

Words That Wound, And How to Avoid Them

By NANCY L. WOLF

Admit it; we all have them. Hidden biases, unacknowledged prejudices, beliefs in common stereotypes that may lead us to occasionally make an insensitive or even offensive comment or joke based on the race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation of a person or group.

In the workplace such remarks likely violate corporate policy, and those that make them can expect disciplinary action. But do media companies hold their on-air personalities to the same standards? And why should they?

Most of us are unaware of how deeply certain stereotypes about other people and the groups to which they belong are embedded in our minds. They can reinforce biases, making them resistant to change, despite verifiable facts to the contrary.

Negative stereotypes and prejudices have harmful results – from offensive jokes to actual slurs, from discrimination to hate crimes. Discrimination occurs in employment, education, real estate, commercial transactions, the judicial system and social services – all because of expectations, biases and prejudice built up by long-held stereotypes.

Even so-called “positive” stereotypes can cause limitations on opportunities or expectations. Not all Asian Americans will excel in science, nor are all African Americans good at sports.

While the media does not necessarily create stereotypes, it plays an enormous role in perpetuating and enforcing them. Stereotyped-characters abound in radio, television and in movies. Mass entertainment routinely takes advantage of stereotypes as shorthand to convey a mood or a scene. By using stereotypes, on-air personalities directly or implicitly tell their listeners and viewers that it is acceptable to think the same way as they do.

Media personalities possess great power. Many are respected in their communities and looked up to as role models. Even controversial personalities strongly influence the perceptions of their listeners and viewers. Whether serious or comedic, what on-air personalities say serves to reinforce the already held beliefs of their audience.

I believe that on-air personalities should be held to the

same policies and standards as their in-office counterparts. Media companies can – and should – train their on-air personalities to curb their use of stereotypes and thus use their power to limit – not to reinforce – the perpetuation of discrimination, prejudice and racism.

Here are some basic do’s and don’ts to convey when training on-air talent.

Refrain from:

- Slurs when referring to a particular group, such as the use of terms like Chinaman, Oriental, gook or slant-eyed when referring to Asian Americans.
- Qualifying statements before making stereotypical comments, such as: “Some of my best friends are Jewish, but...”
- Racial, ethnic, religious or sexual orientation terminology in a report, story or joke when it is not a factor. For example, there’s no need to mention the nationality of the taxi driver if it is not relevant to the story.
- Accents mocking a race, ethnic, religious or sexual orientation group.
- Singling out a person to be a spokesperson for his or her group, with comments or questions like: “You’re gay; why do all gay men like fashion?”
- Slang created by an ethnic, religious or racial group to which you do not belong.

Remember:

- Social criticism and satire are acceptable
- Humor is not offensive. Insults are.
- Entertaining an audience can be done without having to use comedy as a vehicle to denigrate others.

Media personalities play a privileged and unique role in our society. They have a special obligation because of their standing in the community not to offend their listeners and viewers.

Media’s power is immense. Using it wisely can avoid perpetuating stereotypes that only lead to further prejudice, discrimination and hate.

Nancy L. Wolf is a member of the Washington, D.C.-based law firm Leventhal Senter & Lerman PLLC, which advises media companies on how to train their employees, including on-air talent. She can be reached at: nwolf@lsl-law.com or (202) 416-6743.