

Affirmative Action vs. Client Wishes

Topic: Advertising and Marketing Management

Characters: Jennifer, junior Account Executive Trainee at the XYZ Advertising Agency
Sharon, Account Executive to whom Jennifer is assigned
Mr. Hurn, Managing partner of the XYZ Advertising Agency
Mr. Bohlen, Director of Advertising at ABC Client Company

After graduating from college, Jennifer tried repeatedly to secure an Account Executive position in an advertising agency. Finally, after two years of working as a receptionist and “go-fer” at the XYZ Advertising Agency, she got a highly sought-after job as a junior Account Executive Trainee at the same agency.

It is now three years since Jennifer started her current job. Sharon (the Account Executive with whom she works) has just made a major sales presentation for the ABC Client Company account. XYZ Advertising is a small agency, and top management (Mr. Hurn) feels this account is essential to XYZ’s ability to retain its employees and remain financially solvent. In fact, the agency has lost its two most important accounts in the last year and will have to lay off half of its employees if the ABC account is not secured.

The day after the presentation, Mr. Bohlen, Director of Advertising at ABC, calls Mr. Hurn to inform him that XYZ Advertising Agency has the ABC account if the television advertisement presented in yesterday’s sales presentation is changed. Specifically, Mr. Bohlen wants the two African-American actors in the advertisement replaced with two white actors. His reason is that the advertisement is superb, but the African-American actors will offend his target market. Mr. Hurn agrees to this request. He hangs up the telephone, calls Sharon and Jennifer into his office, and informs them of the need to recast/replace the actors.

Sharon refuses. Although tests of the advertisement show that the target market is uncomfortable with the actors’ race, she feels it is wrong to change this advertisement. She feels that more African-Americans in general should be in television advertising. After two hours of discussion, with Jennifer in the room, Mr. Hurn informs Sharon that she is fired for insubordination. He then turns to Jennifer and tells her that she can replace Sharon (which is a promotion to Account Executive). “Of course,” Mr. Hurn states, “you must recast the commercial as I have asked, or you, along with Sharon, will be released from this company due to insubordination.”

Jennifer, who has wanted to be an Account Executive ever since her freshman year in college, is torn. Her decision is complicated by her strong belief in affirmative action, the general scarcity of jobs due to a poor economy, and the fact that Account Executive positions rarely become available. Furthermore, she is already behind in her student loan payments.

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