

Federal Trade Commission Inaugural Diversity Summit
“Beyond the Numbers: Creating an Inclusive Environment”
Remarks of Chairman Jon Leibowitz as Prepared for Delivery
January 19, 2012

Good morning and welcome to the Federal Trade Commission’s diversity summit – “Beyond the Numbers: Creating an Inclusive Environment.”

Let me start by thanking the Diversity Council, especially Norm Armstrong, Lem Dowdy, April Tabor, Jim Taronji, and Kevin Williams, but so many more on the Council also deserve thanks. Your dedication over many months has enabled us to gather today for this summit and will continue to pay dividends in the months and years ahead. Thank you also to Commissioners Brill and Ramirez for participating in panels today – their presence is further evidence of the FTC’s across-the-board commitment to diversity.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks for the participation of our distinguished outside panelists – they are going to be terrific. On a personal note, let me especially welcome John Trasviña, my colleague from our days in Senator Paul Simon’s office. Before coming to Washington in 2009 to be Assistant HUD Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, John was the president and general counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund – his entire professional life demonstrates an unwavering commitment to diversity.

That so many of you have taken time today to attend – including those of you joining us remotely from the regional offices – confirms what we all already know about FTC employees: we are fiercely dedicated to finding new and better ways to do our jobs, serving consumers and preserving competition for all Americans.

It is no coincidence that this Summit immediately follows our nation’s celebration of the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., who dreamed of an America where his children would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” During his life, Dr. King espoused the idea that each person is to be valued; that each person can make a difference; and that, as a society, we should strive to treat each of our fellow citizens with respect and dignity. As he once stated, “we may have all come on different ships, but we are in the same boat now.”

At the core of Dr. King’s message is the idea of “diversity and inclusion” – acknowledging that each person offers a unique and valuable perspective and marshaling these perspectives to advance the goals of the organization, of society.

In 1935, the poet Langston Hughes wrote:

*O, let America be America again –
The land that never has been yet –
And yet must be – the land where everyone is free.*

Like Martin Luther King Jr., Hughes penned his poem during a time of wrenching hatred, prejudice, injustice, and poverty. Yet he – and so many other civil rights advocates, from Cesar Chavez to A. Philip Randolph to Harvey Milk – could see the promise of a future America that embraced the diversity of our people.

We are inspired by the dreams of such visionaries and we honor them, not by simply repeating their words, but by taking the actions that will move us closer to the nation they trusted we could become.

That is what today's summit is all about. At the FTC, we are committed at the highest levels to a workplace that includes all, recognizing the strength in our differences and allowing each of us to perform our best. This goal is not just the right thing to do – it is the right way to carry out our mission.

As all of us in this room are aware, the consumers we serve comprise – and the markets we police are fueled by – a tapestry of cultures, nationalities, religions, races, sexes, and sexual orientations. We best represent them when we reflect them; we best understand what they need when we walk in their shoes.

As the only federal agency tasked with the responsibility of protecting consumers and promoting competition, the Commission's success in fulfilling its mission is inextricably linked to the achievement of our diversity goals. The Commission's Hispanic Law Enforcement and Outreach Initiative exemplifies this. The initiative has resulted in numerous prosecutions of deceptive business practices that targeted the Hispanic community.

Take just one example – a case in which the FTC sued a company that we allege falsely called its employees “notarios” and heartlessly bilked immigrants from Latin America out of advance fees for immigration services that the company never provided. Or another: we filed court actions against five other companies for using Spanish-language advertising to lure consumers into paying taxes and fees on sweepstakes prizes that would never materialize.

Our Spanish-speaking employees deserve enormous credit for the initiative's success and also for providing incredibly valuable consumer education materials published in Spanish – ones that have helped ensure that hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking Americans and immigrants are not ripped off in the first place.

Year after year, the FTC has been ranked one of the “Best Places to Work” in the federal government. And today, more than one-fourth of our employees are racial or ethnic minorities, and more than half of our employees are women.

But we can do better. We can strive to recruit, retain, and promote a workforce – especially supervisors and senior management – that more accurately reflect the diversity of the citizen population that we serve. To this end, we created an agency-wide Diversity Council, and we have implemented many of their recommendations for improving diversity and removing barriers to inclusion. Let me assure you: we will continue to promote a culture of inclusion and open communication.

For instance, we are unifying recruitment efforts among the different bureaus, reaching out to academic institutions, professional organizations, and national advocacy groups to make sure we are maximizing diversity among our new employees. Further, we are expanding our existing mentoring programs so that every single new employee, regardless of bureau or office, gets off to the strongest possible start. We are making it easier for staff to learn of available internal advancement opportunities. The EEO office has also implemented a new employee exit interview process so we can root out any possible discrimination and identify other barriers to making the FTC a supportive workplace.

And, of course, our summit focuses on how the FTC can become more diverse – fostering communication between all, opportunities for all, and inclusion of all. But “if our values are to have meaning,” to quote Deval Patrick, the Governor of Massachusetts, “they must make a claim not just on what we say, but on what we do.” That means we cannot simply say that we want a more diverse workplace. We must back up our statements with action. So think of our efforts today not as the beginning of the end, but merely as the end of the beginning.

Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, and so many more visionaries and poets could see the bright future of an America that embraced its diversity – even while they lived, in the words of Hughes “without freedom in the ‘land of the free.’” We owe them our best efforts to move us toward the nation they believed we could become. Our summit today – as well as our other, continuing work to create a more diverse and accepting workplace at the FTC – are our small steps to honor them and their vision for our nation, and to ensure that the Federal Trade Commission – a small but mighty agency – achieves its full potential.

Thank you.