

NABPAC *Leaders Speak* Series

Black History Month

NABPAC is committed to building understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion amongst our stakeholders. Today, we launch *Leaders Speak*, a series of interviews with members of our NABPAC community. Our goal is to share the career stories of the diverse members of NABPAC, highlighting their career journey, contributions, and powerful perspectives that help shape our organization. We hope you enjoy getting to know these leaders throughout the year.

Interview #1: John Mason



Title: Director, Federal Government Affairs at Altria

What led you to a career in the PAC profession and your current role?

Opportunity. I started in an admin role with Altria, one year out of college. My next role was to manage charitable support for the DC area. Then I went on to serve as an office manager. Then I went on to being an assistant PAC manager, then PAC manager. Throughout, I saw an opportunity to learn and engage with our employee base. My college education didn't prepare me specifically for my role today, but it put me in a position to be flexible in this space. I took advantage of NABPAC resources – conferences, strategy sessions, topics covered in luncheons, and engaging with similar organizations. I also had great leaders who educated me as well.

In my role today, I wear a few different hats: managing the PAC, managing the charitable support portfolio for the DC area, and I'm a federally registered lobbyist. I get the opportunity to manage many of the diversity stakeholder groups that we get to work with. Today, I'm Director of Federal Government Affairs with an opportunity to continue to build.

Why is PAC engagement so important?

The PAC is the voice of the Altria employees. As a people person, I connected to that closely. I bonded to the idea of informing our employees about what the PAC does, about the legislative and regulatory issues. And it is a way to communicate and get feedback. I view our PAC as a two-way street. Employees are investing in an idea around supporting our business and it's my responsibility to continue to have the trust of our employees – I take that very seriously – and to make sure I'm communicating efficiently and that we're making strategic decisions that consider where the resources are going.

You would like to see greater diversity in the PAC profession. What would you say to those who are considering the profession? What skills are needed to succeed?

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One, there's a lot of opportunity. Do not be discouraged that you don't know a lot. I'm an example of someone who started as an admin and worked his way up to PAC Director. Two, a lot of the skills you have in any job relate to having a job in the political action committee space. Whether it's marketing, human resources, sales – all of these are skills that we implement in the PAC arena. Three, I want people to know there's a lot of diversity that exists in this space. We have strong voice and we're building on that through the NABPAC DEI task force. We know there's work to do, but as part of the journey – no matter your background – we must come into a challenging environment and make it better for someone else. I'm reminded of the story of an African American leader I know who was the only person of color in an organization. He wanted to make a difference in diversity and landed on the idea to reach back to other African Americans to help bring them along. If we can bring one person with us and educate them on the environment, then that one person can do the same. We can build diversity step by step, brick by brick. I think it's my responsibility to mentor and educate and to pull others along.

You co-lead NABPAC's first DEI task force. Why is DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) so important to NABPAC's success?

DEI is important because our environment is continuing to change. For NABPAC to be successful, we need to have these DEI principles connected to our success. It's not only a community/cultural issue, but also a business issue. Our population is changing. To be successful, we'll have to embrace DEI as an essential element of the PAC community. Employees are becoming more diverse. Congress is becoming more diverse. We have to create the mechanisms to support that or we won't be here in the future. This is an existential opportunity for NABPAC to be involved in this space.

As a black professional, I feel that my voice is finally being heard. It's so important for us to continue to share and embrace diverse perspectives and for us to grow as a diverse community. I've walked into rooms where I am the only black person. That can be intimidating. But as we embrace DEI, we'll understand that others also felt intimidated because they were Hispanic, a woman, or in some cases the only white male in the room. We have a shared understanding of this uncomfortable feeling, and when we create diverse stakeholders, we can be more comfortable sharing our cultural or community or business perspectives.

Our country has recognized Black History Month (BHM) for many years. What is the relevance of BHM to you in 2021?

Black History Month is a time to celebrate the achievements and the journey we've been through. African Americans – and Black people in general – can never forget their history because it's embedded into the culture we have today. Part of this month is to acknowledge that journey but to recognize how much more we have yet to do as well. In elementary school, we had one black teacher who led our black history month activities. So many people from the community came because there was a thirst for knowledge on the black experience, culture, and history, and people wanted to be educated on how they could help and support. I think about how the community embraced it, learned from it, and how it helped the experiences they were able to share with their inner circle communities. Those learnings continued to enhance diversity and enhance our communities.

What else would you like to share with readers?

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I'm proud of NABPAC and our Leadership. I'm proud that we believe that this journey is necessary for the success of our business. We have far to go on this journey. As a board member and executive committee member, I'm excited for us to be on this journey. I'm awaiting the challenges that will present themselves, but I plan on meeting them, with you all, head on by addressing the elephant in the room, being inclusive of all perspectives. I want everyone to continue to learn because that's the way we change our environment, and to continue to support NABPAC. We, together, are the people who are going to make a difference.

Black History Month Article

February is Black History Month – also called African American History Month – a time dedicated to recognizing the contributions and achievements of African Americans. Negro History Week, the precursor to Black History Month, was created in 1926 by Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. The second week of February was chosen because it coincided with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Over the years, celebration of the month spread and in 1976, President Gerald Ford recognized Black History Month, urging Americans to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every endeavor throughout our history.”

Click [Black History - HISTORY](#) to learn more about Black History Month