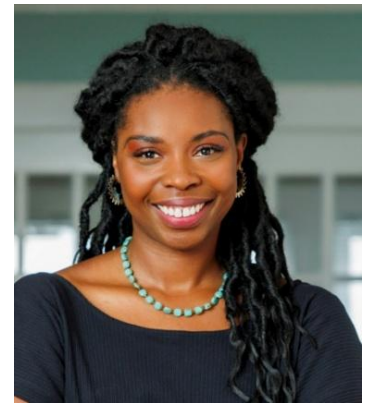


“Breaking Bread” and “Circling Back” When Researching Difficult-to-Reach Communities

By Kai K. Fuentes, Founder and President, Ebony Marketing Systems, Inc.

To build trust in difficult-to-reach communities, you need to think beyond the trust piece. You need to think about it as building relationships. At Ebony Marketing Systems, this relationship building begins even before recruiting with a step we call “breaking bread.” Let me show what breaking bread looks like.

In 2025, we did a study with the [Colorado Health Access Survey](#), where we ultimately conducted in-depth interviews with community stakeholders. But we didn’t rush into the interviews. We said, “we’re going to break bread first.” Our moderator scheduled a couple of



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Zoom calls with each stakeholder. Conversations, not interviews. Not a quick recruitment verification checklist of questions. These conversations are breaking bread — which by the way is the actual term baked into the plan.

Including the breaking-bread Zooms, this recruiting process took about four to five weeks. Yep, just the recruiting process. I know folks are going to fall over when they read that. But in-culture research with difficult-to-reach communities requires this layered building of relationships. The result? A higher completion rate with deeper findings.

After the interviews, we also closed the study in a different manner. To continue the metaphor of sharing a meal, first we broke bread with the pre-recruiting conversations then we had the actual meal or interviews. Then after the study we came back to share the findings with the interviewees. It reminds me of a beautiful word in Spanish, *sobremesa*, the relaxed conversations that happen around the table after a meal. That word doesn’t have a direct translation in English, but we all know that experience of lingering with people that we have built a relationship with.

Once again, we scheduled Zoom calls to share the findings. But it can also be done in person if you’re close-by. Or even a respectfully worded email. That circling back is one critical piece that a lot of folks forget. If you’re interviewing, surveying, studying a particular population, come back and tell them the findings. Too often, people just snatch up research and run leaving behind a mistrust of research and researchers.

By sharing the findings, you are cultivating participation for future projects. You are cultivating a relationship with critical community gatekeepers. You are cultivating the basis for deeper findings. Yes, it takes time. But no relationship is not a sprint. Trust is not a sprint. You need a journey mindset in which you are walking alongside the community, building relationships.
