

***“I think it’s about taking the time upfront to understand the community that you’re talking to.”***

***The management consultancy Batten & Company in an interview with Jason Rosario, Chief DE&I Officer at BBDO Worldwide***



Jason Rosario, BBDO Worldwide

**T**he world we are living in has become more and more diverse in only a few generations. Brands are expected to follow through on these changes and adopt a more inclusive approach to marketing and sales. However, only a few companies have managed to truly embrace diversity, winning over future customers. To find out how diversity can be lived and implemented in practice, our marketing & sales consultants at Batten & Company sat down with Jason Rosario, Chief DE&I Officer at BBDO Worldwide. In an inspiring interview, they talked about the role advertising agencies have

in implementing diversity, how to ensure authenticity in communication and how the advertising industry has changed in recent years.

**Batten & Company:** Can you tell us more about your role at BBDO worldwide and the growing importance of having dedicated teams address diversity-related aspects within organizations?

**Jason Rosario:** My role at BBDO worldwide as a Chief DE&I officer is to ensure, at the very core, that we build an equitable agency – one that is rooted in inclusion, equity and di-

iversity as it relates to the way that we build our culture, but also in the ways that we engage with our clients and help our clients think through a more inclusive lens. That includes everything from launching initiatives internally that help to build this culture but also helping advise our creative teams on inclusive best practices that they can imbue into their work to make their client work better.

**Batten & Company:** Based on this definition, there are two perspectives to consider when talking about DE&I – the internal perspective as an organization and the external perspective, engaging with clients and customers. How do these two perspectives play together, especially in your industry?

**Jason Rosario:** It is placed together because when we think about our responsibility as marketers and advertisers and the responsibility that our clients have towards their customers, it is up to us to shape the world that we want to live in. In the advertising industry, we do that through the stories that we tell. These stories are only more inclusive and more diverse when we have more diverse teams working on those campaigns. If you think about the creative output as the final product, then you have to think about the ingredients that go into making that final product. And part of that is not only building a culture where people feel like they can speak their voi-

ces, speak their point of views, be their best selves. It's also using this feeling of belonging and injecting it into the process of creativity to wind up with better work. That's why it's important for those two worlds to come together.

**Batten & Company:** If we focus on the internal perspective for a moment. At which stage did BBDO Worldwide start its diversity journey and where are you now?

**Jason Rosario:** I think BBDO Group has always been focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. The only difference now is that we have a clear strategic vision of what we want to do. To work towards this vision, we have to ask ourselves: How do we empower and activate our diverse voices? How do we elevate the intersectional value to benefit from diverse perspectives? For example, we're just about to launch several initiatives internally that are going to be focused on training and development and on building the language of diversity. We're also launching some tools that are going to help us improve the work that we do for our clients. So, I hope that over the next 18 to 24 months, we're going to be in a position where we're leading our industry in the conversation around DE&I.

**Batten & Company:** From your perspective, what were some of most important milestones along this journey that you've already achieved?

**Jason Rosario:** The first important milestone we've achieved is the roll-out of our "Unconscious Bias Training" globally. That's the very basic building block of understanding diversity, equity and inclusion, because it gets all of us to really take the time to uncover our biases and then take the necessary steps to address them. Working at BBDO builds on the mantra of "the work, the work, the work". These three dimensions can also be applied when it comes to diversity. The first part is the self-reflective work that we need to do as individuals. The second part of that work is the organizational kind of transformation that we need to do to be a more inclusive agency. The third piece of that work is a product of those first two done well, which is if we take the steps to become better individuals, we become a better organization.

**Batten & Company:** We have now talked a lot about the internal perspective. Let's switch to the role of your industry for a change. What do you feel is your role as marketers in breaking down barriers and cultivating an inclusive environment?

**Jason Rosario:** Our responsibility as marketers is to really think about the stories that we tell on behalf of our clients. This includes identifying different types of audiences and developing authentic communication strategies to specifically speak to those audiences. And it's

not just about casting. It's about understanding how those communities behave, think, and make decisions based on their cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, gender, etc.

**Batten & Company:** Given your experience and professional background, how has the advertising industry changed with regard to DE&I within the last two years?

**Jason Rosario:** I think over the past 18 months, the advertising industry has made a lot of progress in some areas. However, fully embracing DE&I takes time. We're talking about an issue that is decades in the making, so it's not going to change overnight. But hopefully, if we look at this in 10 years, we have made some significant progress in the right direction. That's what I'm excited about.

**Batten & Company:** From your experience, what are some action steps companies can take to accelerate this process?

**Jason Rosario:** Some advice that I would offer to not only other agencies and other practitioners of DE&I but also our brands and our clients, is to really think about the intentionality that we're placing behind our campaigns and the stories that we're telling. And this should begin early on in the conversation so that every part of the process, every part of the creative value chain is inclusive or at least thought through with a more

inclusive lens. You often hear the term “I’m colorblind, I don’t see color” and I think that’s a nice sentiment rooted in a really noble way of thinking. But when you look at the facts and you look at the data, you see that if you’re not specific in writing briefs for specific communities or specific identities, those roles tend to go to white actors. So we can mean well by saying we don’t see color, but in fact, in an industry that is relying on visual presentation, it is very important to have this conversation early on.

**Batten & Company: Where do you see our role as a service provider for our clients? Is it our job to follow our clients and their developments or is it our job to lead our clients with regard to DE&I?**

**Jason Rosario:** Personally, I think that our responsibility as a marketing agency is to lead our clients because as an agency, we’re usually more rooted in culture and connected to the daily kind of shifts in the world. So as a partner, our job is to not only to help our clients think through their business differently. It’s also to challenge them to think outside of that and show them opportunities to be more inclusive and cast a wider net. Because you might be leaving money on the table from an audience standpoint, if you don’t think about the demographic shifts that are happening right now. Oftentimes, we think that demographics are going to

take 20 or 30 years to shift but due to COVID and technology, it’s actually happening right now. So, to think about your business more inclusively is an incredibly important business decision to accelerate growth.

**Batten & Company: How can companies ensure authenticity in marketing and advertising to avoid criticism such as “queerbaiting” or “rainbow-washing”?**

**Jason Rosario:** I think it’s about taking the time upfront to understand the community that you’re talking to. For example, if you’re writing a spot for your audience in India, think about those cultural norms that are important to the country or the region. This is especially important when it comes to writing scripts or thinking about storyboards for a campaign. However, authenticity comes not just in the representation of those identities, it’s also thinking about the way that we’re depicting them. Are they behaving in an authentic way? Would this person say this thing in this environment? Would they even be in this place where they wear those clothes? So, I think it’s really thinking about the entire experience for those people, and then showing that story as opposed to just kind of checking the box and saying, “OK, now we have a woman. Now we have an LGBTQ person. Now we have a black person” because that alone is not authentic.

**Batten & Company:** Given your expertise, what recommendations do you have for organizations trying to advance DE&I efforts within their organization and in marketing and sales?

**Jason Rosario:** I think it starts with where you are today. We often hear our clients say, “Well, I want to be more diverse. I want to be more inclusive, but I don’t know how to start because I don’t want to alienate my current consumer base.” Actually, I think it’s an opportunity for the client, but it’s also an opportunity for us to help them identify where their center of credibility is as a brand. I think every brand, even within its core audience, has dimensions of diversity that it can credibly speak on. Even if your audience is a group of white men, they’re still diverse. They might be diverse of sexual orientation, of background, of disability, etc. So, our job as their partner is to help them understand what that is, and then develop the language. We can then come to the table with an exercise that helps them identify within that core audience what other dimensions of diversity might exist and then how you can credibly still speak to that core audience. But in a more diverse and inclusive way.

**Batten & Company:** What are the key measures for a global network like BBDO to track and measure success with regard to its DE&I efforts?

**Jason Rosario:** Basically, DE&I is about how people learn, connect, and grow with each other and it’s rather difficult to measure that. There are of course KPIs that we’ve established for ourselves but those are going to change depending on the region. For example, in the US, we’ve committed to being at the very minimum representative of the US workforce population. Looking at the demographics of a market and making sure that our teams reflect that is one way to measure inclusion.

Another way of measuring it, which is less quantitative but incredibly important is having a look at how long people stay at the company. Often-times, I speak to people that have been at BBDO for 10 plus years. I think that’s a great sign. That means that they feel like this organization cares about them and they feel like this is a place to grow their careers.

And then I think there’s one more way of measuring it. And that is the feeling. There’s a feeling that you get when you walk in the doors in the office. Are people collaborating with each other? Do they care about each other? Do they cover for each other? Admittedly, that’s been a little bit difficult to measure, given the pandemic but I think we’re moving in the right direction.

## About Jason Rosario



**Jason Rosario** is Chief Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Officer at BBDO's global communications network. He is a seasoned professional whose goal is to bring out the best in a brand, a company, and its people by developing strategic initiatives that strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion and increase engagement internally and externally.

## About Christian von Thaden



**Dr. Christian von Thaden** is Partner and CEO at Batten & Company and focuses on projects in the areas of marketing automation, digital transformation, strategic marketing, CRM and e-commerce. Since joining Batten & Company in 2004, he has worked for large and medium-sized companies in a wide range of industries, particularly automotive, financial services and retail.

## About Lisa-Marie Seufert



**Lisa-Marie Seufert** is a Senior Consultant at Batten & Company and advises international clients on all aspects of brand management, strategic marketing and business innovation.