

## **Disability and the media – the role for advertising**

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Disability frightens people. Stereotype assumptions about people with disabilities are based on superstition, myths and beliefs from earlier times. They are inherent in our culture and persist partly because they are constantly reproduced through the communications media: in books, films, television, newspapers and advertising.

It is hard to understand why, in a late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century media context which has seen considerable advances made in the portrayal of different 'marginalised' groups in the media, one of the largest 'minority' groups, people with disabilities, has received so little attention.

In different countries, the disability Discriminations Acts stand as the most recent effort to 'protect' the rights of people with disabilities, mainly in the context of employment and services. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the rights of the people with disabilities related to their portrayal in the media are not included in the legislation, despite the strongly held view that how the media portray people with disabilities has a significant impact on how they are regarded in 'so-called' real life (that is, by non-disabled society).

Advertising's frequent emphasis on superficial bodily perfection has led to the exclusion of people with disabilities from the images. Moreover, the able-bodied audience's fears of becoming disabled and of viewing images of disability mean businesses have been hesitant to use people with disabilities as models.

We recognise that disability images in advertising are not perfect. There is strong focus on 2 disabilities: deafness and wheelchair use. Although the incidence of wheelchair use is actually quite low when compared to other types of disabilities, it is also understood that

advertising is a visual medium, which needs the equipment clues such as wheelchairs to denote disability as part of the diversity depicted.

The common difficulty of people with disabilities in gaining acceptance as normal human beings fostered the belief, for example, that a male seated on a wheelchair was somehow not really a man. Advertising tends to promote a specific “acceptable physical appearance”. These advertising images influence society in what is acceptable in terms of appearance and what role models it is acceptable to admire, associate with, communicate with and value.

There are at least two ways in which the advertising industry contributes to discrimination. Firstly, people with disabilities are excluded and, in some instances, deliberately ignored by mainstream advertisers and advertising agencies. Besides hiding disability from the general public, this is a clear denial of the role of people with disabilities as consumers.

Secondly, some advertisers, notably charities, present a particularly distorted view of disability and people with disabilities in order to raise money. In both cases people with disabilities are the losers.

While it is not my intention to undermine the excellent and necessary work charities do, the depiction of disability in charity advertising is a major issue for people with disabilities and their organizations. Images of the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic are still very common in charity advertising, such as this appeal by British Oscar-winning actress, Judi Dench.

Compare the very different approach to fund raising in this French example:

Despite protests from organizations of people with disabilities, many charities continue to exploit them and others focus on the 'courage and bravery' of individual 'super cripples'. Besides emphasizing the abnormality of the individuals concerned, this approach reinforces the perceived inadequacy of the rest of the disabled population. A more

recent development in charity advertising is the stress on the 'abilities' rather than the 'disabilities', of disabled individuals - normal able-bodied attributes are emphasized while disabilities are conveniently overlooked.

While this development might be seen as a step in the right direction, it can achieve relatively little in terms of empowering people with disabilities. It is a clear denial of the status of people with disabilities and disabled culture. It obscures the need for change and perpetuates the impression that people with disabilities need to be supported by charitable organizations. The focus remains squarely on people with disabilities rather than on the disabling society in which we live; the very opposite of what is needed. This shift in emphasis, therefore, conceals the fact that charities themselves are a fundamental part of the disabling process; non-disabled people do not normally depend on charity for life's necessities.

The main problem with these and other disabling images is that they have been devised and produced by able-bodied people. Until very recently, people with disabilities have had little or no say in how they were represented on television, in the press, or in advertising.

Although the criticisms made by disabled media consumers against the portrayal of disability and disability issues in the media are many and wide-ranging, they are not impossible for broadcasters to address and certainly do not seem unreasonable.

Many of the changes that viewers and listeners would like to see take place in broadcasting can be described as 'respect' issues:

- respecting the diversity of disability and portraying those varied experiences
- respecting the views of people with disabilities and consulting with them to provide more authentic and credible portraits

- respecting the abilities of people with disabilities and actively involving disabled media professionals in all aspects of programme production across all genres.

We believe that advertising has an important role to play in the portrayal of people with disabilities 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.

It is understandable that advertising alone cannot achieve this goal. However, it can help. There have been some fine examples of advertising featuring actors and models with disabilities, but it is generally accepted by advertisers and their agencies that most of the time they do not actively seek to cast people with disabilities in their campaigns. Most advertising featuring people with disabilities is either for charities, or by corporate sponsors of events for disabled people, like this example for UK mobile telecoms network, One-2-One:

Why are there not more 'commercial' ads featuring people with disabilities?

From research conducted, mainly in the UK, there is a conflict bothering many communications experts. On the one hand there is a willingness by people to want to do 'the right thing' for their fellow human beings. On the other hand there is the concern that the effectiveness of their advertising will in some way be undermined.

Sadly, the latter has tended to be the dominant decision influencer.

However, progress has been made. Recently there have been some very powerful and impactful ads featuring people with disabilities in advertising, which have resolved the difficult questions advertisers find themselves asking. This morning, we saw the Coca Cola commercial based around a football match – here is another example for Fujifilm:

### **FujiFilm commercial**

Commercials like these confront our fear of disability; the fear we have of coming into contact with it, the discomfort we feel when in its presence, but they also show disabled people in normal, everyday situations & activities.

### **Disability becomes the brand**

Another fear that communications people may harbour is that, in using disability too often, they will create an unintended advertising identification for their brand. This unintended branding equity may not only undermine the desired consumer takeout, it could blur the differences between one campaign and another. In most of Europe, companies are hesitant about including people with disabilities in their ads due to both different advertising methods and societal attitudes. However, some companies have started to learn what accurate and non-stigmatizing advertising images are capable of:

### **Die Welt commercial**

Good disability images and well produced advertisements are designed to promote brand loyalty and make a product more popular. Recent research has shown that the disabled consumer is very much more brand loyal than other consumers. Advertisers are realizing that the people with disabilities buy soap, milk, jewelery, use travel services, just like other consumers.

## **Exploitation**

### **Football Match UK DWP commercial**

The criticism of being exploitative is also directed at ads featuring people with disabilities. Most people, especially young to middle aged, are open-minded about people with disabilities being featured in any kind of advertising. Indeed, many endorse unusual and challenging depictions of people with disabilities.

But some viewers harbour deeply conservative views. They believe any person with a disability featured in an ad, which is not part of a fund-raising campaign, is exploiting that person. This is founded in the misguided belief that all people with disabilities need looking after and can't look after themselves.

Other people criticise ads for being exploitative because they feel they themselves are being exploited as a viewer. They assume you are trying to use sympathy to entice them to buy or prefer a product.

People with disabilities, on the other hand, feel that as long as the featured person has given permission to be in the ad and has been paid a fair price to do it, it is not exploitative.

### **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**

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 able-bodied

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. So in that sense, any form of increased presence in advertising is good whether it be a 'featured' part or as an extra.

## **2 Acclimatisation**

Advertising can help begin to overcome the common feeling of isolation that the disabled have by showing examples of interaction between people with disabilities and the able-bodied. This could act as a form of informal education helping the able-bodied 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 reframe people's assumptions and expectations. So would advertising that depicts or focuses on the capabilities and talents of people with disabilities. Recent experience suggests that if there is a disabled person in an important role, it is necessary to decide whether the disability is central to the idea or beside the point creatively.

Compare the anti-drink driving ad which we saw this morning (which Richard Rieser described as “virtually pornographic”) with this treatment of the same subject:

### **‘Just a normal day’ commercial**

If we are consciously seeking to include more people with disabilities in our advertising, there are some observations we can offer that might help the process.

- Learn about disability issues from people with disabilities
- research what's gone before and encourage better practice.
- 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.

### **Ways to improve the image of the disabled in the media**

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

- **'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.
- **Victim imagery** may be used, but only when appropriate. After all, the disabled are just another part of society. Nevertheless it is clear that a significant and vocal minority



of people with disabilities will challenge any depiction of people with disabilities in disempowered or 'victim' roles, so any such usage must be carefully treated and expect to arouse some criticism.

- **Hero imagery** should be used sparingly, if at all. Constant depictions of disabled high achievers have the capacity to further 'disable' the disabled community.
- **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 able-bodied people in a non-disabled-specific context.

#### **APF shoeshop commercial**

- **Avoiding the use of able-bodied people** as advocates of people with disabilities. Let people with disabilities speak for themselves, give them good lines and let them demonstrate their empowerment. We should be aware that there are millions of carers for people with disabilities who are also typically under-represented in media and try to show them as equals.
- **Humour can be very powerful** at normalising issues - it can bring us closer to characters with whom we laugh. There is plenty of scope to challenge widely held assumptions about disability through humour and irony but obviously beware of the fine line between laughing with and laughing at.
- **Showing people with disabilities** being mean or unpleasant is also a challenge. It's the able-bodied who are often more sensitive about the issue than people with disabilities themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The reality is that advertising reflects society and therefore most advertisers at some point produce ads that somehow feature 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. By using and showing disability in lots of different ways it will 'loosen up' the territory.

To conclude, I would like to point out that the business community, including the advertisers and agencies, should be better informed on disability issues. 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.

Let me leave you with an image from the BBC, which is not an advertisement at all, but used to as one of a series of programme dividers – nevertheless it conveys all the vitality and energy of life which should belong to us all – regardless of ability.

## **Hip Hop clip**

I hope this conference will be the first step in a more fruitful co-operation among all the parties concerned, the clients and their agencies, the regulators and the disability organisations. Thank you.