

Executive Summary

Introduction

This executive summary presents the findings and recommendations from a semester-long public relations research project conducted for Canandaigua National Bank & Trust (CNB). The central focus of the project was to explore the financial, educational, and systemic challenges that prevent Black families from achieving first-time homeownership. Through a combination of scholarly research, interviews, media content analysis, and survey data, this report identifies key barriers and opportunities that CNB can address through strategic programming. The research supports CNB's broader goal of promoting economic inclusion and positions the bank as a leader in addressing long-standing disparities in mortgage access and financial literacy.

Purpose and Background

The goal was to investigate the financial, educational, and systemic barriers that Black families face when seeking first-time homeownership and to offer strategic recommendations to help CNB develop a responsive and inclusive program. The research responds to CNB's expressed need to understand these barriers and build equitable mortgage products and outreach strategies that foster trust and access in historically underserved communities.

The guiding research question was:

“How is financial literacy represented in narratives about Black homeownership, and how do systemic barriers impact first-time buyers?”

Research methods included a literature review, in-depth interviews, content analysis of media narratives, and a community-based survey with a sample size of 52 respondents. The following sections summarize the findings of each research component and conclude with practical recommendations for CNB.

Literature Review Summary

Academic research reveals a consistent pattern of institutional discrimination in mortgage lending practices. Justin P. Steil et al. (2017) showed that Black applicants are disproportionately denied loans even when meeting financial qualifications. Brian J. McCabe (2018) found that Black families highly value homeownership but face limited access to credit, lower intergenerational wealth, and skepticism toward financial institutions. These studies support the need for race-conscious lending strategies that include financial education, flexible underwriting, and outreach efforts. CNB should recognize these structural barriers and proactively tailor lending solutions to address them.

In-Depth Interview Summary

An interview with Brent Bridgman, a Universal Banker at CNB, provided firsthand insight into persistent disparities in mortgage approvals. He emphasized that while legal frameworks exist to prevent discrimination, biases can still surface in day-to-day banking practices. Bridgman noted

that trust-building with the Black community must begin with transparency, education, and structured programming. He also highlighted the role of community banks like CNB in taking responsibility for equitable lending through internal audits and employee accountability.

Content Analysis Summary

The content analysis reviewed media sources including PBS, CBS News, Instagram (blackmillionaires_), and the ACLU. Traditional media highlighted redlining's legacy in shaping current wealth gaps and housing inequities. Social media narratives emphasized digital redlining and modern algorithmic exclusion from housing ads. These platforms increasingly call out the lasting effects of historical injustice, reinforcing the public demand for institutional reform. For CNB, this analysis underscores the need to use inclusive communication strategies and digital marketing that avoids algorithmic bias.

Survey Findings Summary

A 12-question survey was distributed to a sample of 52 residents in the Farmington, Canandaigua, and Rochester areas. The margin of error is $\pm 12.63\%$ at a 95% confidence level. The key findings include:

- **Trust Gaps:** 48% of respondents reported only “some” trust in banks; 29% indicated “very little” trust.
- **Financial Literacy:** A majority of participants described themselves as only “somewhat knowledgeable” about the mortgage process.
- **Perceived Barriers:** Lack of credit history, low credit scores, high down payments, and bias from lenders were among the top-cited obstacles.
- **Interest in Education:** 77% said they would participate in free financial literacy courses if offered by banks.
- **Program Support:** 75% said they would be more likely to apply for a mortgage if a bank offered programs specifically designed for first-time buyers from diverse backgrounds.

The survey reveals an urgent need for trust-building, education, and culturally responsive programs that address real and perceived discrimination for Black families.

Recommendations to CNB

Based on our findings across all research methods, we recommend CNB take the following steps:

1. **Launch Financial Education Programs**

Offer free, accessible courses on budgeting, credit management, and the homebuying process. Host sessions both online and in-person, with targeted outreach to Black and Latino communities.

2. Developing Culturally Responsive Mortgage Products

Introduce mortgage options that consider alternative credit assessments (e.g., rent or utility payment histories) and offer down payment assistance or flexible approval criteria.

3. Partner with Community Organizations

Collaborate with trusted nonprofits and housing advocacy groups to co-host workshops and promote CNB's offerings within historically underserved neighborhoods.

4. Increase Transparency and Accountability

Track mortgage approval rates by race/ethnicity and publish this data to demonstrate CNB's commitment to equitable lending. Establish internal oversight to monitor for potential bias.

5. Leverage Digital Platforms Responsibly

Review digital ad algorithms to avoid replicating redlining in online campaigns. Use social media to share financial education resources and stories of successful minority homeowners.

Conclusion

This research affirms that Black first-time homebuyers face both longstanding and emerging challenges in securing mortgages. There is also a strong interest in banking with institutions that demonstrate inclusion, equity, and transparency. CNB is well-positioned to take the lead in addressing these gaps through strategic programming and community outreach. With sustained commitment, CNB can increase its impact in the Rochester area and successfully expand into new markets like Syracuse by aligning its services with the needs of diverse communities.