

To Fight Bias, Consider Highlighting Your Race or Gender

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A friend (let's call her Rosa) recently spent several weeks cold-e-mailing business school alumni who had built successful ventures. Rosa is a woman of color and an aspiring entrepreneur, and she planned to apply to business school herself. She hoped to build her network or at least get some useful advice. But she faced a dilemma: In her messages, should she highlight that she's a woman and a member of a racial minority group in entrepreneurship—or let her identity fade into the background?

We were also curious. After all, Rosa's identity might help her stand out in a positive way, or it could trigger a prejudiced response. So we decided to do some research. We surveyed 200 people who identified as women or members of racial or ethnic minority groups to ask what they would do in Rosa's shoes. Only 35 percent told us they would highlight their identity in requests for career support. Rosa herself, who ultimately decided not to mention her identity, articulated a concern that many of our respondents shared: "I'm worried I'll come off as needy or seeking attention or like I'm playing this 'race' or 'female' card if I mention my identity explicitly."

These fears are reasonable. Several [decades of experiments](#) have shown that [women](#) and [members of racial minority groups](#) whose name signals their identity typically receive fewer responses than white men to otherwise [identical e-mails](#) or [job applications](#). Just signing an e-mail as "Amanda Cabot," "Alma Hernandez" or "Deshawn Washington" leads people to assume that they know your race, ethnicity or gender. If the signature alone makes someone less likely to respond to a message, it's sensible to worry that drawing *extra* attention to your marginalized identity can only make things worse.

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