



COLLEGE of HUMANITIES,
SOCIAL SCIENCES,
AND THE ARTS

COM 535
Diversity, Equity and
Inclusion and IMC

To: COM 535 Class Discussion Board
From: Niki Jennings
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Re: Week 5 Module 05: Discussion 01--Coca-Cola and the Corporate Diversity Challenge

Coca-Cola's Vanishing DEI Message: A Case of Strategic Sanitization

While Coca-Cola was once praised as a leading example of corporate diversity reform in Diversity, Inc. (Newkirk, 2019), a closer look at its recent communications reveals a sharp pivot away from those commitments. In fact, Coca-Cola has **systematically erased public-facing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) language** from its primary web presence, a move that appears both intentional and politically strategic.

Timeline of Key Events in Coca-Cola's Diversity Journey (2000–2020)

Year	Event
2000	Coca-Cola settles a \$192.5 million racial discrimination lawsuit filed by Black employees. This event catalyzed internal pressure to reform its hiring, promotion, and compensation practices (Newkirk, 2019, p. 130).
2001–2006	The company establishes a diversity advisory council and begins implementing internal tracking systems. Coca-Cola also hires a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) to lead these reforms.
2006–2010	Coca-Cola expands supplier diversity initiatives and internal training programs. Despite efforts, progress stalls as metrics lack transparency and leadership accountability (Newkirk, 2019).
2010–2015	The company refreshes its diversity goals and begins publishing internal diversity scorecards, linking executive compensation to DEI outcomes.
2016–2019	Coca-Cola publicly recommits to equity by increasing leadership diversity and joining external diversity benchmarks like the DiversityInc Top 50 list.
2020	The company's 2020 Business & Sustainability Report emphasizes racial equity following the George Floyd protests. Coca-Cola introduces "Listen. Learn. Act." as its strategic internal and external communications theme (The Coca-Cola Company, 2021, pp. 50–52).

From Transparency to Silence: What Happened to Coca-Cola's DEI Page?

In previous years, Coca-Cola hosted a comprehensive **Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI)** hub at <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/shared-future/diversity-and-inclusion>, where the company detailed workforce demographics, supplier diversity initiatives, and internal equity efforts. However, **as of mid-July**

2024, that URL was **permanently redirected to the careers landing page**: coca-colacompany.com/careers. The redirect is notable because **the words “diversity,” “equity,” or “inclusion” are removed** on the new page, signaling a stark retreat from DEI messaging.

Using the Wayback Machine, the last archived version of Coca-Cola’s active DEI page was crawled on **July 17, 2024**, after which all traffic was redirected. The timing raises the question: **Why did Coca-Cola choose to wipe its DEI presence on this exact date?**

Context Matters: What Else Happened on July 17, 2024?

The political and global news cycle on **July 17, 2024**, was extraordinarily consequential:

- **President Joe Biden suspended his re-election campaign**, sending strong signals about political instability within the Democratic Party (Wikipedia, 2024).
- On the same day, the media speculated that **Donald Trump would likely return to power**, bolstered by his campaign’s **explicit calls to dismantle DEI initiatives**. Trump and GOP-aligned think tanks like the **Heritage Foundation** repeatedly declare **"DEI is dead"** (Wong, 2024).
- Just one day earlier, **Israel bombed a sixth UN-run school in Gaza**, killing at least 42 people, including civilians sheltering in a designated “safe zone” (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Strategic Erasure Under Political Pressure

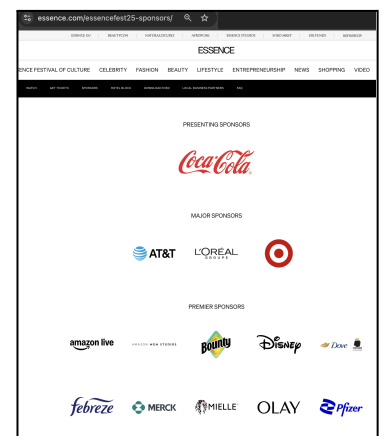
These events point to a broader trend: **corporate withdrawal from DEI is accelerating as political winds shift**. Coca-Cola’s removal of its DEI page just as Biden’s campaign unraveled, and just before the Republican front-runner reaffirmed his intent to "end woke capitalism", suggests preemptive risk management. The redirect to a neutral, non-controversial “Careers” page allows the company to sidestep criticism from conservative watchdogs while avoiding entanglement in geopolitical controversy.

Conservative-led initiatives like **Project 2025** and **Project Esther**, a religious-political campaign to consolidate right-wing policy and influence, have **pressured companies to drop perceived left-leaning stances**. DEI, ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance), and pro-Palestinian expressions have all come under fire, and **Coca-Cola calculated that continued DEI transparency was a liability**.

Addendum Timeline: Coca-Cola DEI Journey (2020–2025)

Year	Event
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The company’s 2020 Business & Sustainability Report emphasizes racial equity following George Floyd protests, introducing “Listen. Learn. Act.” as strategic internal and external communications theme (The Coca-Cola Company, 2021, pp. 50–52).● Coca-Cola launches “Listen. Learn. Act.” DEI strategy and links executive performance goals to diversity metrics in its annual sustainability report (Wayback Machine, n.d.).

2021–2022	The company implements systemic DEI improvements via HR strategies, including inclusive recruitment (blind resumes, diverse interview panels), Employee Resource Groups (Inclusion Networks), mentorship programs, equity audits, and stronger grievance systems. Global leadership targets are set, aiming for 50% women in senior roles by 2030 (LinkedIn, 2024).
2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coca-Cola publishes 2023 EEO-1 demographic reports, showing progress toward equity across gender and race categories in the U.S. (Equal Employment Opportunity Employer Information Reports (EEO-1), n.d.). ● The company publicly affirms DEI’s central role in its business strategy, citing the link between diverse teams and innovation, especially in contrast to industry peers like PepsiCo that were scaling back DEI efforts (McNair, 2025).
2024	In mid-July 2024, Coca-Cola permanently redirects its DEI landing page, https://www.coca-colacompany.com/shared-future/diversity-and-inclusion , where the company detailed workforce demographics, supplier diversity initiatives, and internal equity efforts, to Coca-Cola’s careers landing page https://www.coca-colacompany.com/careers . The redirect removes the words “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion,” illustrating the company’s calculated shift away from DEI messaging.
Early 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coca-Cola reiterates that failing to cultivate a diverse and inclusive culture could negatively impact business performance, reinforcing DEI as essential to growth strategies (Singh, 2025). ● Amid scrutiny during its 2025 annual shareholder meeting, Coca-Cola faces criticism from the National Legal and Policy Center (NLPC) over allegedly misleading claims about tying DEI performance to executive pay. The company argued it had “substantially implemented” proposals to drop DEI incentives, but the SEC rejected that assertion (NLPC Staff, 2025).
Current Status Mid-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintains public DEI goals (e.g., gender parity by 2030) and tracks progress via quarterly demographic reports (Apple, 2025). ● Continues community sponsorships focused on underrepresented groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sponsored the 2025 Essence Fest celebrating Black women. (Misenheimer, 2025) ○ Supported Black golfers from HBCUs at a February 2025 tournament in Florida (McNair, 2025). ○ Despite criticism, Coca-Cola continues reporting and investing in DEI goals.



The IMC Fallout: A Fragmented Brand Message

From an IMC lens, this erasure is damaging. Coca-Cola once aligned internal values with external brand messaging through its “Listen. Learn. Act.” campaign in response to racial unrest. That initiative unified employee training, community investment and corporate transparency under a cohesive message.

Now, the brand presents a fractured identity. Internally, Coca-Cola may still be running DEI programs, but beyond performatively serving as corporate sponsors, there is no trace of those efforts externally. This disconnect undermines credibility, creates stakeholder confusion, and **alienates younger and global consumers** who prioritize transparency and social values in brand relationships.

Conclusion: A Silent Retreat

Coca-Cola's decision to quietly erase its diversity page in July 2024 should not be dismissed as a routine site update. Instead, **it is a strategic sanitization** timed to coincide with political upheaval and conservative backlash against corporate DEI efforts. By vanishing its messaging, Coca-Cola signals alignment with a safer, apolitical brand posture; even if that means abandoning the transparency that once set it apart. In doing so, it serves as a new case study not in DEI leadership, but in **corporate retreat under pressure**.

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