

Black Barbershops and Salons Are a Marketing Opportunity Hiding in Plain Sight

New 'Black Paper' outlines the power and value of the African American consumer



Wil Power Integrated Marketing launched insight into Black barbershop and salon opportunities

WPIM



BY DOUG ZANGER 22 HOURS AGO

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When he owned a salon and was a stylist in the early and mid-'90s, Wil Shelton, **founder of Wil Power Integrated Marketing (WPIM)**, noticed that there was some fertile brand ground to cultivate. The epiphany came from seeing all manner of product discovery around entertainment and that he was inadvertently helping companies—especially record labels and studios—promote their wares.

Shelton's customers demonstrated "an insatiable appetite for entertainment. And I realized that when people left the shop, they wanted to buy the CD they just heard or see the movie I recommended," he recalled.

Shelton put together a proposal to a couple of companies as a test, letting them know that he had a captive audience and that it addressed a blind spot: connecting brands to the Black consumer. Almost immediately, Shelton started receiving free CDs and advance movie screening passes. On a trip to Los Angeles, one New York-based record label marketer told Shelton that "he had to meet with me because this idea was so big."

"That's when I knew I had something right," said Shelton.

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Armed with a few wins under his belt, Shelton opened WPIM in 1996, where he is CEO. The agency became a hybrid of promotional and experiential well before the days of social media. Using his own salon to pilot ideas, Shelton started building relationships with independent salons across the country.

Fast-forward to today, and Shelton said WPIM has a base of over 100,000 Black-owned salons and barbershops with an audience of over 100 million, creating a powerful, authentic platform. And it's one that may be hiding in plain sight for brands.

How a 'Black Paper' helps brands understand the audience

This week, **WPIM released what it's calling a "Black Paper,"** outlining the significant opportunity brands have with this segment of the U.S. population, according to Nielsen, with \$1.4 trillion in buying power.

The Beauty of African American Salon & Barbershop Marketing homes in on data, but points out crucial issues related to authenticity and representation. It's also a fascinating and enlightening look into salon and barbershop history—including its role in Civil Rights activism—and how Shelton sees the platform evolving.

"Blacks have an outsized influence on the culture and have always redefined cultural norms, and I believe they will redefine the cultural new normal as well," said Shelton, who has worked with major brands like AT&T and several record labels and entertainment studios.



Critically, these venues place a significant premium on trust and authenticity. **Black barbershops** and salons are community sanctuaries, with stylists acting as trusted confidants while providing services that help their customers build profound and personal identities through the creative expression of their chosen styles.

"[Salons and barbershops] are unifiers and equalizers for African Americans," said Cheryl Grace, svp of consumer engagement at Nielsen in Chicago. "Regardless of socioeconomic status, when you're in those salons, everyone is treated the same, and it's where you can relax and be your unfiltered self. And the No. 1 way Black people start their prepurchase decision-making process is through word of mouth."

Shelton added that salons are "safe spaces," with consumers relying on their stylists for emotional support.

His research shows that this audience is tailor-made for companies looking to make inroads with the Black consumer. This demographic makes eight times more shopping trips than any other group, consumes 21% more media content, and African American millennials spend 12-and-a-half more hours per week watching video and TV streaming services than others.

With that as a foundation, when it comes to brands entering the space, authenticity is crucial. Content needs to be targeted to this audience, but the entirety of the demographic shouldn't be treated as a monolith, considering regional and local tastes. The paper also shows the distinction between cultural inclusion (showing African Americans in marketing) versus cultural relevance (engaging and reflecting the culture).



Wil Shelton, WPIM founder and CEO.

"People realize the importance, and the cultural significance, of catering to a specific community and making sure that the message is respectful," noted Carolyn Williams, marketing evp at RCA Records, who has worked with WPIM on several releases including, most recently, the soundtrack for the popular show *Insecure*. "I see huge growth for big brands that cater to this community in a respectful way."

To Shelton, not having Black marketing decision-makers is one issue that holds brands back.

"African Americans need to be in the top ranks at brands," he said. "Having

those eyes at that level, who understand the culture, can help brands market to this audience without fear. Black consumers are looking under the hood of companies now and they want to know that your staff lines up with your stance."

Taking it to the next level

Looking at how the platform evolves, Shelton pointed out that social media has become a significant driver of success, with salon and barbershop owners becoming their own media properties, "**influencing the influencers**." Some have large followings, while others have more micro-influence, but all are nimble and entrepreneurial, which can be a boon for marketers.

"When they unleash their power, they understand how to monetize the culture," he said.

Presently, WPIM looks at specific KPIs and customizes tracking for ROI. Success can be measured, for example, in sales spikes connected to codes. One current campaign with a strapless mask company (to help prevent the spread of Covid-19) has seen a 60% sales increase based on conversion.

Looking forward, Grace believes that even more sophisticated tracking, like instant polls or other technology, can supercharge the platform and make it even more attractive for brands.

"If it can be measured, it can be managed," she said. "This takes it from exposure to engagement, and that's how this can gain an even stronger foothold."

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