

## Introduction

Advertising has an important role to play in the portrayal of disabled people in the media. By including disabilities in its creative output, advertising will help society gradually come to recognise that disability is not limited to just a few people in an insubstantial minority but that it is a normal and substantial part of the society in which we live.

Although disabled people account for around 15% of the population of an average Western European country, advertising's frequent emphasis on superficial bodily perfection has led to the exclusion of people with disabilities from advertising images. Moreover, the non-disabled audience's fears of becoming disabled and of viewing images of disability mean businesses have sometimes been hesitant to use people with disabilities as models.

Most advertisers, however, at some point produce ads that mirror their target audiences. And no matter what your target group is, there will, of course, be people with disabilities within it. Because there is a high proportion of people in society who have a disability, there is clearly an opportunity for advertisers to create a richer depiction of any target audience by including people with disabilities in their campaign some of the time.

By harnessing positive images of disability the advertisers convey their brand messages powerfully, and at the same time people with disabilities are featured as included equals rather than excluded victims. Advertising can help the general public be more comfortable with people with disabilities by itself being comfortable with the issue and the language of disability.

And it goes without saying that if the business community were better educated about the size and potential of the market, then advertising programs with the disabled consumer in mind would be created more often. And this would benefit everyone, the advertisers, the agencies, the charities, and most particularly the people with disabilities themselves.

## How can advertising help?

If we are going to include more people with disabilities in our advertising, firstly we need to understand how it can help. What kind of difference can it make in helping to 'mainstream' disability?

Clearly advertising cannot resolve all the issues faced by the disabled community, but if it does its part, there are some issues that advertising can affect over time - some barriers that advertising can help overcome. They are:

### 1 Raising Visibility (Normalising/Mainstreaming)

At the most basic level, people with disabilities suffer from a lack of presence in the media. The fact that they are not a regular feature of mainstream media in the way the non-disabled are, strengthens the negative perception that people with disabilities are somehow not part of 'normal' life.

It is a well known fact that advertising has contributed to raising the visibility of members of ethnic minorities. We hope that advertising can play a similar role in raising the visibility of people with disabilities, by including a wider range of disabilities in its creative output.

Including more people with disabilities in advertising would help build a greater subconscious sense of just how normal it is to see people with disabilities living their lives with the rest of us.

### 2 Acclimatisation

Advertising can help begin to overcome the common feeling of isolation that disabled people have by showing examples of interaction between people with disabilities and the non-disabled. This could act as a form of informal education helping the non-disabled realise they can chat, argue or joke with people with disabilities just as they would with anyone else.

### 3 Challenging expectations of low capability

Advertising depicting people with disabilities in responsible jobs or in senior positions or contributing to the camaraderie of a work place, for example, will help to re-frame people's assumptions and expectations. So would advertising that depicts or focuses on the capabilities and talents of people with disabilities, or shows disabled people having qualities which we all admire to create an emotional connection.

## Guidelines

If we are consciously seeking to include more people with disabilities in our advertising, there are some guidelines to help the process:

- learn about disability issues from people with disabilities
- research what's gone before and encourage better practice (one of the best examples of good practice can be found at [www.imagesofdisability.gov.uk](http://www.imagesofdisability.gov.uk))
- look for originality. Creating rules based on what's gone before will only impede the originality of the future
- in the spirit of mutual benefit, advertisers shouldn't include the image of a person with a disability in an ad if it undermines the original objective of the advertising. This would be completely counter-productive. It would only hinder the progress of integration
- build a sense that it is normal to see disabled people living their lives with the rest of us
- acclimatise non-disabled people to disability and encourage greater consideration
- challenge expectations of low capability
- broaden understanding of disability
- accelerate acceptance about what disabled people can do
- disabled and non-disabled people are similar and have shared values

There are two main types of portrayal: **'incidental inclusion'** and **'integral inclusion'**.

Incidental inclusion occurs when the disabled characters in a commercial are peripheral to the main story, included as extras or without any good reason. Integral inclusion occurs when the disabled characters are either central to the advertising concept or have a meaningful role to play in the story. If you are thinking about including people with disabilities in an advertisement, here are some ground rules to consider:

- think twice before using disabled people as extras
- insensitive or ill thought through casting can be seen as tokenistic
- don't show disabled people in isolation
- don't default to stereotypes (e.g. featuring a wheelchair user or a blind person)
- inclusion can be achieved at any stage of development, from script stage to casting
- disabled people are in relationships, have families and jobs, are consumers
- think about wardrobe and props

## Improving the image of the disabled in the media

Based on research, here are some examples about how people with disabilities might best be portrayed:

### Comedy & Humour

- should not be avoided and can be effective in making people explore their own prejudices
- mimicry or imitation can cause offence
- avoid humour where the focus is about disability - however, a joke by a disabled person can give the viewer permission to laugh. There is plenty of scope to challenge widely held assumptions about disability through humour and irony
- consider the relevance of the joke; beware of the fine line between 'laughing with' and 'laughing at'.
- think about the target audience

### Everyday situations

- normal, everyday situations, including more people with disabilities, rather than situations especially associated with disability, should be shown more often. From the point of view of encouraging integration and diversity there is considerable merit in showing people with disabilities interacting with non-disabled people in a non-disabled-specific context.
  - **'support roles'** offer a huge opportunity to feature people with disabilities in better roles. A person with a disability should not automatically be ruled out of a role where they are featured as a second or passing character. This would be better than just an 'extra' role and offers the opportunity to feature a person with a disability in a situation or role that has nothing to do with disability. Showing people with disabilities in support parts as competent fellow managers or work mates, for instance, will indicate real inclusion.
  - **hero imagery** should be used sparingly, if at all. Constant depictions of disabled high achievers have the capacity to further 'disable' the disabled community, although UK research shows that disabled "celebrities" are viewed the same as other "celebrities", (i.e. not like ordinary people).
  - **showing people with disabilities** being mean or unpleasant is also a challenge. It's the non-disabled who are often more sensitive about the issue than disabled people themselves.

# Guidelines: Portrayal of People with Disabilities in Advertising

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For some people, particularly in the industry, disabled people are ‘untelevisual’, a direct result of society’s obsession with physical attractiveness and the myth that anyone of value is physically perfect.

So, if you decide to create an advertisement based around people with disabilities, be prepared for scrutiny and criticism, especially the accusation of exploitation.

The reaction to advertising featuring disabled people, will vary depending on the audience:

## **Non-disabled audience reaction**

- viewers may try to look for ‘hidden’ or ‘secondary’ meaning
- messages need to be fully inclusive
- disability inclusion must be believable
- disability can be uncomfortable for some. The challenge is to reduce the sense of difference by creating emotional connections
- negative stereotyping widens the perceived distance

## **Reaction of disabled people**

- accuracy in portrayal is vital – wherever possible, cast disabled actors in a disabled role. Realism avoids the potential to offend as it will not misinform about disability
- featured artistes are seen as role models, especially for younger people, and should be disabled themselves
- lack of reality irritates and can undermine the message, especially for younger people; not every execution should feature disability
- people with disabilities want to see disabled people:
  - working and in control of their own destiny
  - as equals - avoid a ‘despite it all’ approach
- dependent or recipient relationships are considered old-fashioned