

A Seat at the Table

LATINA BUSINESS LEADERS PUSH FOR DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND REPRESENTATION

BY ANAMARY PELAYO CONNERY

LATINOS ARE VASTLY UNDERREPRESENTED in workplace leadership, which not only affects cultural representation, but company bottom lines, too. A 2020 McKinsey & Co. study showed that companies in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity were 25 percent more likely to have above-average profitability compared with those in the bottom quartile.

To see who is driving change and how they're doing it, we talked to five corporate trailblazers who have boldly pushed for inclusion. All five have taken chances — switching industries, helping startups and pushing their businesses to embrace new markets — to create new opportunities for themselves, their companies and all Latinas.



SHELBY COOPER

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

Isis Ruiz

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER,
NORWEGIAN CRUISE LINE

ISIS RUIZ IS A powerhouse marketer leading the charge for post-pandemic travel at Norwegian Cruise Line. But for a long time, the New York native was convinced she'd be a lawyer.

"I remember studying for the LSAT (law school aptitude test) and realizing that I wasn't passionate about the work," Ruiz says. Within a year, she took a job in insurance, where she had her first taste of marketing and communications. Looking back, "I'm a much stronger marketing executive because I dabbled in other environments," she says. "I didn't plan for that, but it turned out better. It taught me to be flexible and open to new opportunities."

Following her instincts has proved to be an enormous asset for Ruiz, so it's no surprise that when asked which trait she considers a strength in business, passion is at the top of her list. "Latinos are full of life, vigor and passion," she says. "We also have a tremendous work ethic — and that's the second most important trait you need to succeed."

That work ethic came in handy when, six years into her tenure at Norwegian, she was tapped to build an international marketing team, in part because she is bilingual. "We grew from a team of three or four to over 60 and opened offices in key markets," Ruiz recalls. "We had a startup mentality, but we were attached to a big company, so it was the best of both worlds. We grew that part of the business over 40 percent in just over three years." She refers to that time as her "CMO (chief marketing officer) training."

As the company's chief marketing officer, Ruiz holds a key position at a time when the cruise industry is still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. While other brands stayed away from the airwaves during those long months of quarantine, Ruiz seized on the uptick in TV consumption and led Norwegian to debut its Break Free campaign, which highlights the company's new flexible booking policies. Set to Queen's iconic song *I Want to Break Free*, it's aimed at everyone who'd been feeling trapped at home. Tapping into emotion is something Ruiz also credits to her Latina background.

"I make it a point to listen to our customers and our team members, especially to those who think differently than me," Ruiz says. **"The only way to grow is to sit across from people who look and think differently than you and sometimes disagree with you. You can't train passion, and leaders will always choose passion."**



LEADING CHANGE

Sarah Carberry

HEAD OF MULTICULTURAL STRATEGY & SALES,
GOOGLE

SARAH CARBERRY'S PATH TO becoming the head of Google's multicultural strategy and sales operations did not begin over a fancy lunch, but rather at a New York nail salon. "You never know who you're sitting next to," says the 17-year veteran of one of the world's most influential companies. "I started talking to a woman who had just moved from Boston to work in sales at 'a company called Google.' This was late 2003, early 2004, before Google's IPO (initial public offering). I said, 'You don't know me, but can I send you my résumé?'"

Carberry not only landed the interview, but she also got the job. Already a veteran account executive with experience at CNN and Univision, she knew there was opportunity for Google in the Hispanic market, but she had trouble convincing upper management at the time. Her persistence paid off when she was tapped for a project in Latin America. "Understanding Latin culture while also being bilingual and a seasoned digital marketing exec made me the right person to lead agency development in the region," she says.

She spent the next three years based in Bogotá, Colombia, launching Google partnerships across Latin America and beyond. "I was loving life," Carberry recalls. Part Cuban, Black, Irish and Native American, she credits her heritage and upbringing for

fostering the strong work ethic that kept her going. "It helped me stay resilient even during the most volatile times in my career. 'Cojelo suave,' as my Cuban mother would say."

Carberry admits that not everyone has welcomed the passion she brings to her work. "Some people have wanted me to speak a certain way, show up, listen and just be the person of color in the room," she says. "But my drive is what propels me to succeed. Also, being Latina means you've already overcome some barriers. It means you have strong conviction and thick skin."



In her role at Google, Carberry provides the company's multicultural agencies and partners keen insight based on Google data. "We help them improve their cultural relevance, which delivers on diversity, equity and inclusion. What our society has experienced over the last year has reminded us about the importance of understanding diverse realities," she says. "From LGBTQ+ employee rights to COVID-19's disproportionate impact (on minority communities) to the racial justice movement, people are calling on brands to take action."

Carberry is happy to help Google lead the charge. "Understanding these diverse realities will allow brands to not only survive, but to thrive."

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IN EVERY
443
EXECUTIVES

AT S&P 100
COMPANIES IS
HISPANIC

SOURCE:
USA TODAY analysis of data from
S&P Capital IQ, U.S. Census and
Equal Employment Opportunity
Commission

GETTY IMAGES; PROVIDED BY THE SUBJECTS

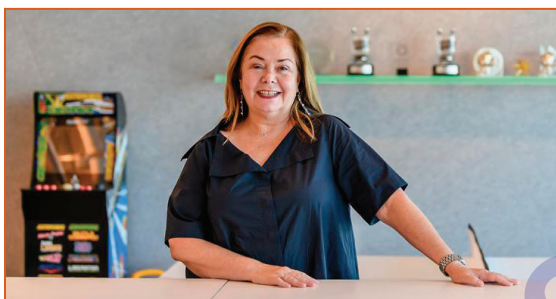
SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Ingrid Otero-Smart

PRESIDENT AND CEO,
CASANOVA/MCCANN

IN BUSINESS, TIMING CAN mean everything, and for Ingrid Otero-Smart, the start of her career couldn't have come at a better time. It was the 1980s, and brands were just starting to recognize that marketing to Latinos could be good for business.

"I joke with friends that we have the same conversations with clients that we've been having for decades," says the president and CEO of Casanova/McCann, one of the most prominent minority-owned Hispanic marketing agencies in the country. At the time, Otero-Smart was working for advertising agency McCann Erikson in her native Puerto Rico, but an itch to move to the mainland



led her to take a position with an independent agency in California, where she'd stay for 18 years and eventually became president.

Loyalty, she says, is one of her strong suits, a trait that's helped her build long-lasting relationships in an industry known for wearing people out. "We still spend a lot of time educating corporate America about marketing to Latinos, but we have better tools now," she says, half-jokingly. "Some marketers cast a Latino in a commercial and say, 'Check! We are diverse!' but consumers know when there's just a token face in the crowd." Instead, Otero-Smart works with brands like Coca-Cola to market to Latinos with culturally relevant messaging.

Her expertise has led to several industry awards and distinctions, including induction into the Hispanic Advertising Hall of Fame. Under Otero-Smart's leadership, the agency also doubled its revenue, she says, welcoming an impressive roster of clients that includes the U.S. Army, Cigna and Nestlé. "It's OK to celebrate your accomplishments," she says. **"As women and as Latinos, it's about being prideful. It's also our responsibility, once we reach certain positions, to bring up other Latinos, too."**

DRIVING DIVERSITY

Carla Vernón

VICE PRESIDENT OF CONSUMABLES,
AMAZON

CARLA VERNÓN UNDERSTOOD AT an early age that for society to succeed at all levels, representation is paramount. At just 7 years old, in 1978, she and her mother traveled across the country to join the women's march in Washington, D.C., in support of the Equal Rights Amendment.

As one of the most senior Afro Latinas in the food industry, most recently at Amazon, where she oversees a multibillion-dollar portfolio that includes grocery and household and beauty products, Vernón's determination has served her well.

"I don't care why I'm at the table, but now that I'm here, I'm bringing my ancestors and the communities that aren't in the room yet into everything I do," she says.

Born to a Black mother from New Orleans and a Black father from Panama, Vernón was taught at an early age that she already had what it takes to succeed in life. "Immigrants know how to lean into opportunity and ambiguity. We have hustle," she says. "That's why there's no one better equipped to deal with

this moment."

As a Minneapolis mother of two teenagers, the moment she's referring to is the social justice movement that followed George Floyd's death in the city last May. "That changed my family and my teens' lives forever," she says. "It was a crucial moment of realizing there still isn't equal justice in this country, and once again we are all called to accountability."

Corporate America's subsequent call for diversity was a welcome message to Vernón, but "the truth is diversity has always been the reality in the U.S. — that's not new," she says. "We're all a piece of the economy. We all should be represented in how it's talked about, shown and built."

Less than a year into her tenure at Amazon, Vernón, who spent two decades at General Mills as president of the natural and organic division, says diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) are key to her business strategy. "I am excited to take DEI from what many think of as a recruiting strategy to a real business driver. There's a whole demographic with a lot of influence right now. It's an untapped audience."



TAKING RISKS

Alicia Enciso

CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER,
NESTLÉ USA

AT A TIME WHEN many brands are waking up to the idea that diversity and investment in multicultural markets are worthwhile, Nestlé has long been hailed as a model for both, and it's in large part because of Alicia Enciso's leadership.

"When you bring diverse perspectives to the table, it enhances a team's overall abilities," says

Enciso, the company's chief marketing officer. She should know; her team is as diverse as the strategies they implement. Across the Nestlé USA marketing team, 65 percent are female and

one-third are people of color. **"Being Latino or part of any other diverse group today is a strength," Enciso says. "There's never been a better time to lean into your culture."**

Nestlé's massive success in the Hispanic market began with the community's most beloved beverage: café. "Years ago, we noted that Latinos were missing their coffee, so we seized the opportunity to market Nescafé," Enciso says. "When that proved successful, we applied the same multicultural marketing strategy to Coffeemate. Today, more than 10 percent of our budget is dedicated to Hispanic marketing." As a point of reference, most companies invest somewhere

between 2 percent and 7 percent of their marketing budget to reaching Hispanics, according to the Hispanic Marketing Council.

Enciso has long had a knack for seeing opportunities where others thought they didn't exist. After spending the first decade of her career at Procter & Gamble (P&G), where she helped lead the company's largest

Latin American acquisition at the time, she shocked her colleagues by handing in her resignation. "It was the internet go-go years, so I went home to work at a small startup in Mexico," she recalls. "My

friends at P&G were like, 'Why are you doing this?'" Enciso eventually became general manager and shareholder of the company that was later sold to a Silicon Valley investment group.

"Sometimes to really broaden your skill set, you have to take a leap," Enciso says. A few years spent consulting eventually led to a position in Nestlé's Mexico office, and the rest is history. Today, she heads up the company's marketing efforts from its base in Washington, D.C.

"My career has always been about taking risks," she says, adding that there's never been a better time for all people of color to do the same. "A friend said recently, 'It's a time like no other for multicultural talent.'"



The New (Old) Push for Inclusivity

IN THE WAKE OF recent protests against discrimination and injustice, multicultural marketing has suddenly become trendy (again) as brands respond to growing pressure from organizations, business leaders and of course, consumers, demanding equality, representation and culturally relevant messaging.

But while it's nice to see inboxes blowing up with requests for tools, training and new objectives to meet the demand for inclusivity, too many brands are using diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) initiatives as substitutes for meaningful multicultural marketing investments, often cannibalizing budgets from other multicultural segments, according to the Hispanic Marketing Council.

"We're seeing a shift where founders, CEOs and others in upper management are now asking DEI leaders for change, rather than the other way around," says Lauren Romansky, managing vice president at Gartner, a global research and advisory firm. "On one hand, it's thrilling to see such a high level of engagement, but on the other, it's disappointing that it took a movement for some to notice how much is left to do."

Will it make a difference? Maybe, in part because there are companies and organizations like Nissan, Toyota, Pepsi and others that have been leading the way for quite some time, providing a model for how to do it right. "Another thing that makes this moment in time different is that Gen Z (those born in the late 1990s through early 2010s) is in the workforce in a way they weren't four years ago, and they aspire to work for organizations that value diversity, transparency and activism," Romansky says.

Coupled with corporate America's renewed appetite for the perspective of underrepresented talent, the kids may, in fact, save us all.

— Anamary Pelayo Connery