



Stop doing diversity

BDI talks with Dr J. Jackson-Beckham

At the recent Friends & Family & Beer Festival run by Manchester's Cloudwater Brewery, one of the last uncanceled events (that is another story!) held before the current corona pandemic struck, *Brewer and Distiller International* took the opportunity to talk with keynote speaker, Dr J. Jackson-Beckham, on her role and her views about the 'D' word.

Dr J. Jackson-Beckham is not a fan of 'diversity'. Despite being a black, queer woman. Despite her commitment to social justice. Despite being, since 2018, Diversity Ambassador for the Brewers Association (BA).

In fact, she wants breweries to stop 'doing diversity' altogether. Because what does it even mean? 'Diversity', she says, points to a numerical, quantitative end state. And this is not

particularly useful.

"There can be lots of different types of people in a room, but that doesn't mean everyone is having a good time," she says. "It doesn't mean everyone is experiencing things to the same level of quality."

Instead she would rather businesses focus on inclusion, equity and justice. This was the message of her keynote address to Cloudwater's Friends & Family & Beer trade expo.

No policing

Dr J. (as she is usually known) is comfortable with public speaking thanks to her career in academia. The BA gig is not full-time. And in person she is relatable and approachable. Plus, she likes a beer, which helps in this role. Her work for the BA takes her around the world. She gives talks, and consults with breweries, on what can sometimes be tricky issues. Her affable style goes a long way, drawing people in where they might otherwise disengage.

Dr J. is not interested in calling people out when they get things wrong. "I'm not the diversity police," she tells us, "that's not my job." Instead she focuses on creating positive change and fostering dialogue to encourage it.

"There's so much opportunity to be absolutely excoriated if you get it wrong, especially with the way social media works right now," she says. "It's important we become a community that allows each other to f*** it up from time to time, because that's how we're going to learn and get better. If nobody can misstep, no one will try."

This is why she doesn't like to talk about problems. Instead she reframes them as opportunities. This is not to deny that there is anything wrong within the beer industry. Rather, Dr J. dares to feel good about how things can get better.

No hand-holding

But Dr J. wants you to know that she cannot fix your brewery for you. Only you can do that.

Instead she teaches people to analyse how inclusion, equity and justice apply to their business. Her aim is that they learn how to create opportunities for others. She says sometimes that means focusing on what not to do.

First, don't confuse the ends for the means. Anyone can claim to value diversity, but without action to back that up it is an empty claim. "That changes things about as much as declaring you have a black belt in karate and then expecting to be able to kick backsides," says Dr J.

Second, focus on barriers not on bait. It may seem a good idea to encourage more people to buy from, or work for, your brewery. But what's the use if the barriers that prevent them from doing so remain? "We may not be able to perceive the barriers that people experience but that doesn't mean they are not real," she says. "We need to discover and remove them."

Third, don't look for a quick fix. When we try hard things in life we don't

expect to get it right away, we give ourselves time to learn and grow. But for some reason in business we don't do the same with diversity and inclusion practice. We figure we'll have this one sensitivity training and then it'll be over.

"That's a huge pitfall," she says.

"Everything else you do in business you expect to put it into practice, to measure it, to assess those measurements, then to try again. Don't fall for the one-and-done. Build in a process of action and assessment."

More buy-in

One of the most powerful tools Dr J. works with is data. This is another advantage gleaned from her academic background. "The BA knew from the outset that it wanted data research work and some kind of resource and curriculum building to be part of the role," she says. "And for me that was one of my biggest points of interest because I'm an academic and that's my skill set."

Dr J. says it has been helpful to be able to speak with data. "I can say we're not just here to cheerlead, we're talking about observable phenomena. And we can treat this as any other kind of business and organisational practice."

For example, she has collated survey responses from 14,000 craft beer drinkers. These are segmented according to defined market areas.

"It's extraordinarily helpful for me to walk into a meeting and say 'here are your three biggest markets, here is who's drinking your beer by gender, age, socioeconomic status,'" she says.

Dr J. often juxtaposes this data with figures for the general population. "So, we can see here's the general population, here is who you're selling beer to, look at the gaps. And that gap isn't like you're not going good or I'm going to berate you for being a bad person. The gap is: there are a whole bunch of customers you're not surveying. There are a whole bunch of ideas and experiences you're not bringing into your professional fold. There are a whole group of networks where you haven't made connections and opportunities."

"I believe that if we are more inclusive, more equitable, and more just, that will drive diversity. It will be an inevitable end goal. And the great thing about that is it doesn't just improve the experience for certain groups of people. This isn't special programmes for special people. Do this right and it improves the experience for everybody, and that is an admirable goal."



Dr Jackson-Beckham addresses CBC, April 2019. (Photo: Brewers Association)

"We also have a business case for doing so. And I don't think it's ugly to think about the money."

For example, she points out that getting more women and people of colour into work led to major economic growth in mid-century America. Today, companies in the top quartile for gender and racial diversity are likely to be more profitable. And in a little over 25 years, more than half of the working population in the USA will be people of colour.

"People are sometimes *icked* out when you're talking about things like diversity and then you talk about bottom line. But I don't see any reason why we shouldn't understand that there is a financial imperative."

More talented people

Most brewers that Dr J. talks to say they find it difficult to hire and to keep diverse talent in their breweries. The best remedy for this, she says, is to consider the route someone takes to join your company. "Take each milestone and ask yourself: 'How can I make an effect in relation to inclusion, equity and justice at each stage in the journey?'"

She gives the example of a brewery in the US which, when it posts a job ad, does not state that it is at a brewery. Instead it focuses on what it wants people to do, what people can learn, and the values their team members hold. "They get an entirely different population of people applying for jobs, and the people who do apply tend to be a good fit for their culture," she says.

Another brewery, she says, changed its interview process. It had been putting

candidates through multiple interviews, which required them to return to the brewery over and over again. "For some people that is a huge burden," she says. "They may have kids at home or a job they need to go to. So, they had to think about what they were asking and reconfigure their interview process."

It can seem a lot, but the key is to take it one step at a time. Set a strategic goal. Decide on a trackable measure, something you can keep track of to see whether you're improving. Record and review your progress and adjust as needed.

"You have to accept that we are talking about cultural, systemic change and it is going to be slow," she says. "It's like a big boulder on a hill. It is going to take a long time to get that thing rolling. You might have to use different levers and dig out some of the barriers from out front. But once it's rolling it is going to be hard to stop."

Keeping positive

Dr J.'s message is a bit like her: positive and affable. It's built on solid theory and data yet remains easy-going. "We have to keep reminding ourselves that we're still learning," she says. "Think about how much crappy beer people have put out in the world. And we're like 'that one was terrible, but your next one's better'."

"I want us to have the same kind of communal vibe and be like 'yeah, your policies used to be pretty exclusive but gosh you're doing so much better now. That's awesome, let's talk about it.'"

Reporting: Anthony Gladman