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March 2025

BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING LEGACIES

A Conversation With
Simone D. Ross

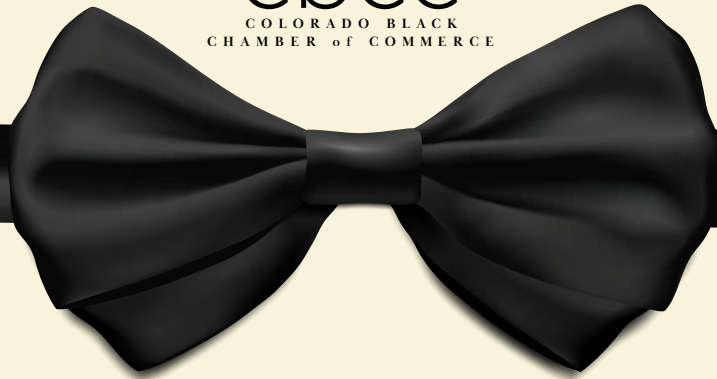
BY DR. ANGELIC COLE

**BUILDING MORE THAN
STRUCTURES**
TANIEKA GRIFFIN

**THE BUSINESS OF
MUSIC**
DALE R. HUNTER

**LIFE BALANCE
COUNSELING**
JANELLE JOHNSON

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with respect to DEI and how it
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Contributors

Editor

Alisha Harris, Original Account Strategies

Photographer

Shameka McBoat, McBoat Photography

Contributing Writers

Dr. Angelic Cole, Tarieka Griffin, Dale R. Hunter, Janelle Johnson, Hamza Jones

Contributing Member Companies



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Would you like to share your story with a broader audience? Submit a 2,000-5,000 word article about your business or industry to be included in a future issue of The Acumen, a CBCC monthly e-magazine publication.

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President's Corner

The Impact of Black Women Entrepreneurs on the Small Business World



Dear Reader:

The landscape of small business ownership in the United States is as diverse as the nation itself. Yet, within this landscape, one group stands out for their remarkable contributions and unique challenges: Black women entrepreneurs. From reshaping industries to fostering community empowerment, Black women entrepreneurs have had a profound impact on the small business world. This column delves into the multifaceted influence of Black women business owners, highlighting their contributions, challenges, and the broader implications for society.

The Rise of Black Women Entrepreneurs

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of Black women starting their own businesses. According to the 2019 State of Women-Owned Businesses Report, Black women are leading the growth among women-owned businesses, with a 50% increase in the number of firms between 2014 and 2019. This surge in entrepreneurship can be attributed to several factors, including a desire for economic independence, the need to address gaps in the market, and the pursuit of passion-driven endeavors.

Economic Contributions

Black women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to the economy. Their businesses

create jobs, generate revenue, and stimulate local economies. According to the 2019 American Express "The State of Women-Owned Businesses" report, Black women-owned businesses employ approximately 2.4 million people and generate over \$422.5 billion in revenue annually. These businesses span various industries, including healthcare, beauty, technology, and retail, reflecting the diverse interests and skills of Black women entrepreneurs.

Innovation and Industry Disruption

Black women entrepreneurs are known for their innovative approaches and ability to disrupt traditional industries. For example, in the beauty industry, Black women-owned brands like Fenty Beauty by Rihanna have revolutionized the market by prioritizing inclusivity and offering products for a diverse range of skin tones. This innovation has forced larger, established brands to reconsider their product lines and marketing strategies, ultimately benefiting consumers from all backgrounds.

In the tech industry, Black women like Kimberly Bryant, founder of Black Girls CODE, are making significant strides. Black Girls CODE aims to increase the number of women of color in technology by providing education and mentorship to young girls. Bryant's work not only addresses the underrepresentation of Black women in tech but also inspires a new generation of innovators.

Community Empowerment

Black women entrepreneurs often prioritize community empowerment and social change. Their businesses frequently address issues that disproportionately affect Black communities, such as health disparities, educational inequities, and economic inequality. For instance, organizations like The Honey Pot Company, founded by Bea Dixon, focus on providing natural and effective feminine care products while also supporting initiatives that promote health and wellness in Black communities.

Additionally, many Black women entrepreneurs engage in philanthropy and community development efforts. They invest in local schools, support non-profit organizations, and create programs that provide mentorship and resources to aspiring entrepreneurs. This commitment to giving back not only strengthens communities but also fosters a culture of entrepreneurship and resilience.

Overcoming Challenges

Despite their remarkable contributions, Black women entrepreneurs face unique challenges that can hinder their success. Access to capital is a significant barrier, as Black women receive less funding and investment compared to their counterparts. According to a 2020 report by Project Diane, Black women founders receive only 0.64% of total venture capital funding. This lack of financial support can limit the growth and sustainability of their businesses.

Moreover, Black women entrepreneurs often encounter systemic racism and bias that can manifest in various ways, from discriminatory lending practices to limited access to business networks. These barriers require Black women to navigate additional hurdles, often necessitating greater resilience and resourcefulness.

The Power of Networks and Mentorship

To overcome these challenges, Black women entrepreneurs have created and leveraged networks and mentorship opportunities. Organizations like Walker's Legacy and Black Women Talk Tech provide platforms for Black women to connect, share resources, and support each other's ventures. These networks not only offer practical business advice but also create a sense of community and solidarity.

Mentorship plays a crucial role in the success of Black women entrepreneurs. Experienced business owners and industry leaders provide guidance, encouragement, and valuable insights that can help new entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of running a business. Programs like the Tory Burch Foundation and The WELL (The Women Entrepreneurs Leadership Lab) offer mentorship and resources tailored to the needs of women entrepreneurs, including those from marginalized backgrounds.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The impact of Black women entrepreneurs extends beyond individual businesses and communities; it also has broader policy implications. Addressing the challenges faced by Black women entrepreneurs requires targeted policy interventions that promote equity and access to resources. This includes initiatives to increase funding opportunities, provide affordable healthcare, and enhance access to education and training programs.

Furthermore, supporting Black women entrepreneurs can have a ripple effect on the broader economy. When Black women thrive, their businesses create jobs, stimulate innovation, and contribute to economic growth. Investing in the success of Black women entrepreneurs is not only a matter of social justice but also an economic imperative.

Conclusion

Black women entrepreneurs are reshaping the small business world through their innovation, resilience, and commitment to community empowerment. Their contributions to the economy, industry disruption, and social change are undeniable. However, to fully harness their potential, it is essential to address the unique challenges they face and create an environment that supports their growth and success. By recognizing and celebrating the impact of Black women entrepreneurs, we can build a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

Dr. Angelic Cole
President & CEO
Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce

BREAKFAST SERIES



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with respect to DEI and how it impacts Minority Businesses

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The Business of... **MUSIC**

Kendrick Lamar is redefining the Music Business before our very eyes. He has revolutionized how artists/performers are paid and compensated for their work. For example, he is expected to make a cool \$15 million for his social media platform deal with Apple Music for his 15-minute concert at the recent NFL Superbowl game. Despite not being paid for his show (NFL Superbowl performers are not paid), he could make more than \$50 million dollars in other streaming deals, album sales and merchandise just from his one short concert at the 59th Annual Superbowl. His halftime show broke the domestic viewing record with over 133 million viewers. Period. Full Stop

In 2022, the music industry was valued at approximately \$26.2 billion dollars for the global recorded music sector. However today, the overall global value of the music business is estimated to be over \$50 billion. Additionally, the music industry contributes around \$170 billion to the US GDP annually, supporting millions of jobs. The rise in the global sales and revenue of the music business is directly related to the rise and influence of paid streaming subscription services.

The leading streaming services in the music business are Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music and YouTube. The number of paid music streaming subscription services continue to grow and the revenue they generate is unparalleled. The US market is the largest in terms of music consumption and revenue generation. Kendrick has tapped into this new and historic revenue stream.

Who is Kendrick Lamar and why should you care? Notably, his fans span generations. How many artists can say that? The 37-year-old musical genius has transformed the iconic phrase, satirical poem and Black Liberation song by Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." How you ask? Kendrick has moved the revolution to Apple Music and social media platforms making him unrestricted and

unstoppable. He's calling the shots. Kendrick Lamar Duckworth is a Pulitzer Prize Winner, 22 time Grammy Award Winner making him the third-winningest rapper in Grammy history. From Compton, population 105,000, located a few miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles, is considered the birthplace for "gangster rap."

I must confess, my son introduced me to the talented songwriter about five years ago and I've been a fan ever since. Kendrick is regarded as one of the most influential hip hop artists of his generation and one of the greatest rappers of all time. Apparently, Kendrick was named after the late great Eddie Kendricks, the smooth, velvet voice of the mighty Temptations.

In 2016, Time Magazine listed Kendrick as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. In 2018, as previously mentioned, he won a Pulitzer Prize for Music becoming the first musician outside of the classical and jazz genres to receive the honor. That's right - a rapper from Compton won this prestigious global award for music. The Pulitzer is the ultimate world recognition for one's talents, brains, and achievements. After all, isn't rap an extension of artistry, poetry and wordsmithing?

Two months before the nationally televised Super Bowl game, he won five Grammys at the Grammy's Award Ceremony, an annual music gala that recognizes the best in the music



Dale R. Hunter
Founder, The Hunter Group (THG).



business. His 2024 chart busting song, “They Not Like Us” got more than 100 million views in just three days after it was released to the public. According to a recent music industry report, Kendrick’s current net worth is more than \$150 million dollars and rapidly growing.

As a member of the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce, I applaud the young genius for smartly leveraging financial opportunities with all the new social media platforms and the various music streaming services. But I also want to acknowledge all the foundational trailblazers in music who help lay the foundation for Kendrick’s success. Can you imagine how the Temptations could have reshaped the music business if they had a multi-million-dollar deal with YouTube?

THG is a government relations consulting firm that specializes in water and energy issues.

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Share Your Story with Us!

Are you a Black business owner in Colorado making an impact? We’re seeking submissions for our “Black Businesses on the Move” section! In 500-1,000 words, tell us what sets your business apart, your contributions to the community, and any challenges you’ve overcome. Please include relevant photos and/or bios to accompany your story.

Send your submissions to:
TheAcumen@cbcc.biz.

Let’s celebrate your achievements and inspire our community together!

WINTER SERIES



OUTLOOK & OPPORTUNITIES VIRTUAL MEETING

Monday, March 3 | 4:30 PM - 6:00 PM

The **Colorado Restaurant Association** will provide an overview of the current restaurant/retail business and the potential opportunities for BRG and BPSG members.

Meeting link will be shared separately with all attendees that are registered.



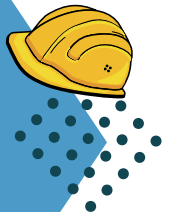
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WINTER SERIES



MEMBER MEETING



WHAT: Black Construction Group (BCG)
Opportunities in the Highway and Rail Construction Industry

WHO: Kraemer North America (Colorado Office)

WHEN: Tuesday, March 11 @ 4:30pm to 6pm

WHERE: CBCC Office, 444 Sherman St, Denver



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 Third Tuesdays, 3pm MT. Starts April 16th
- **Gala Committee**
 Fridays, times To Be Determined

FOR MORE INFORMATION, contact Dr. Angelic Cole:
 dr.angelic.cole@cbcc.biz

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Building More Than Structures: Building Opportunities

By TANIEKA GRIFFIN





Jake & Edweena Gilmore.
Image: Gilmore Construction

In 1997, Jake and Edweena Gilmore founded Gilmore Construction with a vision that extended far beyond bricks and mortar. They set out to build not just structures, but opportunities—opportunities for underrepresented communities, aspiring entrepreneurs, and for a more inclusive and equitable construction industry. Nearly three decades later, that vision continues to shape the Rocky Mountain region’s environment, reinforcing new standards of excellence, mentorship, and economic empowerment.

With a strong commitment to mentorship, workforce development, and community impact, Gilmore is more than a builder, it’s a force for change. Through its strategic leadership, the company has transformed from a small business in the SBA 8(a) Business Development Program to a powerhouse managing \$40 million in annual revenue, leading major infrastructure projects across transportation, healthcare, education, and commercial sectors.

From Humble Beginnings to Industry Leadership

Jake Gilmore’s love for building began long before Gilmore was founded. His early interest in architecture and construction was fueled by a passion for transforming concepts into completed structures. He began working on projects with his family, taking on renovation work during

college, and later gaining professional experience in general contracting. For nearly 18 years, he honed his skills working for a small minority-owned business, he eventually recognized the opportunities that presented themselves in Denver and a gap in the industry that he was uniquely positioned to fill.

Seeing the lack of opportunities for minority-owned businesses, Jake took a leap of faith, transitioning from working for someone else to building his own company. In the beginning, Gilmore focused on small renovation projects and finishing jobs that Jake had started with his previous employer. With each project, the company demonstrated its capabilities, earned client trust, and established a reputation for quality and reliability. One of the company’s early breakthrough projects involved constructing five preschools, which propelled the company into larger commercial projects. Soon after, Gilmore expanded into federal contracts and on-call projects, securing its place among top-tier general contractors. While Gilmore built its name through hard work and excellence, Jake and Edweena also recognized the importance of leveraging strategic resources to break through systemic industry barriers. They utilized the SBA 8(a) Business Development Program as a catalyst, gaining access to essential training, networking, and contract opportunities that allowed them to scale their business. By combining their own expertise and reputation with the advantages of the program, they positioned Gilmore to compete at higher levels and secure larger, more complex projects.

A pivotal moment came when Gilmore partnered on a major \$15 million renovation project in Colorado Springs. This opportunity showcased the company’s ability to manage large-scale commercial work, leading to further high-profile projects. Shortly after, the company was awarded a multi-million-dollar airport renovation for United Airlines, a project that significantly increased its visibility and credibility in aviation infrastructure. Building on this momentum, Gilmore took on even more ambitious projects, further cementing its reputation for excellence. One of the company’s most defining achievements was



At Gilmore, “A Higher Standard” is not just a tagline—it’s a commitment.

FreshLo Hub.
Images: Gilmore Construction

the GSA Building 67 renovation—a nine-story transformation that set a new benchmark for quality and efficiency. By implementing LEAN practices, advanced training, and rigorous coordination with architects, clients, and trade partners, the project was completed ahead of schedule and earned national recognition. The success of this project reinforced Gilmore's reputation for excellence and helped solidify relationships with key clients. While each project is unique, Gilmore approaches them with the same mindset: every building is special, every client's vision matters, and every detail must reflect the company's high standards.

At Gilmore, "A Higher Standard" is not just a tagline—it's a commitment. It represents a philosophy of excellence, continuous improvement, and pushing beyond expectations. It's about exceeding not only the client's expectations but also your own, constantly striving for better craftsmanship, more efficient processes, and a superior client experience.

This commitment to continuous improvement has led Gilmore to embrace processes like LEAN and TAKT principles, inspired by Toyota's Kaizen methodology. By optimizing workflows, improving efficiency, and engaging all stakeholders—including architects, trade partners, and clients—the company has been able to enhance project outcomes while maintaining cost-effectiveness. This dedication to innovation has allowed Gilmore to remain at the forefront of the industry.

With a growing track record of high-quality projects, Gilmore expanded beyond the 8(a) program, transitioning from residential work to securing major government, commercial, and infrastructure contracts. Today, its diverse portfolio showcases the company's ability to adapt and excel in multiple construction sectors. The company has played a vital role in aviation and transportation projects, including airport terminals, airline carrier facilities, and transit stations. It has contributed to civic and recreation spaces, such as libraries, recreation centers, and religious institutions, while also specializing in corporate office renovations and interior remodels. Government facilities, healthcare buildings, and

K-12 and higher education institutions have benefited from Gilmore's expertise. Additionally, the company has left a significant mark on mixed-use and retail developments, enhancing residential and commercial spaces with modern and efficient tenant improvements.

Beyond traditional commercial projects, Gilmore has also driven community-focused initiatives, including the FreshLo Hub, a transformative mixed-use development that integrates affordable housing, retail spaces, and cultural amenities to support local businesses and promote food accessibility. This project reflects Gilmore's commitment to fostering economic growth and serving its community.

Another key initiative is the redevelopment of Welton Street Cafe, a beloved establishment in Denver's historic Five Points district. Understanding the cultural significance of the cafe, Gilmore has played a vital role in ensuring its transition to a new space while maintaining its legacy as a community gathering spot. By supporting projects that uplift local businesses and strengthen neighborhood identity, Gilmore continues to shape spaces that serve both economic and social needs.

Despite growing its work capacity and capabilities, Gilmore never lost sight of its core mission: To create a company that uplifts emerging minority-owned businesses and provides opportunities for underrepresented groups. Today, that mission remains embedded in every aspect of Gilmore's operations, driving its commitment to excellence, innovation, and community impact.

Diversity as a Competitive Edge

Gilmore sets itself apart by building a workforce that reflects the communities it serves. More than half of its employees come from diverse backgrounds, demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusion. Additionally, women hold one-third of the company's leadership positions, breaking barriers in an industry that has historically lacked female representation.



Special Olympics plane pull 2024.
Image: Gilmore Construction

Trade partners are also a key priority, as the company actively collaborates with minority-owned, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses to create equitable economic opportunities. Chief Administrative Officer Tanieka Griffin underscores this commitment stating, "Our strength is in our people. We don't just talk about diversity—we build it into everything we do. From our hiring practices to the projects we take on, we are intentional about ensuring that communities of color have access to economic opportunities within construction."

Gilmore's ability to integrate DEI into its business model has contributed to its success, winning large-scale projects while maintaining a people-first approach.

Shaping Denver's Landscape & Beyond

For Gilmore, success is measured not just by the buildings it constructs but by the lives it impacts.

The company actively partners with trade schools, mentorship programs, and nonprofit organizations to introduce young professionals—especially those from underrepresented backgrounds—to careers in construction. By collaborating with groups such as CABPES (Colorado Association of Black Professional Engineers and Scientists), Transportation & Construction Girl, and the Construction Education Foundation, they are helping shape the next generation of industry leaders.

Gilmore also prioritizes trade partner diversity, ensuring that minority-owned, women-owned, and small disadvantaged businesses have opportunities to participate in major projects. This commitment to economic inclusion strengthens communities while elevating the standards of the construction industry as a whole.

Beyond workforce development, the company supports charitable initiatives that give back such as the Special Olympics Plane Pull, the



CABPES FreshLo site visit 2024.
Image: Gilmore Construction

Denver Rescue Mission, and the Struggle of Love Foundation, reinforcing its role as a community-driven business.

Looking Ahead: The Next Chapter of Gilmore Construction

As the industry evolves, Gilmore remains committed to growth, sustainability, and community impact. The company is preparing for industry shifts, investing in the advancement of technology, smart construction processes, and workforce training to stay ahead of future demands. Jake envisions the next five to ten years as a time for legacy-building—continuing to develop Gilmore as a family business while fostering leadership from within. While the company has achieved remarkable success, there is still work to be done in breaking down barriers

for minority-owned construction businesses and advocating for greater representation in the industry.

Jake's advice to aspiring business owners in construction is simple: set clear goals, embrace continuous learning, and never be afraid to surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. He believes that mentorship and knowledge-sharing are crucial for success, and he encourages young entrepreneurs to engage with the industry, seek guidance, and remain adaptable.

Gilmore's story is one of determination, resilience, and purpose. From its humble beginnings to its status as a multi-million-dollar industry leader, the company has proven that success is not just about building structures—it's about building opportunities, uplifting communities, and paving the way for a more inclusive future.

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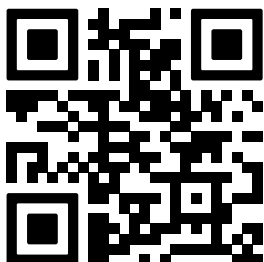
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Leading for the Long Game

A Conversation with

Simone D. Ross

*CEO & Executive Director, Colorado
Women's Chamber of Commerce*

By DR. ANGELIC COLE

Images: McBoat Photography

Cole: What would you say is the primary motivating factor behind your leadership?

Ross: My leadership is fueled by an unwavering commitment to reshape America's economic landscape into one of true inclusivity and equitable opportunity. I recognize that our current systems have historically and systematically excluded women, particularly women of color and Black communities, from full economic participation – creating barriers that continue to grow more challenging with time. This reality isn't just a social justice issue; it's an economic imperative that demands immediate and sustained action.

Cole: Who are your role models, and what life-changing lessons did you pick up from them?

Ross: My role models are my family - a powerful lineage of trailblazers who didn't just witness history but actively shaped it. My great-grandfather, George Morrison Sr., broke racial barriers in the music industry as the first Black man signed to Columbia Records. His performances for the Queen of England and his role in managing Hattie McDaniel's career weren't just professional achievements - they were revolutionary acts that challenged the status quo. As the father of jazz in Denver, he showed that artistic excellence could be a powerful tool for social change, always keeping his vision of justice, equity, and a better future for his descendants at the forefront.





Photo: McBoat Photography

My grandmother, Marjorie Morrison, was a masterful strategist who understood that economic and political power were intertwined. She worked tirelessly to create pathways for Black leadership in our community, knowing that representation wasn't just about visibility - it was about transformative change.

My grandfather, George Morrison Jr.'s, impact on education and his numerous achievements, from presidential appointments to his athletic hall of fame induction, showed me that excellence knows no boundaries. But what truly set him apart was how he balanced his professional accomplishments with his deep commitment to faith, family, and community service.

My aunt broke barriers as the first Black female officer of the U.S. Senate, earning recognition from presidents and Supreme Court justices alike. Her work in fair employment practices demonstrated how institutional change happens through persistence and courage.

Their examples taught me that true leadership isn't just about personal success - it's about creating lasting impact that extends beyond your own lifetime. The pursuit of equity isn't just my professional mission; it's my inheritance. I stand on the shoulders of giants who, from the stages of concert halls to the halls of Congress, showed me that when you fight for what's right, you pave the way for generations to come.

Cole: What inspired you to pursue a career in the nonprofit field, and how did you get started?

Ross: My path to nonprofit leadership wasn't a traditional one - it was forged through both success and adversity in the private sector. For 15 years, I thrived in healthcare administration, building systems, managing acquisitions, and driving strategy for Colorado's largest healthcare systems. It was rewarding work that allowed me to develop crucial skills in system-building and organizational growth.



Photo: McBoat Photography

However, my experience as often the only Black woman in the room revealed a darker reality of workplace culture. I experienced what I would later understand to be microaggressions, microinvalidations, and microassaults. The psychological and emotional toll of these experiences opened my eyes to a broader crisis: 60% of Black women in America share similar experiences of racial trauma in the workplace.

This realization became my catalyst for change. I founded Simone D. Ross Consulting with a clear mission: to prevent other Black women from experiencing workplace harm and abuse from racial trauma. My work focused on helping organizations systematize workforce equity - moving beyond surface-level diversity initiatives to create meaningful, sustainable change.

When the Colorado Women's Chamber of Commerce recruited me as their fractional COO, I saw an opportunity to amplify this impact. As the state's catalyst for systems change, CWCC offers a powerful platform for collaborative

transformation. My transition to nonprofit leadership wasn't about leaving the private sector behind - it was about leveraging my business expertise to drive systemic change for women in the workforce.

Today, my work isn't just about addressing workplace inequity - it's about reimagining what an inclusive economy can look like when we actively dismantle barriers and create new pathways for success.

Cole: What do you believe to be the most important piece of advice for a leader to follow?

Ross: The most profound leadership advice I share is deceptively simple yet deeply transformative: Start with your obituary. This isn't about morbidity - it's about clarity of purpose. By envisioning what you want people to say about who you were when it's all said and done, you create a powerful north star for your leadership

journey. This reflection forces you to confront the gap between who you are today and the legacy you hope to leave behind.

But this vision must be grounded in humility. True leadership isn't about individual acclaim or ego – it's about understanding that everyone and everything plays a vital role in our collective success. No matter how significant your individual achievements may be, they will never outweigh the power of our collective impact.

This dual approach – having a clear vision of your desired legacy while maintaining the humility to recognize your role as part of a greater whole – creates leaders who drive meaningful change without losing sight of their humanity. It's about being intentional with every decision, every interaction, and every initiative, knowing that each moment is a building block in the legacy you're creating.

The greatest leaders understand that their success isn't measured by personal accolades, but by how effectively they've contributed to the collective good. Our individual sum will never be more than our collective sum – and embracing this truth is what separates transformational leaders from merely successful ones.

Cole: How can you inspire others while also maintaining that you continue to be inspired by the Women's Chamber overall mission?

Ross: What keeps me inspired is the sheer force and complexity of women themselves. Every day, I witness women performing what seems like magic – juggling multiple roles, breaking barriers, and achieving the impossible, all while navigating countless obstacles. Each woman's story I encounter through the Chamber is unique, yet they all share a common thread of resilience and determination that never ceases to amaze me.

I find endless inspiration in knowing what's possible when women lead. We need women running our country, heading our industries, and crafting legislation because women bring a

transformative, catalytic style of leadership that's sorely missing in today's world. We lead with both strength and empathy, with both vision and practicality, with both courage and compassion.

The Chamber's mission isn't just about creating opportunities – it's about fundamentally reshaping power structures to ensure women occupy the highest levels of leadership across every sector. When I see women supporting other women, breaking new ground, and refusing to accept the status quo, how can I not be inspired? Every success story, every barrier broken, every ceiling shattered adds fuel to my passion for this work.

The most energizing part is that we're just scratching the surface of what's possible. The untapped potential of women in leadership is enormous, and being part of the movement to unlock that potential is what drives me every



Photo: McBoat Photography

single day. When women lead, transformative change follows – and that’s a mission worth dedicating your life to.

Cole: How do you prioritize work-life balance, and what advice do you have for junior professionals who are struggling to find balance?

Ross: I’ll be honest – I don’t seek work-life balance anymore because I’ve found that concept can create more stress than solutions. Instead, I embrace work-life integration, which allows for a more fluid and authentic approach to managing life’s various demands.

Part of this integration means bringing my children along on my professional journey when appropriate. I want them to see their mom in her fullness – not just as a parent, but as a leader and change-maker. This transparency helps them

understand why I do what I do and shows them what purposeful work looks like.

Life moves in seasons. Some weeks are 80/20 in favor of work, where I’m all in on professional commitments and need to lean heavily on my support system for family responsibilities. Other times, my children need more of me, and I have to trust my team to carry more of the professional load. Both scenarios are okay.

I’m also committed to honoring my humanity. There are times when I’m struggling emotionally or psychologically, and I believe acknowledging these moments is crucial. The key isn’t achieving perfect balance – it’s being able to honestly articulate where you are, what your priorities are in that moment, and asking for the support you need to meet your goals.

For junior professionals struggling with this, my advice is to let go of the guilt that comes with not being perfectly balanced. Instead, focus on integration. Be clear about your needs and boundaries, build strong support systems both professionally and personally, and remember that different seasons require different approaches. Success isn’t about maintaining a perfect equilibrium – it’s about creating a sustainable way to honor all parts of your life while remaining true to yourself.

Cole: As an African American leader, what do you consider to be one of the most difficult obstacles you’ve faced?

Ross: One of my most significant challenges has been managing the weight of expectations – both those I place on myself and those that come with being the first Black woman to lead the Colorado Women’s Chamber. This role carries a profound responsibility that I feel deeply in my bones.

Being ‘the first’ means more than breaking a barrier; it means shouldering the responsibility of creating lasting change. I feel an intense pressure to get everything right, to make meaningful impact for all women while advancing equity.



Photo: McBoat Photography



COLORADO WOMEN'S
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

STATE OF WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Activate Workforce
Economic Equity



Photo: McBoat Photography

Every decision, every initiative, every public appearance carries the weight of representation.

The world places countless expectations on Black women – too many to name. We're expected to be strong yet not intimidating, confident but not threatening, successful while remaining relatable, and leaders while being team players. There's an exhausting pressure to navigate these often contradictory expectations while carrying the weight of racial and gender dynamics in every space we enter. With everything happening in the world right now, I feel all of it deeply.

Sometimes these expectations can be overwhelming, but they also fuel my determination. They remind me why this work matters and why excellence isn't just an aspiration – it's a necessity. Because ultimately, this isn't just about me succeeding in my role; it's about expanding possibilities for every woman who comes after me.

Cole: What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the Chamber of Commerce today, and how do you see the Women's Chamber overcoming them?

Ross: We're navigating through a particularly challenging moment in history, where organizations dedicated to advancing equity for specific communities face unprecedented headwinds. The current federal rhetoric and agenda threatens to undermine decades of hard-fought progress, putting chambers like ours – those established to level the playing field and create economic opportunities for underrepresented groups – in a vulnerable position.

However, the real question isn't about the challenges we face, but about how Colorado's business community will respond. The business case for equity hasn't changed just because the political winds have shifted. If anything, it's

become more crucial than ever. Companies still need diverse talent, innovative perspectives, and inclusive practices to remain competitive in an increasingly diverse marketplace.

CWCC has a long-standing track record of adding tangible value and moving the needle for women's advancement in business. This isn't about politics – it's about smart business strategy. The federal agenda shouldn't, and frankly can't, deter businesses from doing what's right and what's profitable: creating equitable opportunities for all talent to thrive.

Our chamber's strength lies in our ability to demonstrate that equity isn't just a social imperative – it's a business imperative. We'll continue to show that activating and

operationalizing equity drives business success, regardless of the political climate. The path forward isn't about retreating from our mission; it's about doubling down on our commitment to creating an economically inclusive Colorado.

Cole: How clear is your vision for what the future of corporate responsibility should look like at the Women's Chamber of Commerce?

Ross: My vision for the future of corporate responsibility is rooted in a fundamental shift in business architecture. For too long, companies have operated within an industrial framework that emerged during the Industrial Revolution—one built on the values of division, competition, and exploitation. This outdated architecture simply



Photo: McBoat Photography

cannot address the complex challenges of our present, let alone our future.

What's needed is a transition to what I call Inclusive Business Architecture, which prioritizes collaboration over division, relationships over transactions, and belonging over exploitation. This isn't merely an idealistic vision—it's a practical necessity for businesses that want to thrive in the modern economy.

Corporate responsibility within this new architecture becomes more comprehensive and integrated. It requires companies to systematically evaluate their impact across five critical dimensions: individuals within the organization, environmental sustainability, organizational performance metrics, external partnerships, and contributions to the broader economy.

The Women's Chamber envisions corporate responsibility not as a separate initiative or department, but as the fundamental operating system through which all business decisions are filtered. This approach demands intentionality in every decision, intelligence in implementation, and an unwavering commitment to creating positive impact.

The most forward-thinking companies are already making this shift, recognizing that sustainable success requires abandoning exploitative models. They understand that belonging drives innovation, collaborative approaches solve complex problems more effectively, and relationship-centered business practices build resilience.

This evolution isn't just about doing good—it's about doing business better. Companies embracing this new architecture will find themselves better positioned to attract top talent, build customer loyalty, navigate regulatory landscapes, and ultimately deliver stronger, more sustainable financial performance. That's the future of corporate responsibility we're working to create.

Cole: In what direction does the Women's Chamber of Commerce see itself going?

Ross: The Women's Chamber is charting a course that reflects the evolution of what women need to succeed in today's economy. Rather than focusing solely on individual advancement, we're increasingly committed to changing the underlying systems that create barriers for women in the first place.

This systems-change approach will manifest in several key directions:

First, we're expanding our policy and advocacy platform significantly. You'll see a much stronger Chamber presence at the legislature, where we'll advocate for policies that remove structural barriers to women's economic advancement. We recognize that individual empowerment isn't enough when the rules of the game remain tilted.

Second, we'll continue equipping women with sophisticated toolkits for navigating corporate ecosystems. These environments remain complex and often challenging for women to advance within, so we're focused on providing practical, actionable strategies that work within existing structures while we simultaneously work to transform those structures.

Third, we remain committed to providing access to our high-velocity network of like-minded leaders [both women and men]. The power of connection cannot be overstated - whether for mentorship, business opportunities, or emotional support, our community continues to be one of the most valuable resources we offer.

The thread connecting these directions is our commitment to addressing both immediate needs and long-term systemic change. We're moving beyond simply helping women adapt to existing systems toward actively reshaping those systems to be more equitable, inclusive, and conducive to women's success at all levels of the economy.



Photo: McBoat Photography

Cole: Let's switch gears and end with you as a Chamber colleague by providing a positive and forward-looking statement about the Black Chamber's future for the next 40 years.

Ross: As we look to the next 40 years, I see the Chamber becoming an increasingly powerful economic catalyst, transforming Black entrepreneurship from underrepresented to indispensable in Colorado's business landscape.

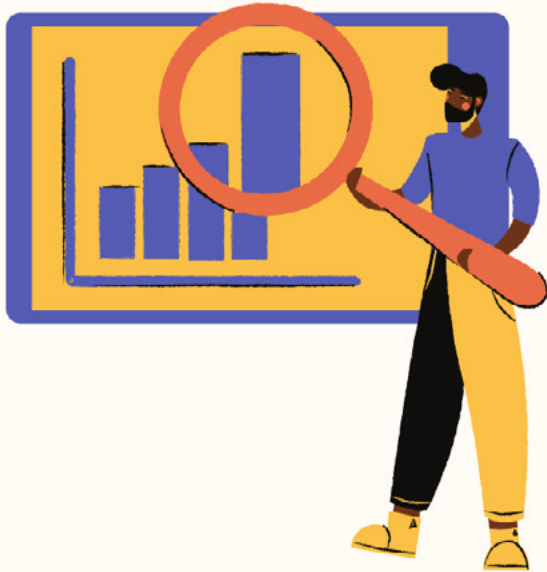
Black-owned businesses are not just important cultural touchstones – they are essential economic drivers whose success ripples throughout our communities and the broader economy. The Chamber's expanded role in cultivating, supporting, and advancing these businesses will be instrumental in creating generational wealth, vibrant communities, and innovative solutions to tomorrow's challenges.

I envision a future where the Black Chamber's influence extends far beyond traditional business support, becoming a central force in economic policy development, investment strategy, and cross-sector collaboration. Through strategic partnerships, innovative programming, and unwavering advocacy, the Chamber will help Black entrepreneurs not just participate in the economy but fundamentally reshape it.

Further Reading: Simone D. Ross expands on the urgent need for economic inclusivity and systemic change in her recent op-ed for Colorado Newsline. Read more about why DEI is critical to America's economic future here: [DEI is America's Economic Future](#)

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Life Balance Counseling and Elle Naj

By JANELLE JOHNSON, MA, LPC, NCC



Image: Life Balance Counseling, Elle Naj

Destigmatizing Seeking Support for Mental Health Concerns

Our industry is mental and behavioral health at Life Balance Counseling and Elle Naj. Life Balance Counseling is a private mental health practice founded by Janelle Johnson, a Licensed Professional Counselor in Aurora, Colorado. The clinical practice has operated since 2011 and is home to Colorado native Janelle Johnson. The mission of Life Balance Counseling is to promote the welfare of humankind in the mental health field by destigmatizing seeking support for areas of concern. Areas of concern may be mild, moderate, or severe. At Life Balance Counseling, we understand that individuals may not always recognize the signs indicating a need for mental and behavioral health support. However, some individuals know they need to schedule with a provider, but stigma is keeping them from making the first contact with a clinician. To increase the number of people receiving treatment, an effort to combat stigmas and misconceptions about the Counseling experience must be demonstrated. Normalizing seeking support for a mental or behavioral health concern is critical. People help end the stigma by sharing their mental health experiences and journeys in safe communities and education on what mental and behavioral health disorders, concerns, and illnesses are. Understanding that families have mental, emotional, behavioral, and physical health concerns that are addressed to

function optimally. It is common to have health concerns at some point in life. Insensitivities and a lack of education about mental health may aid in mental and behavioral health stigmas and misconceptions. Doing clinical work for the correct reason with the correct qualifications is essential. Promoting second opinions, updated information, research, and continuity of care is viable at Life Balance Counseling.

Goals and Quality of Life

The message behind the name Life Balance Counseling is to assist clients in balancing areas in their lives. The way humans contribute to areas in their lives is individualized. Picture a pie chart where areas of your life will be given a percentage demonstrating the priority or time spent in that area of your life exemplifying your "quality of life." Moreover, the percentage indicates how often you desire to attend a specific area in your life. Areas in life, including career, schooling, family, friends, health, spirituality, and leisure activities, are lived. Each person's pie chart looks different when considering priorities for career, schooling, family, friends, health, spirituality, and leisure activities. Please note that the sections of the pie chart are subject to change as the demands and contributions of work in each area evolve throughout your life. Updating your goals with the priorities based on your needs evolves. It is our business to encourage people to fulfill their realistic goals with the support of counseling, enriching their lives by doing more of what is working and improving and managing areas including "mental and behavioral health."

Therapeutic Alliance

A significant impact is demonstrated when clients come in ready to do their work at Life Balance Counseling by maximizing their potential through their actions. There may be a delay in mental health improvements when clients are reluctant to assess their mental health concerns and share their life experiences. Life Balance Counseling believes in building a therapeutic alliance with

our clients. Life Balance Counseling fosters a therapeutic alliance and a trusting environment by building relationships with our clients by actively listening, assessing client needs, prioritizing the order of needs, collaborating with clients, setting goals and a treatment plan, and being direct in the therapy setting. Clients exit therapy with an increased sense of self and insight, managing anxiety symptoms, moving through grief and loss, emotionally regulated, mitigating depressive symptoms, building healthy relationships, increasing tools and resources, and sustaining self-worth and value. Clients are encouraged to access resources available to nurture themselves, others, and what is dear to them.

Emotional Regulation

Guiding clients as they manage their emotions is a priority at Life Balance Counseling. Emotional regulation is a primary goal in assisting clients in finding ways to manage their emotions, decrease their stress, develop better coping skills, keep emotions in check, and feel better about their composure and disposition. The reason Life Balance Counseling feels strongly about emotional regulation includes reducing arrests. Arrests increase anxiety and depression. Since there is a disparity in people of color being arrested even when they do not commit a crime, it is imperative to be mindful of conduct and sobriety in the hopes of reducing this number and criminalization. Emotional dysregulation impacts individuals and their family unit. The term this is hard to watch goes deeper when experiencing someone emotionally dysregulated. The helplessness that ensues causes mental health challenges for all who experience the dysregulated person. Emotional dysregulation has several physical effects, such as increasing cortisol levels and putting the body in a state of fight or flight. Physical effects of emotional dysregulation can include headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension, digestive issues, changes in appetite, dizziness, and fatigue. Life Balance Counseling sees a path forward if the person struggling uses resources and gets help.

Being in Service to Others

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, Life Balance Counseling went from an in-person practice seeing clients of all ages to a telehealth private practice that sees adults and couples in counseling for mental health needs. After careful consideration in 2025, Life Balance Counseling has moved to a hybrid model, seeing clients virtually and in person. As well as moving to an individual, family, couples, adolescent, and adult counseling practice. The extension in services came after the pandemic subsided, with the desire to further fill the gap by providing services to underserved populations seeing adolescents and taking additional traditional insurance, private pay, employee assistance programs, and affordable counseling. Marginalized communities are the business of Life Balance Counseling. Life Balance Counseling is a Black Woman Owned Business. While working with the Bipoc community to increase services to marginalized communities is the business of Life Balance Counseling. Life Balance Counseling works with all cultures, ethnicities, and groups of people and does not discriminate against the race, gender, sex, age, or disability of people. All people are welcome at Life Balance Counseling.

Essential Business

Mental health counseling was noted as essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Life Balance Counseling saw its record number of clients from 2020 – 2023. Life Balance Counseling was in high demand as people dealt with various forms of loss, illness, and unforeseen



change. Additionally, the world was at the height of recognizing racism, discrimination, disparities, and oppression. Death loss increased from the pandemic, jobs ended, and relationships were severed. Some statues came down in the US, and names of cities were changed from their former racist predecessors in a movement to condemn the legacy of racism right here in my state. During this time, Life Balance Counseling commentated by providing news interviews on issues relating to mental and behavioral health for all populations, including children's needs and how parents can assist their children with mental and behavioral health, suicidal ideation, stress, performance anxiety, rights for LGBTQ+ communities, death loss, hate crimes, anxiety, trauma, and depression. Life Balance Counseling was at the heart of making a difference in mental health. Life Balance Counseling knows people must see the correct type of provider for the accurate concern, so they are evaluated accurately to increase positive treatment outcomes. Life Balance Counseling offers referrals to clients who have a need outside the scope of our practice. Life Balance Counseling is a big part of giving support and resources to people.

Business Growth

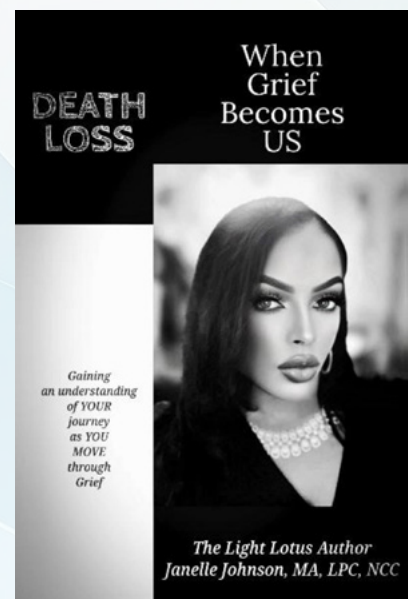
Life Balance Counseling is committed to change. The vision is to have qualified providers working for Life Balance Counseling to serve clients seeking support for mental and behavioral health needs. By 2030, Life Balance Counseling will expand into a mental/behavioral health group practice. Life Balance Counseling will supervise counseling interns overseeing their work as intern clinicians. Counselors will help clients understand the differences in types of clinicians and their roles, modalities in counseling treatment, methods of assessment in the clinic, and duration of treatment. At Life Balance Counseling, advocacy work means clients advocate for themselves when working with clinicians, practitioners, and doctors in health fields. Resources and referrals are part of navigating the system and promoting quality health care. Life Balance Counseling encourages

you to stay true to your values so you "balance your life."



Elle Naj

Elle Naj is a sister Business to Life Balance Counseling. Elle Naj promotes mindfulness practices and was founded by Janelle Johnson in 2023. The Philosophy of Elle Naj is to remember the light lotus of sounds, guides, merchandise, and books, an appropriate manifestation designed to enhance health through calming, centering, focusing, relaxing, and breathing. The business operations modus operandi is in accordance, legitimate, and fair. You can purchase Elle Naj's first book, "When Grief Becomes US: DEATH LOSS," online at major bookstores by Janelle Johnson, MA, LPC, NCC, The Light Lotus Author. Through your reading on death loss, "gaining an understanding as you move through grief; you are not alone when dealing with grief loss. There are resources."



All Images this page: Life Balance Counseling, Elle Naj

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Image: Adobe.

How Authentic Employee Reviews Boost Employer Branding

By HAMZA JONES

Employer branding refers to how a company is perceived as a workplace. It significantly affects job market dynamics and influences new recruitment. A strong employer brand helps attract skilled and driven candidates. Positively influencing employer branding is primarily dependent on employee input. Actively seeking employee input demonstrates that a company values their thoughts and concerns.

Authentic reviews benefit employers by showcasing workplace culture and development opportunities. These reviews teach Prospective workers about the company's principles and work-life balance. An atmosphere of openness and communication benefits both companies and employees. Overall, employer branding builds trust between a business and its employees.

What is Employer Branding?

A company's reputation as a place to work is known as its employer branding. It outlines how current and prospective workers view the business. For a business, having a good employer brand offers numerous significant advantages. It draws talented and driven applicants who mesh well with the group. It also helps keep current employees happy and engaged in their roles.

A strong employer brand decreases employee turnover and promotes loyalty. Online reviews and comments significantly impact public perception of a business. Good reviews attract candidates, while negative reviews can harm recruitment efforts. Engaged employees are more likely to post positive online opinions. Encouraging genuine feedback creates trust between the company and potential employees.

Companies should actively manage their online presence to maintain a strong employer brand.

Why Employee Reviews Matter for Employer Branding

Employee reviews powerfully shape how people view a company's employer brand. They provide insights into a company's workplace culture and values, reflect how leaders treat employees and encourage a positive work environment. Honest feedback from employees helps job seekers understand realistic working conditions. Reviews also influence job seekers' decisions to apply for or accept job offers.

They provide clear information on growth opportunities, workload, and team dynamics. Positive reviews attract candidates who align with the company's culture and values. Negative reviews highlight areas needing improvement and prompt necessary changes. Authentic reviews build trust between the company and both current and potential employees. Honest feedback promotes transparency and illustrates a commitment to employee satisfaction.

The Impact of Positive Employee Reviews

Positive employee reviews vastly enhance a company's reputation in the job market. Potential candidates regard these reviews as trustworthy sources of information about the workplace. They help companies build greater trust and credibility with prospective talent. A transparent work environment fosters strong employee relationships and retention.

Employees feel more valued and satisfied when their feedback is appreciated. Positive reviews encourage candid communication and contribute to an open company culture. Employees become advocates and promote the company to their professional networks. They are likelier to refer friends and peers to join the company team. Engaged employees sharing positive experiences attract skilled and culturally fit applicants. Good employee evaluations foster a community of support and promote sustained dedication.



Image: Adobe.

The Risks of Negative Reviews and How to Manage Them

Unfavorable evaluations can harm a company's reputation and significantly affect hiring decisions. To preserve confidence, resolve unfavourable evaluations transparently and solution-focused. Use negative feedback as an opportunity for improvement and growth for your company.

Respond professionally to criticism to uphold brand integrity and commit to change. Always engage reviewers respectfully and demonstrate a proactive approach to resolving their concerns. A company can turn critiques into valuable learning experiences by addressing issues head-on.

How to Encourage Authentic Employee Feedback

Encouraging feedback thoughtfully strengthens company culture and builds employee trust. Create an open, nonjudgmental environment for employees to comfortably share their opinions.

Foster a safe discussion space to remove factors that discourage honest communication.

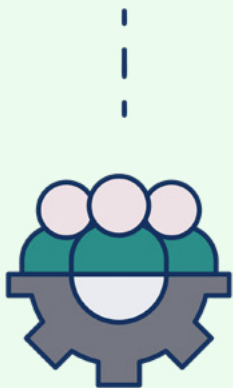
Utilize anonymous review platforms and surveys to gather frank employee feedback efficiently. Anonymous methods allow employees to express opinions without fear of negative consequences. Incentivize constructive feedback by rewarding participation without manipulating employee opinions. Offer small rewards for feedback contributions to motivate honest employee input naturally.

Communicate regularly with employees about the importance of feedback and express appreciation openly. Share how collective feedback shapes company improvements and sincerely value employee contributions. Use feedback results to make visible changes that benefit the work environment.

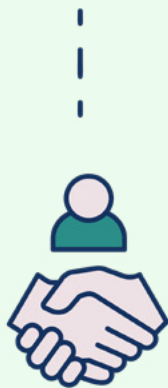
Case Studies of Companies with Strong Employer Branding Through Reviews

Google has enhanced its brand using employee feedback on workplace culture and environment.

BRANDING



RETENTION



RECRUITMENT



ATTRACTION



Image: Adobe.

Employees highlight flexible work policies, strong leadership, and team collaboration initiatives. Google reviews emphasize development opportunities and an innovation culture, consistently attracting top talent.

Salesforce has used reviews to showcase its commitment to diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Employees appreciate Salesforce's supportive environment and fair treatment, promoting a positive company perception. Consistent positive feedback on work-life balance contributes to intense employee satisfaction within Salesforce.

Adobe engaged employees by valuing authentic feedback and adapting policies to meet employee preferences. Reviews reflect Adobe's investment in employee growth and welfare, attracting talent aligned with its values. Positive discussions about creative freedom and tools empower Adobe's brand as an innovative workplace leader.

HubSpot leveraged employee reviews to highlight transparency and open communication across all levels. Feedback encouraged improvement in training programs, enhancing employee skills and productivity. HubSpot's strong brand distills from shared values of authenticity and adaptability

emphasized in employee reviews. Zoom cultivated strong employer branding by addressing feedback and creating a supportive work atmosphere. Employees praised Zoom for its proactive handling of concerns and transparent management practices. Reviews strengthened Zoom's reputation for valuing employee voices and ensuring a positive work culture.

These companies used employee reviews to build employer branding, enhancing trust and reputation. Authentic feedback transformed workplace dynamics, fostering improvements and creating efficient work environments worldwide.

Conclusion

Employee reviews are crucial in effectively building a company's employer branding. They offer insights into the work environment from an insider perspective. Positive reviews attract talent that is aligned with the company's culture and core values. Companies should prioritize authentic feedback to enhance their reputation in the job market. Authentic feedback naturally fosters trust and transparency between the company and its employees.



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July 2025		
International Day of Cooperatives	Tuesday, June 17	Friday, June 20
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National Black Business Month	Tuesday, July 15	Friday, July 18
September 2025		
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Eighth Page (business card) - Vertical	2.000 w x 3.500 h	2.250 w x 3.750 h
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