

# FN's 'Women Empowered' Roundtable: How Leaders Should Tackle Diversity Now — And for the Long-Term

By Madeleine Streets

As companies around the country address their internal issues of diversity, footwear and retail are having their own reckoning. FN continued the conversation with four female leaders from the industry, in its virtual edition of the annual Women Empowered event.

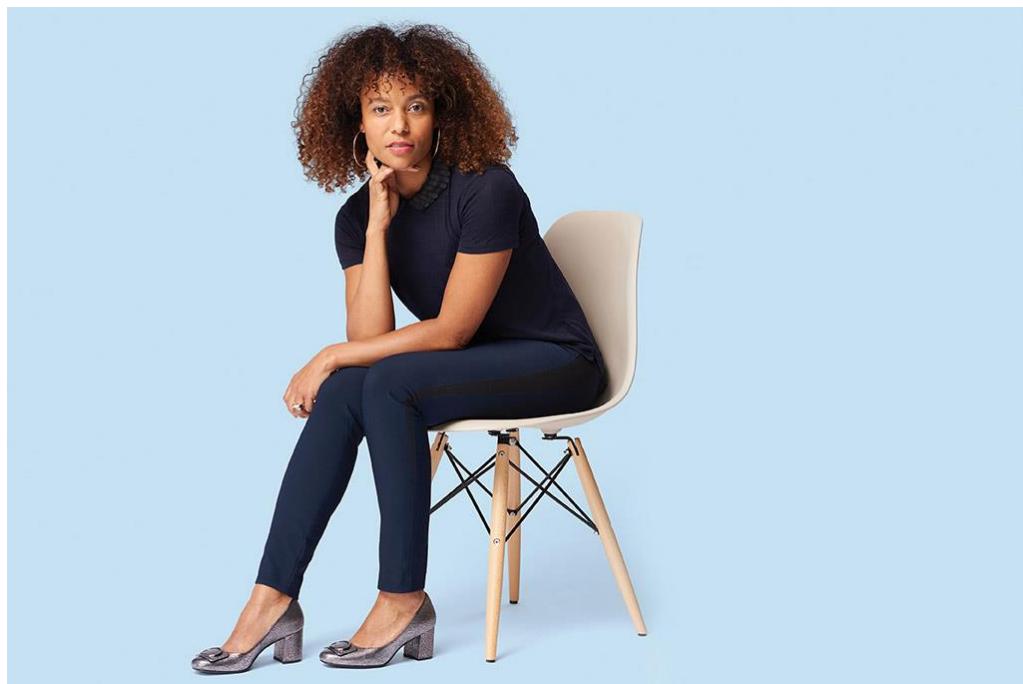
The conversation was moderated by FN executive editor Katie Abel and presented by global payments solution Klarna.

The panel featured Teri Bariquit, chief merchandising officer at Nordstrom; Angelique Joseph, VP of global design for Caleres brand Naturalizer; Merah Vodianova, founder and designer at Merah Vodianova; and Lindy Crea, head of US partnerships at Klarna.

The group of women leaders shared their insights into creating meaningful change within an organization and what steps can be taken to establish a truly diverse company culture. A selection of those insights is shared below.

## **On the Current Failings of Corporate Diversity:**

Angelique Joseph: As far as making everyone feel comfortable talking about racism and inequality and diversity: companies don't do a good job. All the companies that are putting those messages out to the world – is that a moment or is it a movement? For me, I hope it's a movement, but there's still so much work we need to do with this open wound in the US. Black employees don't feel comfortable bringing it up because there is that stereotype of backlash – which actually is very real. And a lot of the companies are looking at their black associates to help them understand, to create these committees. But I also feel that that's not necessarily the answer. What they need to do is acknowledge and take ownership of what has happened and actually do a little educational research on their own, because it's not the responsibility of the black community to help teach what's going on here.



Angelique Joseph, VP of global design at Naturalizer. CREDIT: COURTESY

Teri Bariquit: We've been on a journey for quite some time and I think the reality is we have so far to go. We've moved the needle on our diversity, in the last 30 years going from roughly 16% to over 53% having people of color and diversity, and we've made some progress in management – but not by any means to a point that I'm satisfied with. Having a black employee network (called BEN at Nordstrom) that is available to share their experiences and to educate us, that's OK. That is not enough. It is up to me as a leader to demonstrate that we need to reach out and have the conversations. I myself have to be very cognizant of microaggressions that maybe I didn't even realize I was doing in and continue that conversation so that I'm emulating as a leader. It's up to me.



Teri Bariquit, chief merchandising officer at Nordstrom. CREDIT: COURTESY IMAGE

### **On Turning Words and Marketing Into Action:**

Merah Vodianova: Everyone's posting the black squares; all these brands are very quick to make these Instagram highlights. But is this just for right now? Is this an Instagram trend? Because for me, black people have always been there. We're not new, we've always been here. We're not a trend, but you haven't been including us. You've been ignoring us. So companies need to put their money where their mouth is. Let this not be an Instagram trend, let this not disappear in a year's time or six months' time or it's going to be very disappointing. I believe that stores, companies, brands, they need to make this part of their ethos.



Merah Vodianova, founder and designer at Merah Vodianova. CREDIT: COURTESY OF MERAH VODIANOVA

Lindy Crae: Like many other companies, we came out with this statement early on to say that we condemn racism and we stand in unity with those who are standing up against racism and fighting for racial justice. But just as Angelique raised, is it a moment or is it a movement? What are we actually doing to support that? I think the important thing about actually giving voice to that statement is it creates space for people to talk about it – because it is an uncomfortable topic. It's an emotional topic.



Lindy Crae, head of U.S. partnerships at Klarna. CREDIT: KEVIN SNYDER PHOTOGRAPHY

AJ: The companies that put out those virtual messages, now that they've put themselves in this box and are talking about it, let's actually do something about it. And I think they need to dig a little deeper. As far as going into their own company's history, acknowledge the racial biases; acknowledge that there's not that much diversity at the top; realize inclusion is important and how it would benefit the company.

### **On How to Create Long-Term Impact:**

TB: I want to uncover all of the Black-owned brands, the POC brands that serve our customers with the authenticity and integrity of the offer that we are showing up with. I don't want to check a box; I want to make sure it actually is something we can stand behind and not be a moment. Some of the things we're looking to do is start with some pop-ins and start with some discovery. Maybe it's online, maybe it's in a few stores, to explore what's going to work and what's going to have some staying power. Because I'm also very sensitive to a lot of companies that are starting up: the worst thing we could do is give them a shot, but not really. We need to be committed to this.

MV: [For] the social media challenge "Post the 5 black brands in your house", a lot of people were struggling because the stores weren't buying the brands so how can you participate? The stores need to make the choice or you're going to stumble. It's not that the products are inferior, so why not buy into them? Why not invest in them? There are lots of terms you can offer to a new brand that I'm sure they would jump on. You want a company to take you on because they love you and their brand, not just because you're black and you tick the box. It's like ticking the box for a handicapped employee. That's not what we're looking for.

### **On Diversity Impacting the Bottom Line:**

LC: All of us as consumers, we want to go in and see people who represent us and diversity. I think about the brands that I go and shop and it becomes so important to see people who represent you. I really love shopping at Good American because I can scroll through their jeans and choose a model that is a different size and it informs me in a lot of different ways about how that piece of apparel is going to fit my body. And you read the reviews and you can identify different aspects that inform your buying decision – and all that results in conversion. So, I think it's a no-nonsense business decision to have inclusivity and representation of the people you want to buy your products.

AJ: Looking at it from a retailer's perspective, it would behoove them to take more of an action towards this change because there's so much civil unrest among the black, white, the American communities. There's so much unrest that now, if you don't come forth with the challenge that you face to your customers, there are people that will look for the brands that are doing something. So if you don't come forth, it's going to hurt you and keep you from becoming a successful brand. There will be a lot of women who are looking for the brands who are doing something to support them.

### **On Creating a More Inclusive Recruitment Process:**

LC: Klarna is hiring right now and it's a question we're asking ourselves. I love the idea of going to black colleges, it's a very tactical idea we can take onboard. But how do you hire and take that bias out – it can span age, where you come from, what school you went to. So how do we weed that out and make sure that these candidates are getting a fair assessment that isn't informed by bias? We need diversity in the people assessing them. My industry is e-commerce and tech and it's very homogenous; we tend to go out and look for what worked before. So we need to make a concerted effort to go outside our echo chamber and find other populations.

MV: Mentorship programs help. Even with stores, maybe you have a designer that has potential but doesn't quite have exactly what you need, but you can mentor them. You can set them on the right path, just as you can maybe buy from a bigger brand and say, "we want a green product next time." So why not do that with a smaller brand or smaller designer? That's something that doesn't take a lot to do – it's an investment of time.

TB: It's an investment of time, but it's one that's going to pay off quite well for us down the road. Something that we've done historically is having all of the various executives have a relationship with college campuses, including the black colleges. And it's definitely something I think we need to resurrect. And it's not just about an H.R. thing; we have to lean into it as leaders in the company. And so, getting to the campuses, meeting with students like we've done in the past – if there's a way to identify talent, that is also going to bring in more points of view, more diversity of thinking.

AJ: A lot of us who have been born and bred in America, you have these cultural biases that you might not even be aware you have. In a corporate environment, I think it's really hard to get those black candidates past those early rounds because of those old biases. We need to work hard and understand where that thought process is coming from. And then I think we need to have a better representation of people of color, as far as bringing in those hiring managers. If companies realize it's been hard to get more diverse candidates in, even though you may have them coming to apply – if you can't get past that first step, maybe it's because of who they're being interviewed by. Maybe you need to have a bit more of a diverse panel interviewing those candidates to get them past that first step.