

INCLUDES

# Liz Castells-Heard



## Has Been Saying It ALL ALONG. Are You Listening Yet?

How Liz Castells-Heard and INFUSION by Castells energize brands through transculturation to reach diverse consumers — and yes, that means everyone.

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March 11, 2018

**Liz Castells-Heard** has spent more than four decades in advertising proving a point that too many brands still resist: Culture is not a segment, it's the market. She's worked for the likes of McDonald's, Oldemark and Grounding Day, the CEO and chief strategy officer of B&W by Liz Castells. She's also been preaching the same thing for years, and people are finally coming around to listening to it.

Who she listened? The brand's core clients—McDonald's, Toyota, and Spectrum—are brands known for staying ahead of multicultural growth, along with P&G, Unilever, and many others.

"Liz Castells-Heard says that about 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies still treat cultural marketing as a checkbox, an add-on, or initiative rather than infrastructure, or core strategy."

There's a lesson in that gap. When nearly half of America is multicultural, they need to be part of the conversation. Liz Castells-Heard and Grounding Day, the CEO and chief strategy officer of B&W by Liz Castells, she's also been preaching the same thing for years, and people are finally coming around to listening to it.

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### THE MAKING OF A MULTICULTURAL LITTEK

Castells-Heard is often called bold, smart and a bit of a rebel. Her conviction was forged early—she was born in Cuba, a seven-month preemie with her brain and mouth on overdrive. She grew up in a family of immigrants, and she was raised in a household where her understanding of identity, a truth only sharpened by a life lived globally.

"Culture is DNA," she says. "It codes who we are and how we move."

Moving from Puerto Rico to Pittsburgh, she was bullied but won people over. In Connecticut, she burnt her hair for women's rights. She was a tennis, volleyball, and vocal kid, or so she puts it. "I doubt anything." Those qualities became her edge as a future CEO.

She started in investment banking in Geneva. At Stanford Business School, a leadership marketing class she took "for fun" changed her life. She fell in love with decoding the human "why" behind the numbers—and proved instantly. "My classmates may be bilingual or even bicultural, but I'm not," Castells-Heard says. "I'm generally from what I do. I got to build brands, drive growth, and really understand the business."

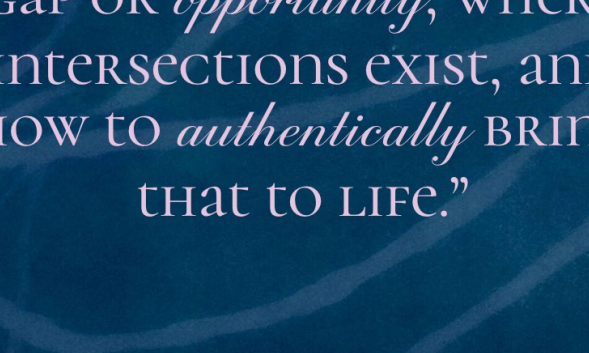
Her advertising career began on Madison Avenue at a time when women and people of color were hardly visible. A few female MBAs were guinea pigs of sorts in management track roles. She was told she was "too aggressive" for a woman. Too educated for a Latina, too pretty to engage. Too much," Castells-Heard just learned in more.

She cut tension with jokes about the testosterone in the room, using the gaps know that she meant business—refusing to be intimidated without warning. She got big agency and client experience and worked her way up. Later, Castells-Heard earned partnerships but chose not to litigate, and she eventually moved to her own business. It was. One firm collapsed after she left.

"I never said that 'no' just means 'no,'" she says. "Impossible is a condition of the mind."

She is a champion of education, the advancement of, and appropriate portrayal of women and multicultural communities in media. Today, success also means something more personal: the number of people she's trained and mentored who are now running the show and making a difference. Her advice to those she mentors mirrors her own experience.

"You can take something terrible and turn it into something magical," Castells-Heard says. "How you handle difficult situations is what defines you, not the situation."



## "Effectiveness lies in strategically knowing how and when culture matters, where there's a gap or opportunity, where intersections exist, and how to authentically bring that to life."



### A MUCH-NEEDED INFUSION

The modest defines Castells-Heard's leadership: candid, collaborative, grounded in grit, constant, constant learning, and a no-BS ethos. She says, "Analytics is our feedback. Strategy is our experience and creativity our soul. But heart is the compass."

Founded in 1988, the agency is a tight, nimble, client-centric shop, one that embraced its roots in brand long before it was fashionable to stay ahead, sharper and adaptable. The bar is high. People must be flexible, multifunctional, curious, and accountable. If they want a truly checked and a no-to-five, this is not the place—and she helps them feel that way.

Despite her volume and velocity, her leadership is rooted in generosity, listening, empathy and loyalty. She never asks anyone to do what she won't do herself, still works 50-hour weeks, celebrates her team's wins loudly—and still considers former employees part of the family.

A pivotal chapter in the agency's evolution came when she partnered with Leticia Juarez. When Castells-Heard's kinetic force and vision pushes brands to think differently, Juarez's calm steady compass, approachable style, and strategic delivery precise collaboration as the clients' voice of reason. "Our clients know where it's going," she says. "That creates trust and magic."

There's a seamless flow in cultural marketing, conducting INFUSION as a strategic growth partner—not a tactical vendor. They sit up close, embedding cultural fluency into business decisions and frameworks. "Our job is to power our clients' growth in collaboration by sharing innovation and insight," Castells-Heard says. "Clients face pressure, shifting goals and chaos. We help them turn roadblocks into rocks—creating clarity and uncovering opportunity. They're only when we know, the more we can impact."

Their consistent results speak loudly. With McDonald's, their Hispanic marketing by development phase playbook, border guidelines, and segmentation work became corporate policy. For The Warner Cable, their acquisition and cultural media marketing models, and "It's My Show" program ignited Hispanic businesses and shows.

For Nestlé Pure Life, their Hispanic-only led launch drove outsized growth. Not only were the strategy and campaign later adopted by the general market, but it also delivered Nestlé's "only" profit sales growth in the 2008 recession, an outcome still remarkable by any metric.

Castells-Heard rocks the team she's built early and often. It's here that you understand the push and pull of her tenacity and heart. "It may be the energy and the vision," she says, "but it's my team's amazing talent and work that makes it possible."



### TRANSCULTURATION: ARE YOU LISTENING YET?

Over twenty years ago, Castells-Heard coined the term "transculturation" to describe a way of working many markets have yet to embrace. As an MBA who came up in a world where nearly every business model, she wanted something more rigorous.

Transculturation, she explains, is "embedding cultural fluency across the organization—from metrics, using, operations, operations, customer service, and then the five Ps of marketing, of which advertising is just one." It requires "the 3 C's": cultural intelligence, customer intimacy and cultivated lived experience.

It starts from the premise that all consumers are not alike and that effective marketing must operate on three levels at once: universal desires that everyone shares, transcultural desires that involve across multiple groups, and unique efforts that honor specific cultural codes.

She explains why culture matters. For most multicultural consumers who are bicultural or monobicultural, culture is central to identity and daily life, shaping attitudes, beliefs, trust, responses, choices, and media habits. Culture is their lived operating system. Unlike white Americans who identify more by age, life stage, profession, income, or affluence.

She helps clients develop curricula. It's about showing the family with about 10-15% is the collective mindset and decision-making process. They only want our influencers' shows more they play and teach areas, knowing the whole family participates from the start.

INFUSION never clients embed that nuance across messaging, operations, and training so teams can flex tone and speak authentically. Hispanic prefer slower, more relational interactions, and Black Americans seek clarity, respect and solutions that work for them. When teams feel real, are connected, to the community, and "get" them, they can deeper trust, loyalty and even gain. When they don't feel valued, they move as faster—having heightened sensitivity shaped by past exclusion and bias.

Transculturation can be compared to tailoring marketing differently across generations—it's disciplined audience intelligence. Research shows two-thirds of clients' growth in collaboration by sharing innovation and insight. That acquisition must be learned, cultural, generational, even regional—marketing with the communities, not at them.

In her mind, the 87 percent feel-when statistic is the wake-up call. "It's marketing 101," she says, "almost everywhere." "Know your audience. All of them."

"In this era, I call 'Culturalomics,'" cultural fluency reduces risk and fuels growth," she says. "The question is whether brands are structurally prepared for the diverse America that already exists."

Castells-Heard shares this advice freely because it's just the surface. If your organization is still focused on casting or translation, you're missing the point. That's the Castells-Heard's point.

That's why she's doesn't stop. That's why she doesn't stop. She leaves the work—and too many people still get it wrong.

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### Two SCORPIOS, Forty YEARS

Liz Castells-Heard has just as much to be proud of in her personal life as her profession. She and her husband have been married over forty years, a statistic that naturally inspires changes to ask for relationship advice. "Everyone says we should have a blog," she jokes.

That formula is something of a paradox. "You have to be different enough to keep it interesting, but your basic core values have to be the same," Castells-Heard says. "It's not about getting to the end of the road, it's about enjoying the journey and what makes you laugh."

Both are Scorpios but cross opposites within that distinction. He's the calm, cool one who, she adds, looks like an aging rockstar. She's the business marketer—loud, kinetic, and, as she puts it, the kind of person who "throws something and it bounces."

Castells-Heard also emphasizes to keep it interesting. She reads and lives life as an adventure. That's why they do from burping jumping, snacks, duck ranches and hugs jumps to making everyday moments count and love. They're not even together. Two Scorpios. Shepherds and a rescue chihuahua who thinks he is one.

The most important part? They don't try to sand each other down. "People get annoyed at things about their partner and kids. We can change that over time." Uh-uh," she says. "You either love the person as they are, or you don't."

She applies the same principle to clients. If you don't like "loud" and "forward," she says, then "there are plenty of other fish in the sea."

### Who Should Be Seeking an INFUSION?

The answer: most of the Fortune 500 who don't have cultural fluency. The organizations that get the most from INFUSION tend to share a mindset. They treat agencies as partners, sharing data, inviting them upstream, and willing to lead and learn.

They also put multicultural consumers at the center of their margins, it markets like LA, where Hispanics are the majority and Asians economically dominant, ignoring that reality is growing revenue. Yost and McDonald's understood that customer base and supported it accordingly.

"Clients are most open to trying new things when they're under financial strain," Castells-Heard says. "That's when you get to do our best work." Today, the stakes are higher than ever. Budgets are tighter. Performance and efficiency matter. All at stake stakes. That's a gamble. Consumers are overbooked yet feel unmet. In this environment, Castells-Heard sees immense opportunity for the right kind of client.

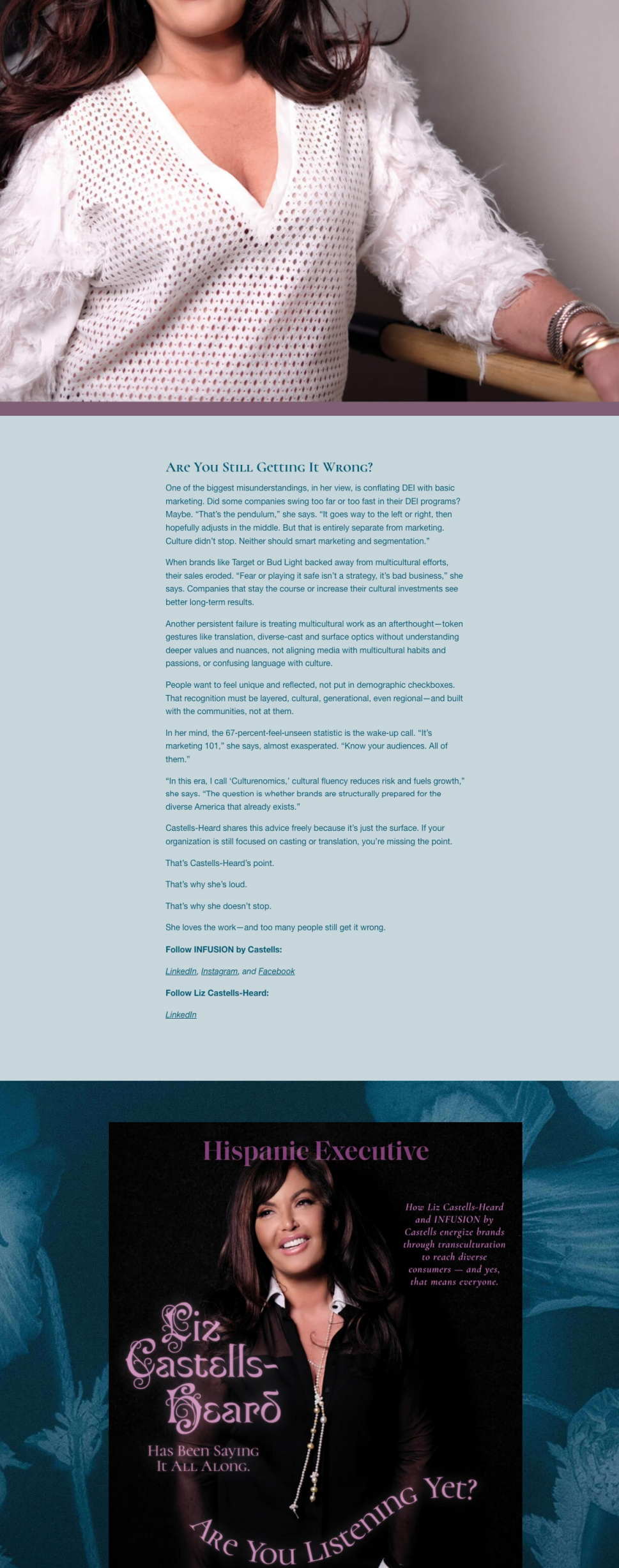
Who should call INFUSION? They don't try to sand each other down. "People get annoyed at things about their partner and kids. We can change that over time." Uh-uh," she says. "You either love the person as they are, or you don't."

"You can't be effective today without cultural fluency," she says. "That's just reality."

General agencies bring scale. Cultural agencies like INFUSION fit the gap—bringing the depth of knowledge, experience, fluency, nuance, and context needed.



## "Analytics is our lifeblood. Strategy is our superpower and creativity our soul. But heart is the compass."



### ARE YOU STILL GETTING IT WRONG?

One of the biggest misunderstandings, in her view, is conflating DEI with basic marketing. But some companies hang on for too long to their DEI programs. "That's the problem," she says. "It goes away to the left or right, then nobody adjusts in the middle. But that's entirely separate from marketing. Culture doesn't stop. Neither should smart marketing and segmentation."

When brands like Target or Bud Light backed away from multicultural efforts, their sales ended. "Even if playing a safe bet's a strategy, it's bad business," she says. Companies that stay the course or increase their cultural investments see better long-term results.

Another persistent failure is treating multicultural work as an afterthought—taken problems like translation, diverse cast and on surface optics without understanding people values and nuances, not always needs with multicultural habits and passions, or confusing language with culture.

People want to feel unique and reflected, not put in demographic checkboxes. That acquisition must be learned, cultural, generational, even regional—marketing with the communities, not at them.

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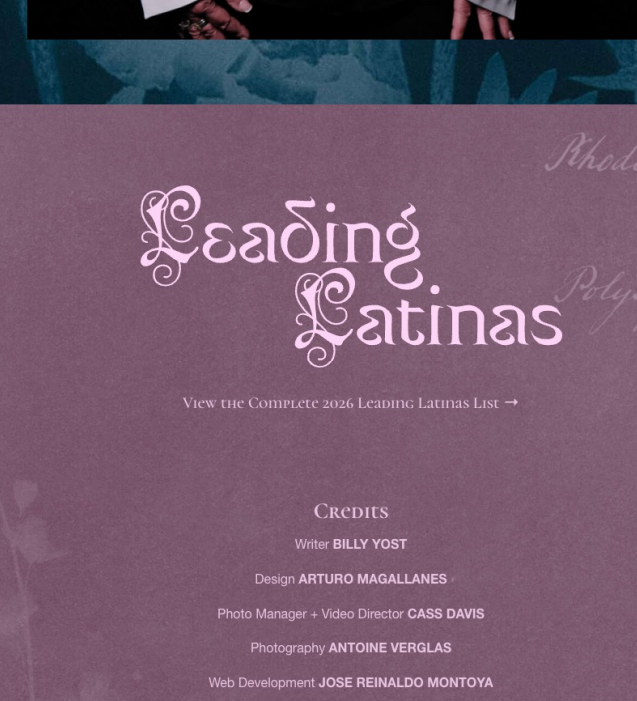
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