents the differences and identities of individuals in a given setting. It can include race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

Inclusion is what you implement to make people feel seen, valued, and welcome in a particular setting. It requires you to look beyond your own experiences and understand how people with different backgrounds perceive things. While diversity is about the presence of people from different backgrounds, inclusion is how you make those people feel.

Diversity does not equal inclusion. You can have people of different identities together, but if you're not doing anything to make them feel included, you are not being inclusive.

With Ama & Akua, we naturally focus on diversity, but to ensure we are being inclusive,

we focus on creating a brand and client experience that thoroughly communicates that everyone is welcome!

THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Assess your feelings

Have an honest conversation with yourself—why do you want to be diverse and inclusive in your business? If you are doing it out of guilt or because you know DEI is “trending”, then you need to take time to better understand your feelings and likely also educate yourself.

Assess what your intentions are. If you intend to be inclusive because you feel the need to check off the diversity box, then your efforts are disingenuous. The truth is, people can pick up on this and it won't serve your business. Nobody wants to be tokenized or chosen to fulfill a self-serving need. You can do better.

Another thing to ask when assessing your feelings is, what are you willing to let go of? To be more inclusive, there will be times you will need to willingly give up your seat at the table to ensure other voices are heard. For example, inclusion could look like turning down a speaking opportunity because the event or speaking panel is not diverse.

Wherever you are in your journey, it's essential to better understand your feelings so you can learn how to move forward.

Always be open to learning

Though Ama & Akua is black-owned, we have learned so much about other communities of color, their cultures, and what they value. Every BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ business owner offers something different, and it's a humbling experience to support their businesses and share their gifts with the world.

You can only learn by getting out of your comfort zone. Sometimes I am nervous to reach out to vendors to share our business

ideas. However, once we connect and start building a relationship I'm able to learn more about their culture and values and find the partnership that serves us best.

We wouldn't gain a deeper understanding of the world around us if we stayed on the sidelines. To make a change, you must be willing to show up and make the first move.

HOW TO CREATE A DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION-CENTERED BUSINESS

Conduct a brand audit

To be intentional, you must prioritize diversity and inclusion in your business. It can be overwhelming, but conducting a brand audit is an excellent place to start.

Take a hard look at all areas of your business and see where you can improve. For example, if you identify marketing as an area of improvement, ask yourself if the content you're creating is a true reflection of the community or world we live in. How can you make people feel included beyond adding more pictures of people of color?

Remember, inclusivity is about how you make people who are different from you feel. Look at every aspect of your business and apply different ways to make people feel included. How are you making people feel seen, heard, and valued in all areas of your business? This could look like taking the time to give a client a gift that is meaningful to their culture. Sometimes taking that extra step can make a world of difference for someone.

Take a stand and communicate your values

Believe it or not, diversity, equity, and inclusion are becoming more important to consumers. Purchasing decisions today are influenced by the values that a brand upholds.

Research has shown that about 83% of [millennials](#) feel it is important for brands they purchase from to align with their values.

Research also done by Sprout Social showed that 70% of consumers say it's important for brands to take a stand on social and political [issues](#). Now more than ever, you need to communicate your values and how you make an impact.

While building Ama & Akua, we quickly realized how important our values are. We want to make it clear where we stand on social and political issues because our priority is to ensure our consumers know our brand is a safe space for people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community. We want to attract people that will contribute to that value and make a change.

Be vocal about your values, where you stand, and what you're doing to be a diverse and inclusive business. This will help deepen your relationships with your audience, build trust, and even attract new customers.

Be open to feedback

As I mentioned before, make sure your inclusion efforts are genuine. It's all about respect and appreciation for people's differences.

As you learn ways to become inclusive, there will be times you may mess up. When we make a mistake, it's easy for us to get defensive. Sometimes we end up spending more time explaining ourselves to justify our actions, or we pull back, ending our diversity and inclusion efforts altogether. Both of these do more harm than good.

First, it's important to remember that we are all human and bound to make mistakes. What matters is the actions you take afterward. Lean into your efforts even more. The only way to truly understand your role as an ally is to listen to the people you are advocating for. Some of the feedback may be hard to swallow, but feedback helps us all learn and grow. The only way to make positive change is to acknowledge where you may have gone wrong, listen, and act accordingly.

Invest in businesses of color

We hear this one all of the time, and with good reason: invest in BIPOC-owned businesses. Whether hiring someone for your team, purchasing their product, or even hiring a DEI specialist to come in and help you create a DEI strategy, you already know the power of investing in independent business owners. When you invest in a BIPOC-owned business, you make a meaningful impact. You are helping close the racial wealth gap, improve equity, and actively demonstrate a desire for change.

With [Ama & Akua](#), we want to help people with this step. In 2020, we heard many people express an interest in investing in BIPOC businesses but they didn't know where to start. We do that work for you. By purchasing a box, you have the opportunity to discover new products and learn about the amazing makers that you might otherwise never have found out about. This small step of investing in a BIPOC-owned business makes a difference, whether or not it's immediately visible.

No matter how long you have been in business, creating a business centered on inclusion is a lifelong journey. There is no finish line until all communities of color are truly treated equally.

And remember, the work and effort you put in will inspire others to do the same. In times of struggle and exhaustion, learn to rest, but don't quit. The march towards equality for all marginalized communities is not easy, but when we unite and work together, we get closer each day.



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ADD ACCESSIBILITY TO YOUR CLIENT EXPERIENCE: 8 BEST PRACTICES

Claire Bough

When was the last time you audited your business for accessibility? It could be that you've never assessed the accessibility of your client experience. But, it's never too late to optimize your processes and make them accessible to as many as possible.

Creating an [inclusive client experience](#) means communicating to everyone in the same manner— regardless of age, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and more. To provide an equal experience to people with disabilities, you should place a focus on online accessibility.

Not only is online accessibility ethical, but it can greatly benefit your business. A more accessible experience can bring in more clients and you can even benefit from ADA (Americans With Disabilities Act)-compliant incentives like [tax credits](#).

In short, online accessibility increases the number of people who can access information and materials. If we create websites and client material that aren't accessible, we're offering a poor experience to the [one in four U.S. adults](#) who live with some form of disability.

WHO IS ACCESSIBILITY FOR?

Accessibility aims to improve the experience for anyone with a disability, whether it's:

- Visual
- Auditory
- Physical
- Speech-related
- Cognitive
- Neurological

When accessibility comes to mind, you may think of people who are blind and need auditory options, as well as people who are deaf and require visual options.

But, many other disabilities benefit from accessibility:

- **Dyslexia:** Crowded letters and content can make it more difficult for people with dyslexia to read
- **Epilepsy:** Animations and GIFs that flicker can trigger epilepsy

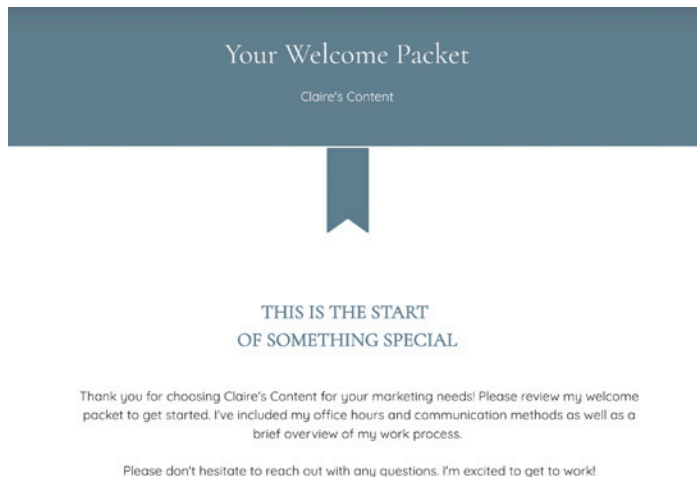
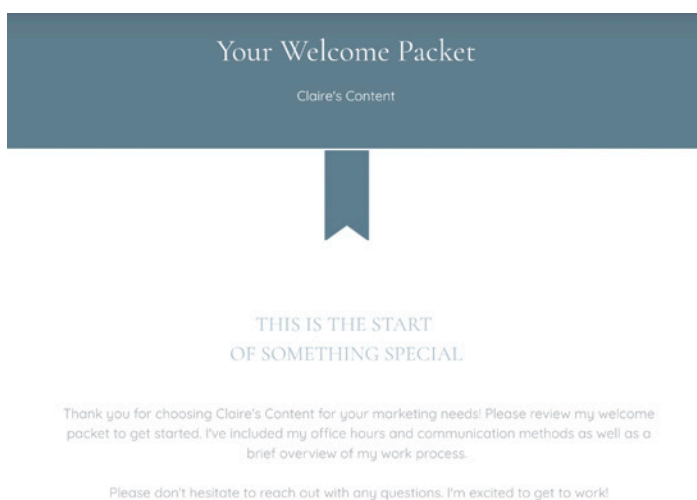
- Color blindness: Though there are different types of color blindness, the most common type makes red and green indistinguishable, so certain graphics and photos can be hard to understand
- Loss of dexterity from age: Moving a mouse and using a keyboard can become difficult and require a screen reader

There are also situational limitations where someone would benefit from accessibility—working with a broken arm, with poor lighting, in a noisy area, lack of access to audio, or using a mobile device with a small screen.

Accessibility issues can affect all of us and, taking this into account, can give many people a far better user or client experience. Instead of thinking about accessibility as something to “add on” to your website design and client experience, it should be core to your processes for updating your website, sending files, and more.

1. USE CONTRASTING COLORS

Light text on a light background is hard for pretty much everyone to read. But, for those with visual impairments, combinations that others can read will be difficult for them. As a rule of thumb, always use high-contrast colors to make sure everything is easily readable. Check out some examples.



When incorporating your brand colors on your website or within your files, consider where they'll best take into account accessibility considerations. It's always a good idea to include your logo and your primary colors might look great as the background for your CTA (call to action) buttons. But, the rest of your file may be best as standard black text on a white background. Often, simplicity is best for accessibility.

2. CHOOSE READABLE TYPOGRAPHY

Similar to your brand colors, consider if your brand fonts are accessible. Script fonts can be especially difficult for clients with visual impairments, including aging eyesight. Any font that makes each letter hard to read is also inaccessible to people who aren't as familiar with the English alphabet.

If you want to choose unique brand typography, we recommend selecting a few options you could use for advertising or social media. For your client-facing files and website materials, it's best to use a standard serif or, better yet, sans-serif typeface.

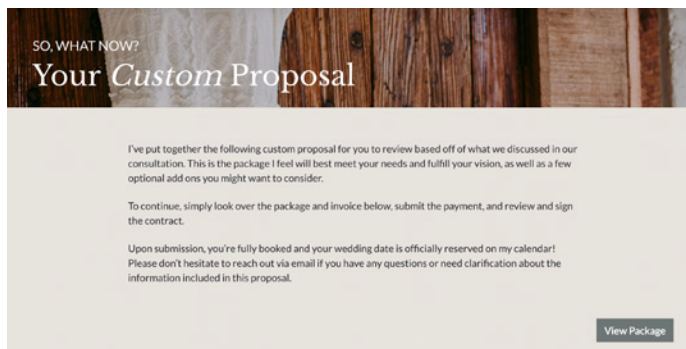
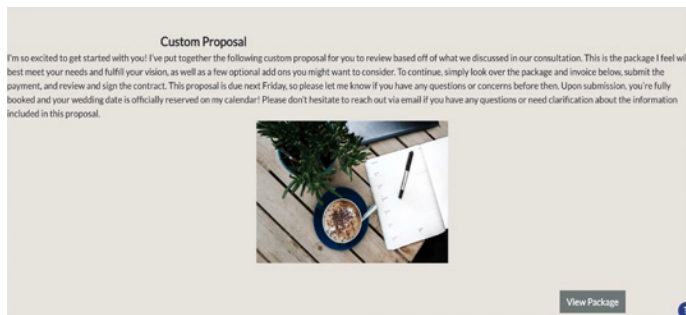
3. USE CLEAR FORMATTING

Another factor in readability is formatting. Imagine receiving a proposal file that includes one huge block of text with an image placed

somewhere in the middle. Regardless of disability, it would be difficult for anyone to pick out important information quickly.

What can you do to make your content easier to read?

- Break your text into smaller paragraphs—it makes it easier to pick out and absorb important content and steps to follow
- Add wider top/bottom and right/left margins
- Add padding (space) around elements/images



4. USE ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE

When it's time to write content for your client files, keep in mind your clients' range of needs. Some clients may have a cognitive disability that makes reading difficult, while others may not speak English as their first language.

If you have a brand voice, use it in your messaging. Casual, everyday speech should be understood by most, but mix in too many uncommon euphemisms or sayings and your clients could lose your drift, uh, I mean, not get your message. In fact, it's best to aim your

writing at Grade 6-8 reading level—this will accommodate most people and make your content quick and easy to read.

Never assume what your client knows. Something you say every day could be something they've never heard before, so you may need to explain what you mean or omit them altogether.

5. AVOID DIRECTIONAL LANGUAGE

When you're creating accessible content, consider all the ways people can consume that content. For instance, people with visual impairments may use screen readers to understand what's on a page.

With screen readers, your clients will hear all the text in a file read out loud. If you have CTA buttons that say things like Click Here and Learn More or Go to the menu on the right, it won't mean much to clients who can't see what that language is referring to.

This directional language can make the experience difficult for people using screen readers. Instead, make your link and button text descriptive. It doesn't need to be long, but it should refer to the action.

For example, you can put Next Page on your buttons for clients filling out your files. When you use text links, always reference the linked page, rather than writing Click Here.

6. STAY CONSISTENT

Another best practice for accessibility is being consistent. This helps avoid confusion and it can also make your job easier.

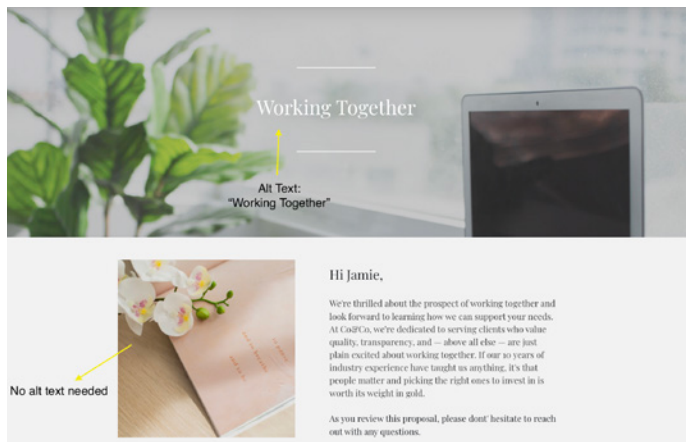
If you send a file that uses the language Next Page on one button and Next Step on another, it can be confusing for people with screen readers and everyone else. As people, we tend to look for patterns and inconsistencies can throw us off.

Different file layouts, headers, and element designs can be confusing. While differing styles can make your brand look less professional and put together. To make it easier on your clients, choose the same wording for your CTA buttons and use [file templates](#) that you can simply and easily personalize for each client, without affecting the consistency.

7. ADD ALT TEXT FOR IMAGES

For clients who use screen readers, using alt text is important to give them an equal understanding of a file or page. If an image has embedded text, for instance, the alt text should include the message.

When implementing alt text, only describe images that impact understanding. If the image is offering more context or value to the file, that's when alt text is important. Otherwise, don't waste a client's time by describing an image that's only decorative.



8. USES OF VIDEO

If you use video on a website or include it in your smart files, consider clients with auditory impairments. You should always offer a transcription of the video or include captioning so they can read it as the video is playing.

Also, consider people with visual impairments or cognitive challenges like ADHD and dyslexia. In these cases, videos with audio are especially important for clearly conveying your message.

MAKE ACCESSIBILITY A PRIORITY

The next time you're updating your website or creating new client files, think about *accessibility*—*make* it a priority. There's plenty to learn, so continue educating yourself and use this knowledge to improve the client experience and your business!

There are many resources available to help you, such as [contrast checkers](#) that check for WCAG compliance (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and the Web Accessibility Initiative's [checklist for web accessibility](#).

With these best practices, you can make your client files accessible and build a more inclusive client experience. With [HoneyBook](#), you can implement accessible branding for every file you send. Our templates also allow you to create consistency for every client and build a process that prioritizes accessibility.



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THREE EASY STEPS TO CONDUCTING AN INTENTIONAL DEI AUDIT

Amber Aziza



Whether your independent business is a large enterprise or small business, you've likely considered implementing some sort of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiative. The problem is, that it's hard to know where to start. Every company is different and has different factors that completely change the impact of diversity on both the workplace and clients.

It's become all too common to hear about an organization with well-meaning intentions ending up "canceled" because of a diversity initiative gone wrong. The truth is, it's likely these organizations didn't start with the essential piece of any diversity plan: a DEI audit.

Let's break down the five essentials of a DEI audit that will ensure any diversity initiative you undertake is aligned with your goals and has the desired impact on your team and clients.

WHAT IS A DIVERSITY AUDIT?

A builder would never build a house on land that hadn't been assessed first. A surgeon would never perform surgery without first doing some diagnostic tests to determine if the surgery is

necessary. Much like our builder and surgeon, a business should never begin a DEI initiative without first determining what needs to change and what is currently working well for the organization.

The whole point of a DEI audit is to provide you with an idea of where your business sits on the DEI spectrum. Auditors determine this by using equality assessments, a competitor diversity analysis, diversity research, a pay gap analysis, recruitment assessments, supplier diversity audits, and more.

Most audits are designed to allow you to compare where you are and where you should be. These efforts will outline your business's biases, workplace culture, and the obstacles you'll have to overcome to implement an effective DEI initiative.

Spoiler alert: sometimes, it's possible that you, as the business owner, are the biggest obstacle. And that's okay! The audit can also help you identify the behaviors you may have missed and things to personally improve. This is all about learning and growing.

DEI Audits are incredibly detailed and can take weeks to complete. They're best completed by a third-party skilled in DEI consulting. But, if you're just getting started and want an idea of where to begin on your own, let's dig into the top three essentials every DEI Audit should include.

1. LEADERSHIP BIAS ASSESSMENT

It's time for some real talk: everyone has bias. It's part of the natural human experience. There are over 150 different types of bias, including gender, ethnicity, skin color, age, religion, accent, weight, attractiveness, and the list goes on and on. The key to being an amazing leader, whether you're leading a team of just yourself or one of the thousands, is understanding your bias and how it impacts decisions in your company.

Being good at your job or having higher than average intelligence will not make you less likely to have bias. We were all born with bias, it's how you use it that matters.

Bias impacts your brain's decision-making when it comes to your perception of other people, environments, and processes. Oftentimes, like a thief in the night, it's happening while you aren't aware of it.

Here's a great example: let's say you're hiring for a position in your company that works with children. In the media, you see roles of caretakers, teachers, and nannies being held by women. Let's say growing up, your mother was a stay-at-home mom. Combined, these could create a bias that women should be in positions that have to do with child care. This belief could impact who you hire for your open role. While you may not intentionally nor outwardly say, "I won't hire a man for this role," your natural bias, based on your lived experiences, could be making that decision for you subconsciously.

The good news is that you absolutely can reprogram your bias to support inclusivity. Be aware of the choices you make and ask yourself this simple question: "How could bias have impacted this decision?"

Remember, your bias exists because of your lived experiences. Your lived experiences aren't automatically bad and can be leveraged to help you, as long as you're aware of them and how they impact your day-to-day.

Want to start assessing your leadership's bias? Harvard University has a great [Implicit Bias Test](#) to help you and it's 100% free.

2. EMPLOYEE ANALYSIS

No DEI audit is complete without taking existing employees in the organization into account. The employee analysis portion of your audit should include an employee engagement survey (sometimes also referred to as an audit) that asks a variety of questions, including how employees feel about the workplace culture and diversity efforts within the company. It also takes into account the current makeup of your team, which includes a breakdown of self-identified demographics you collected when hiring each individual.

A diversity audit differs from a traditional employee engagement audit in identifying the company's history with certain demographics on your team and why. For example, after my team completed a client audit for a company with roughly 100 employees, it came to light that the company was writing-up Black male employees three times as much as their non-Black counterparts.

This highlighted a general bias of management surrounding Black men that needed to be addressed. After doing deep work with the management team, it was revealed that two managers' biases made them distrust Black men more than others. In turn, this resulted in the managers scrutinizing the work of their Black male employees more than others.

Your audit should also assess pay gaps to determine if any specific groups are being paid disproportionately less than their peers. While we like to think we're paying all our

team members according to their skills and experience, the harsh truth is that our bias often kicks in when making such decisions. For a clear example of this, look no further than the [US Census Bureau](#), which found that women still earn only 83 cents to every dollar earned by men as recently as 2021.

You're also going to need to review your employee recruitment process. Yes, even how you onboard your team members should be reviewed. This includes evaluating where you're posting new positions.

Spoiler alert: if you're using only main sites, like monster.com or indeed.com, then you're missing out on a whole diverse pool of candidates. There are so many sites like PinkJobs.com, BlackJobs.com, and more that can provide you with diverse and talented candidates.

While you're at it, take a look at what your position requirements are. Do the positions that you have available require a university degree? Or could a certification suffice?

Is there an EEO statement at the end of every job description that states that you're an equal opportunity employer? When you post positions with details of the company's culture, are you using photos of your diverse staff? Is your language inclusive? Questions like these will help you in the audit.

One last piece of advice on this: take a second look at your interview questions and processes. Interviews are designed by humans. Humans have biases. Therefore, interview bias happens all the time.

An example of this would be disqualifying a candidate because they didn't make a lot of eye contact. Doing so could eliminate neuro-diverse candidates.

Another example is asking someone who went to a state school five questions about their coursework vs. asking someone who attended an Ivy League school no questions about their

coursework because you assume their courses are relevant due to status. All of these factors are important to evaluate when completing a DEI audit.

While this part of the audit may seem like you're signing yourself up to be scrutinized by your team, it's necessary to get a complete picture of how diversity initiatives are (or are not) impacting your current employees, which let's not forget, are the most valuable asset you have as a company.

3. EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION/ VENDOR/CONTRACTOR ANALYSIS

The final focus of your DEI audit should be assessing how you're communicating the values and beliefs of your business to the outside world. This includes determining if your partners, vendors, and contractors align with your diversity values.

A significant first step is reviewing your past marketing initiatives with a series of questions. Were the images diverse? Did you have various types of people featured?

Was the copy free from offensive, harmful, or diverse-adverse language? This one is difficult for most business owners because our bias can kick in and tell us it looks fine when in reality, there could be some flaws or areas to improve.

Did anyone reach out and ask for a word or phrase to be changed? Has anyone expressed frustration with the language being used? (This is when listening becomes key.) Using terms like "tribe" or words that show clear appropriation of cultures to which you do not belong, can be seen as harmful and damaging to the groups they impact or derived from.

Next, you'll want to determine if you've ever actively communicated your diversity commitment. Have you ever released a statement in support of diverse issues outside of those that directly impact you? Have you

donated money to equality causes? Have you followed up beyond a post or press release to make sure that you're walking your talk?

After reviewing the last year of your marketing and communication, you'll be able to quickly establish if you need to express your commitment to diversity more publicly.

Finally, you'll need to review your partners, vendors, suppliers, and affiliates. Are they sharing the same commitment to diversity as you? Have you seen them support diverse initiatives? Do they have a diverse team? Have you scrolled through the owner's personal social media pages to see if they express views that are contradictory to supporting a diverse environment?

All of these questions will give you better insight into whether or not you're partnered with firms that share your same values.

SO, WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW?

Get Started! A DEI Audit is an exploration into the introspective work needed to support a diverse-aware and culturally-inclusive organization. You and your team will be challenged to grow into a level of self-awareness you may not be familiar with

to understand the importance of DEI in your organization.

Using the tips above will give you a clear idea of where your company may need improvement. But, to experience the full benefit of an expansive DEI audit, I recommend you hire a consultant or team that specializes in DEI and workplace architecture.

Whether you do a self-audit or hire an external auditor, remember this: you're making a big impact on your business, your team, and your community by doing so, and it's well worth the effort it will take.



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FIVE STEPS TO MORE INCLUSIVE MARKETING

Jenna Teague

As entrepreneurs, our motivations for becoming business owners are as individual and varied as our businesses themselves.

Whether primarily driven by our mission and values or by profits, each of us has our unique reason. No matter our goals, we all have one thing in common: we need our customers and clients. We need people who resonate with our message and believe in our mission enough to invest in our work.

As unique as our businesses are, the same goes for potential clients. Sure, you may have an ideal client profile, but it should be diverse in terms of your clients' backgrounds, beliefs, gender, race, culture, and much more.

By acknowledging the diversity (or potential diversity) of your client base, you can resonate with many more people. Beyond that, you'll build a strong set of values for your business.

THE INCLUSIVITY BLIND SPOT

To maximize our success and impact, we want to welcome as many customers and clients to our business as possible.



But what if I said that your current messaging is leaving many potential clients out completely? I'd be willing to bet that it is. I know this not because I'm secretly keeping tabs on your business but instead because I'm the one you've likely been leaving out.

You might be asking yourself, "how so?"

And it's for a few reasons, actually:

- My pronouns might be unexpected given how I look and the sex I was assigned at birth;
- I'm in a queer relationship with someone of the same gender; and
- I'm fat, and I own it.

WHY INCLUSIVITY MATTERS

Creating inclusivity as an independent business owner isn't about morality or political correctness—it's professional practice and good business to reduce harm and attract the full spectrum of clients into your business. It's also important to note that a lack of inclusivity as a business owner isn't a moral failing on our part either. The fault lies with traditional marketing

strategies that teach us to get as specific as possible in our language and try to read the minds of our ideal clients.

Not only do these conventional marketing methods put tremendous pressure on you, as the independent business owner, to master your mind-reading skills and position your business as the only answer to your client's problems, but they also force you to assume that you know the lived experiences of your potential clients.

That simply isn't possible. No matter your business model or industry, many of your customers and clients will have completely different backgrounds, identities, and lifestyles than you. Does that mean they can't benefit from what you offer to the world and your business won't benefit from them as clients? Of course not.

SIMPLE MARKETING SHIFTS YOU CAN MAKE

Taking steps toward greater inclusivity and representation as an independent business owner can be simpler than you may think. A few easy shifts in your marketing could allow more potential clients to see themselves in your vision, thereby communicating a huge message to those who need to hear it most.

Additionally, not making those simple changes, whether intentionally or not, also sends a clear message that marginalized communities have been hearing for far too long: you don't belong here, and you're not welcome.

The underlying reminder for these shifts is to avoid assuming that your clients have the same lived experiences as you. Don't assume anyone's gender or sexuality. Heterosexuality is not the default sexuality for every person, and cisgender identity (gender identity that matches someone's sex assigned at birth) is not the default gender identity. When we make those assumptions, we are perpetuating oppression heteronormativity and cisnormativity, which is

not something we want to do, as humans or as business owners. Here are five simple shifts you can make towards greater inclusivity and representation in your marketing.

1. Adopt gender-free language

By removing language based on the gender binary, you open your business up to the full range of potential clients and customers. The bonus is that this shift is low risk and high reward. Likely, the only people who will notice it are the ones who need to hear it most, i.e. the marginalized clients, including nonbinary and gender-nonconforming people, for example. The shifts can be so simple. Instead of referring to your clients and customers as men and/or women, use inclusive terms like individuals, people, humans, or souls.

Changes like these open up your spaces for more people to feel seen and welcomed, potentially expanding your client base, income, and impact. And when has called in more clients ever been a bad thing?



Photo by Brooke Cagle

2. Normalize asking people for their pronouns and sharing yours

Never assume someone's gender or pronouns. The simple act of stating your pronouns communicates a strong message of allyship and inclusivity to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Start by sharing your pronouns in your email signature and on your social media profiles, business cards, and website. This is another low-risk, high-reward shift. Making your pronouns visible across all platforms immediately lets potential clients know you are open to them telling you who they are as well and, you aren't assuming you already know.

By avoiding the assumption that you know someone's gender identity or pronouns, you're also taking the pressure off them to have to correct you if you assume incorrectly.

3. Transition from couple language to partner and relationship language

As you should never assume the gender of a person's partner, you should never assume their relationship dynamic either. Also, don't assume that someone who is currently in a relationship with a person of the opposite gender is heterosexual. Remember, no two people have the same lived experiences.

Rather than using terms like a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife, opt for the inclusive labels of partner or spouse. Instead of referring only to couples, use the term relationships. This small shift acknowledges that couples are not the default, nor are they the only relationship structures that exist. Opening your language to offer representation to more people is never a bad thing.

4. Do not make assumptions about discrimination based on their gender and/or sexuality

Many people (incorrectly) assume that members of the LGBTQIA+ community no longer face significant discrimination. We do. Never

assume that someone does or does not face discrimination based on their appearance or gender presentation.

Just as we can move through the world avoiding the assumptions that people we interact with have had the same socioeconomic history, resources, and privilege that we have, we can, and should, also avoid assuming that any two people have the same history of facing discrimination.

Your intentional steps to make your business practices more inclusive and welcoming will make a difference in the world, but we have a long way to go before representation and inclusivity are the experiences of the majority.

5. Post your business values and allyship statement on your website

To create a space that is not only inclusive but affirming for the LGBTQIA+ community, I invite you to share your business values and an explicit allyship statement on your website, [as I've done on my values page](#). If you haven't yet created a business value and allyship statement, this is your opportunity to do so.

Consider what—and who—you stand for. Increasingly, people want to know who they're giving their money to and what their investment is funding. Don't be afraid to let business be personal because it is personal. You may just find that letting people know what matters most to you in life and business creates deeper connections and loyalty with your clients, ultimately motivating more people to support your mission and expand your impact.

Remember, this approach is different from what most of us were taught when it comes to marketing and life in general. We've all had assumptions made about who we are and what we want in different contexts in our lives.

You don't have to perpetuate those assumptions for your business to be successful. Stepping out of traditional strategies and beginning to

make our way as independent business owners can be scary. I invite you to give yourself grace in this process. Don't be afraid to show up imperfectly—showing up imperfectly is so much better than not showing up at all. Remember that we're learning and evolving together.

WELCOME ALL POTENTIAL CLIENTS TO YOUR BUSINESS

The easiest way to reduce harm, create inclusive spaces, and call in more clients who can benefit from your work is to stop assuming that you know them already. Opening your language allows more people to feel seen and represented, which is not only good for marginalized communities who have been overlooked and excluded in traditional marketing practices, it's good for business.

If you'd like to learn more about stepping into proactive allyship for the LGBTQIA+ community, I invite you to follow Allyship in Action on Instagram @proactiveally and [join our email list](#) for exclusive resources and priority access to upcoming training and workshops.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1** What area of your business will you audit for inclusivity?
- 2** How will you ensure your marketing is accessible?
- 3** Share what steps you've already taken to make your business more inclusive.
- 4** How will you diversify your network?
- 5** How will you talk about inclusivity within your community?
- 6** Share a key takeaway that you learned from this guide.

RISING TIDE | HONEYBOOK BLOG POSTS



CLAIRE BOUGH

[How to Enhance Your Client Experience With Inclusivity](#)



ALEYA HARRIS

[Create an Inclusive Messaging Strategy That Reflects Your Values](#)

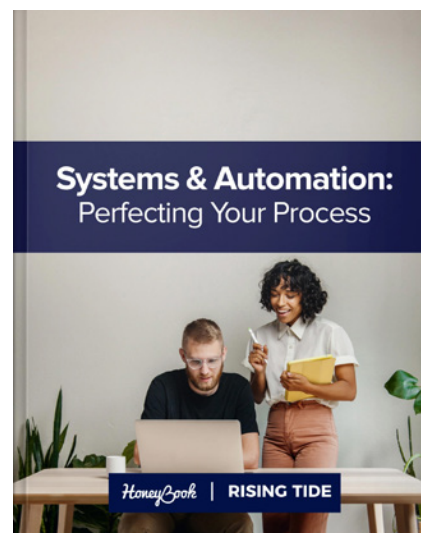
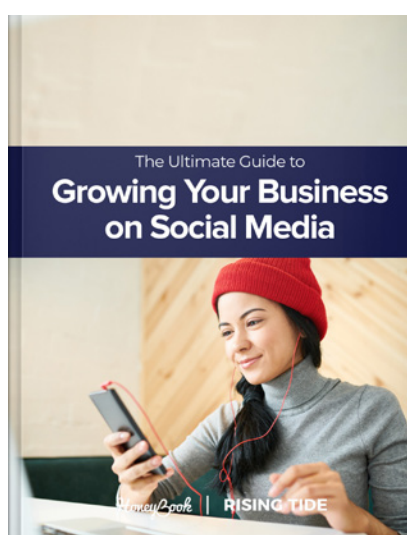


LISETTE CERVANO

[Creating an Inclusive Space Within Your Business](#)

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WHO WE ARE

The [HoneyBook | Rising Tide](#) team believes an empowered independent business economy will change the world. By elevating the voices of small business owners, sharing their stories, and building a thriving online and offline community, we support entrepreneurs in their pursuit of a sustainable livelihood.

Empowerment begins with saving business owners time and money. [HoneyBook](#) helps entrepreneurs manage their businesses more efficiently so they can do more of what they love. With [HoneyBook](#), Independents can send brochures, proposals, and invoices; create the ideal customer experience; and track payments – all in one place. Equally as important is sharing knowledge and providing support. That's why [Rising Tide](#) is a community and living library of educational resources, including blog content from thought leaders, monthly guides, online summits, and over 400 monthly meet-ups across the world to help entrepreneurs succeed in business.

We're also passionate about supporting the communities around us. To date, we've given over \$130,000 to nonprofits including The School Sessions, U.S. Dream Academy, The Birthday Party Project, Thirst Relief, and more. In 2018 we partnered with Pencils of Promise to build a school funded entirely by community donations through our 2017 RISE Summit.

We believe that all business owners get closer to their goals when they have a supportive community behind them, that's why we champion community over competition. We're on a mission to empower Independent business owners to rise together doing what they love.

Photo by Oliva Reed

