

Juneteenth in America: Success Stories and Lessons Learned

By Alesa Gerald

In the last few decades, more and more people have been introduced to Juneteenth to mark the day on June 19, 1865, when federal troops informed enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, that they were free and had been for more than two years. Their celebration became an annual event across the country and was made a federal holiday last year.

As corporations move to incorporate diversity in their work and customer branding, some have started offering Juneteenth as a paid holiday in addition to coordinating celebrations at worksites and as part of marketing campaigns. Some have learned the hard way that incorporating stereotypes around food or African-American traditions will backfire with customers and employees if sensitivities aren't taken into consideration. Here are a few examples of what worked and what didn't.

Moving ahead of the crowd

Nike

A year ahead of President Biden making Juneteenth a federal holiday, Nike declared it as a paid annual holiday for its employees in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. A Nike spokesperson told [HR Drive](#), "Across our Nike, Converse, and Jordan family, we will close our corporate, retail, manufacturing, and distribution operations in observance of Juneteenth to provide educational opportunities that honor Black history and culture."

Amazon

In 2021, Amazon sponsored several Juneteenth events, including the inaugural Juneteenth Unityfest. The festival is a series of musical performances, speeches and other live shows that will be livestreamed nationwide this year.

Amazon Books also featured a selection of books highlighting the history of Juneteenth. The company's Prime Video platform will feature a landing page with a curated selection of movies and series acknowledging and honoring the holiday.

According to [CNN](#), Amazon donated \$1 million to 13 Seattle-based community organizations that support communities of color. The company says the funds will help sustain active programs relating to equity and social justice, youth development, arts and culture, and sustainability.

Chipotle

Last year, Chipotle donated to Project 10X, an initiative for racial equity created by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the nation's largest community development financial institution.

"[Customers] can round up with change to the next highest dollar amount when ordering from the Chipotle app or Chipotle.com," the company told [CNN](#) via email.

In addition, one of Chipotle's employee resource groups is hosting activities designed to advance inclusion, access and awareness throughout June.

Playing cleanup with customers

Old Navy

[Old Navy faced backlash](#) in May 2021 after a leaked pitch email was sent to 300 Black influencers asking them to participate in an upcoming Juneteenth campaign. The influencers were asked to post themselves in branded, Juneteenth T-shirts, which they were required to purchase on their own.

The company offered them a \$450 payment in exchange for their sponsored posts, a much lower rate than for similar projects offered to white influencers. After facing backlash for low-balling Black talent, Old Navy suspended its campaign.

Ikea

An Atlanta branch of Ikea was bashed for what employees called a highly offensive "special menu" curated to celebrate Juneteenth. The menu featured fried chicken, watermelon, mac and cheese, potato salad, collard greens, candied yams, and more. These foods have historically been stereotypes associated with African Americans.

"We got it wrong and we sincerely apologize," Ikea reps told the [New York Post](#). "[It was meant] to honor the perseverance of Black Americans."

After the apology from the Swedish box store, the NAACP refused to accept their apology.

The importance of a year-round acknowledgment

Businesses that are interested in real diversity and inclusion efforts should not look for a gimmick to attract customers or engage employees. The transparency behind short-sighted efforts will do long-term damage. Plan activities throughout the year to acknowledge the diversity and culture of your customers and employees. And if you're interested in planning a Juneteenth campaign, include people of color throughout the planning process. It's important for brands to be sensitive to the history of the holiday and understand the impact that can have on employees and customers. You can create positive, innovative campaigns, but before it's put into action, it may be best to think about the potential harm your campaign can cause.