

## How to avoid tokenism

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

October 14, 2013

Every once in a while I get an invitation to speak at an event. I look over the names and see a dozen people who look so similar that the conference brochure might as well be served in an egg carton. I call the organizer and ask if I could provide them with some options so that there's a bit of diversity on the docket. I always keep a list handy.

He answers, "Well, we always ask the *best* people to speak at our conference. And if the best people just happen to be white men, then so be it. We don't want to ask women and minorities to come just *to come*. We don't want to be involved in tokenism!"

And I sigh, because "tokenism" is often used to excuse for a lack of diversity these days. It's a gentle way of saying, "I've listened to people who say they aren't taken seriously at conferences. I understand. I would never be a part of that."

Except that they haven't listened, because tokenism complaints are not so that we keep a diverse group of speakers out. It's so that we will take all of the voices seriously.

There are *always* qualified women and people of color. We're the majority of the population. If you're a conference organizer, you're not lowering the bar of quality by having different perspectives involved. You're making things more interesting. It proves that you're not just in your own echo chamber, listening to your frat-boy buddies talk about a certain topic, but that you have a vast knowledge of the subject. You have an understanding that comes from voices outside of one particular ethnicity or gender. As my friend [Ed Blum](#) recently commented, "If segregation is wrong at the swimming pool, it is wrong in the pools of our thought."

I know that people may have taken my demographic more seriously than my content at first. I started writing and speaking when I was a relatively young woman and I know that my face was a counterweight in the glossy brochure line-up. That's

okay. In a world where doors are often sealed shut, having a bit of opening in the edifice is important. But there was a point in my career when the doors opened and I was invited to many things. I didn't have enough time and money to support every endeavor. I needed to say "no" to some things, so I needed to come up with a formula for avoiding tokenism. Here are a few things I take into consideration as a speaker, and organizers who truly want to avoid tokenism can take them into consideration as well.

**Influence.** When I'm asked to be a part of a group, I often ask, "Why me?" What I want to know is if the person has read my work or heard me speak. Has my work influenced them in some way? If not, then it can be a frustrating road ahead, especially if it's a long-term project.

If we're worried about tokenism, we can ask, "Why are we inviting the person?" If it's only because they fit into a demographic slot and we're worried about that, then that is easily remedied. We can read their work, listen to their sermons, or visit their ministries. We can let them get inside our thoughts and opinions. We can let them influence us.

**Expertise.** This can be tricky. I speak about church and cultural shifts. I wear lipstick and a dress while I'm lecturing, but I'm not an expert on gender. I'm a feminist. I constantly read Womanist, Mujerista and Asian-feminist thought, but I'm woefully inadequate as a historian of feminism or intersectionality. The fact that I'm a woman influences my thought, gives me a varied perspective, and (hopefully) makes my work more interesting, but it's far from my expertise.

If there's a panel and a person asks me, "Can you answer this question, from a woman's perspective?" please understand that being a woman is who I am, but it's not focus of my work. So he or she might want to ask the next person, "Can you answer this question, from a white man's perspective?" That will allow people to understand that he has a particular social location, just like I do. It's not the default race and gender, it's just one of many combinations. If you're moderating a discussion, and you're not comfortable doing that, then you can drop the particularities. The dress and lipstick will locate me.

**Paralanguage.** There are all kinds of ways that we show that we take a person's opinion seriously. In our culture, we make eye contact and we're thoughtful about introductions. We have cues that show we're listening. If one person is talking and

we're nodding, taking notes, and soaking in what he has to say, and the next person is up and we start checking our Facebook and filing our nails, people understand those social cues.

**Compensation.** What are we paying people across the board? Often keynoters are paid and other leaders are not compensated. There is a certain pay structure to these things, but if we don't want tokenism, we can make sure that there is some sort of parity in pay.

Wanting to avoid tokenism is important. But it's a terrible excuse for our indolent inability to see beyond our own thought bubbles.