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The Routledge Companion to Disability and Media

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31

ADVERTISING DISABILITY AND THE DIVERSITY DIRECTIVE

Josh Loebner

Introduction

Inclusion of people with disabilities in advertising and the surrounding discussion and discourse has, until recently, predominantly been marginal and minimal at best. Media coverage and visibility of the subject, however, is now on the rise, in part due to internationally recognized brands choosing to include people with disabilities in their advertising and placing those ads during preeminent live broadcast events on a global scale,¹ including the World Cup, the Olympics, Academy Awards and Super Bowl. The *Future 100* annual trend report, published by ad agency J. Walter Thompson, noted advertising and disability as trend 39, stating, “there has been little representation of disabled people in either television or advertising. That is now changing.”²

This chapter aims to provide an engaging assessment of both empowering and stigmatizing representations of people with disabilities in advertising. It addresses a series of important questions and topics while sharing insights for academicians and advertisers centering on prior, current and future portrayal and inclusion of people with disabilities in advertising. Subjects covered include how advertising often elevates the ordinary to the extraordinary and the connection and association of disability, ableism and “inspiration porn” to the advertising industry.

Also discussed are emerging shifts in parameters of recognition of people with disabilities as a relevant and influential minority among national-level advertising professional organizations, and the buying power this minority has connected to brand loyalty and brand engagement on digital platforms. The chapter concludes with the methods and best practices advertisers, ad agencies, industry influencers and the media can utilize to bring inclusion of people with disabilities into creative conversations and campaign executions.

Before moving into discourse centered on advertising and disability to further establish context, it is important to consider what advertising is from a system and symbolic perspective. The American Marketing Association defines *advertising* from a systems and process standpoint as:

The placement of announcements and persuasive messages in time or space purchased in any of the mass media by business firms, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and individuals who seek to inform and/or persuade members of a particular target market or audience about their products, services, organizations, or ideas.³

Media historian James Carey observed that advertising is part of a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed.⁴ The transformation of the industry for greater inclusion needs to focus on both the systems and symbols within advertising.

Proliferation of smartphones, media access anytime anywhere and always connected consumers, among other trends, have expanded not only the delivery, engagement and consumption of advertising but also its definition. Once considered a monologue, or one-way communication process, advertising can now, in part, be defined much more as an evolving dialogue with consumer-generated content, viral marketing and instantaneous feedback through social media. Campaign goals move beyond product sales to include social media likes, comments, shares and other online and offline conversations that drive engagement. To remain relevant, be an ongoing part of conversations and stay top-of-mind among consumers, many advertisers not typically associated with cause marketing or corporate citizenship are adding layers to brand messaging; they go beyond product features and benefits to narratives that support broader social movements and establish affiliation with or reinterpretation of cultural norms.⁵

The Shifting Nature of Advertising, Inspiration and Identity

Rather than single out and objectify people with disability, advertisers have an opportunity to be inclusive within storylines to convey realistic portrayals. That said, the advertising industry is synonymous with inspiration and sensationalism, elevating mundane moments of people's daily lives into epic narratives. Advertisers and ad agencies weave compelling storylines into products as ubiquitous as drinking water; with some bottled water brands positioned and priced as rarified luxuries. Often a 30-second TV commercial's cinematic messaging goes beyond the focus of the product or service itself to the people featured in the ads. Cavalcades of athletes, celebrities and other spokespeople aren't just product endorsers but seen by the viewer as larger-than-life and superhuman. Whether a make-believe persona or real human, from Mr. Clean® advertising his brand of floor polish, the Brawny® Man and his paper towels, or Taylor Swift promoting Diet Coke®, the stories of people and products in advertising are intertwined as an inspiration for consumers' intent to purchase, to buy into not only the brand but also into a larger story of belief and belonging. People with disabilities fit within this belief and belonging—and in more inclusive advertising.⁶

Because advertising plays a significant role within our culture, it drives not only brand purchases and affinity, but also the construct of self as an individual and place in society.⁷ Portrayals of societal perfection, however misaligned, proliferate within the ad industry and cultivate an ableist view while significantly hindering flow of dialogue, interpretation and understanding of greater diversity and inclusion. The inclusion of disability in advertising is imperative to better educate, interpret and accept people with disabilities as a viable part of our capitalistic economy, community and culture. As an industry that exists to communicate with consumers of all backgrounds and walks of life, the advertising industry stands to benefit more than most by cultivating a highly diverse and inclusive environment that reflects the changing demographics around us.⁸

Economic Impact

For many corporate advertisers, data mitigates risks and drives marketing decisions. While quantitative and qualitative information is readily available on purchase habits of minorities and customer segments, including African Americans, Hispanics, women and millennials, little data is available on people with disability as a market segment. Without data, then, US marketing teams within corporations may consider inclusion of this group a greater risk compared to inclusion of others. Yet according to Rich Donovan, CEO of the Return on Disability Group:

Including friends and family in the people with disabilities population takes us from roughly 19 percent of the total U.S. population to more than 55 percent and as a brand you could make a decision to not look at the 19 percent of people with disabilities marketplace, but to ignore the inclusion of family and friends would be foolish. This isn't a niche—it's a blockbuster. Companies seeking new ways to create value for stakeholders have a strong interest in attracting the spending of this increasingly powerful cohort.⁹

Thus minimal visibility of people with disabilities in advertising belies the large purchasing power, brand loyalty and lifetime customer value of this market segment.

Lack of Disability Visibility in Ads and in Agencies

While the definition of advertising is evolving rapidly, the dynamic inclusion of disability and diversity representation as a whole in the ad industry has been slow to progress and can, in some ways, be tied to anachronistic perceptions that linger from more than a century ago.

The late nineteenth century saw innumerable achievements from the rise of the industrial revolution to the birth of capitalism and the beginnings of the advertising industry, but these promises of progress towards a better tomorrow actualized and further solidified the derision of minorities including people with disabilities into a figurative and literal caste system wherein identification within a marginalized group was tantamount to being an untouchable. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several major US cities enacted so-called “ugly laws” banning people deemed “diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or improper person” from public spaces.¹⁰ Surprisingly many cities not only still had these laws on the books until the mid-1970s, but also upheld them.

While these ugly laws are no longer legally binding or align in any way with modern jurisprudence, the ableist worldview that initially gave rise to civic leaders enacting them and society codifying a dominant ableist viewpoint has, with few exceptions, maintained a continuum of second-class citizenry of people with disabilities that is ingrained in our culture.

Big-budget photo and video productions are meticulously managed, down to minute details with storyboards, scripts, staff, handlers and stylists for everything from actors' hair, makeup and clothing, to food styling, animal handlers and staging the shoot location to ensure every shot is crafted, curated and perfected. For decades that perfection of every aspect of brand storytelling extended to the hegemonic selection of talent in the ads elevating disproportionately whomever the advertiser deemed appropriate to portray their brand's target audience. This meant, more often than not, actors and celebrity endorsers were white men and women and rarely included people of color, LGBTQ, people with disabilities or other minorities in lead roles within the ads.

The cultural memory of ugly laws continues to persist into the twenty-first century with the ongoing lack of inclusion of people with disabilities in the media and advertising. In 2016, advertising industry trade publication *Campaign* posited the question of inclusion with this headline “The Invisibles: Why Are Portrayals of Disability So Rare in Advertising?”¹¹ Among many other points, the author of the article states, “The key, as with other diversity issues, is seeing people as individuals and without labels.”

The Ad Council, a private, non-profit organization, inspires ongoing dialogue, engagement and action around significant public issues, creating a measurable difference in society.¹² The Ad Council's *Love Has No Labels* campaign champions greater inclusion with goals of mitigating conscious and unconscious bias and embracing diversity with the mantra to put aside labels in the name of love. The campaign, launched on Valentine's Day in 2015, incorporated a video¹³ that utilized technology to portray people behind a screen while showing their

skeletons in certain interactivity or poses wherein the audience would have a certain viewpoint about who those people were, to then reveal a diverse group, such as two young friends, one with a disability the other without, potentially different from the audience's initial perceptions based on unconscious bias.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) produces an annual analysis of the overall diversity of prime-time scripted series regulars on broadcast and cable networks, with streaming media included for the first time in the 2016–2017 report. For the seventh year in a row, GLAAD's *Where We Are on TV* report conducted a count of regular prime-time characters depicted as people with disabilities. While the 2017 American Community Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau reported 13.3 percent of US non-institutionalized citizens are living with an apparent disability, the 2018–2019 GLAAD report found that of all series regulars on prime-time broadcast programming, only 2.1 percent (18 characters) were people with disabilities.¹⁴ While minimal, this percentage and number of series regulars with disabilities more than doubled the 2015–2016 GLAAD report's result of 0.9 percent, or eight characters. Networks and producers must pay close attention to diversity when creating new series, and that includes people with disabilities. Increasing these numbers should be just as important to advertisers who are paying for airtime during those prime-time shows. Seth Adam, director of Communications at GLAAD, notes:

What's clear is that equality is now important to a company's bottom line, and it's important that's reflected in its marketing to consumers. Tracking the quantity and quality of people with disabilities in the media would be a great way to start having impactful conversations with networks, and then making that data public will help keep them accountable and move the needle.¹⁵

As recently as 2006, the New York City Commission on Human Rights found that larger ad agencies in New York City had minimal increases of hiring among minorities, particularly African Americans, which had not changed significantly since the 1960s, when the Commission held hearings on the same issue.¹⁶ The commission launched an investigation into diversity recruitment and hiring practices of 16 of the largest agencies, including Arnold, Euro RSCG, Saatchi & Saatchi, Grey Direct and Grey Interactive, Y&R, Ogilvy & Mather, Kaplan, Draft, FCB, Gotham, BBDO, DDB, Merkle & Partners and PHD.¹⁷ At the time of the commission's investigations, editorial coverage included the *Advertising Age* article, "Still So White; Still No One Really Wants to Discuss It," which shared that the wide spectrum of reasons agency executives cite for the low number of black employees in the advertising business range from nepotism, institutional racism, inertia and clients' indifference to the issue.¹⁸

More generally, challenges with diversity hiring still exist within the industry. Insights from an American Association of Advertising Agencies, or 4A's, survey conducted in June 2016 show that once hired, diversity challenges remain prevalent. When asked how the ad industry is doing when it comes to hiring diverse professionals, nearly half of respondents said the industry is terrible (20 percent) or not great (29 percent) and a quarter of respondents said it is mediocre. Approximately half of respondents said they believe agency culture is still discriminatory, but that the discrimination is not as overt as it used to be. For employees with disabilities 17 percent of those surveyed agree the industry is terrible at providing equal opportunities to people with disabilities (compared to white males), 29 percent felt it's not great and 28 percent said it's mediocre.¹⁹

In relation to these insights, Nancy Hill, former president and chief executive officer of the 4A's stated:

The ad industry must do more to hire diverse professionals who will create work that reflects our diverse consumer base; there is a very real appetite for that work. We've made some progress, but we have a lot more to do to make agencies a place where anyone can thrive, and everyone is represented.²⁰

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the 559,000 people employed in advertising, public relations and related services in 2017, almost half (49.2 percent) are women, 5.8 percent are black or African American, 7.4 percent are Asian and 8.9 percent are Hispanic.²¹ People with disability were not tracked.

An Industry Moving from Discrimination Towards Diversity and Inclusion

Strides are being made among advertisers, ad agencies, professional organizations, consulting firms and advocates to individually and collectively move the industry towards greater inclusion. Gina Grillo, president and CEO of the Advertising Club of New York explained in an *Advertising Age* article:

In advertising, building a staff with varied perspectives and knowledge about cultural nuances is crucial. Without it, there's no way to communicate authentically in an ever more globalized business environment or in an America that grows more diverse by the day.²²

Professional workshops, panel discussions, seminars, career fairs, internships, employee training, think tanks and consultation initiatives among educators, industry organizations, advertisers, HR staff, ad agency creative teams and others are building a foundation for progress. One of the leaders within this group who is spurring change and spearheading dialogue is Tari Hartman Squire, founder of EIN SOF Communications, a full-service marketing firm specializing in disability-inclusive diversity and public policy. Squire and the EIN SOF Communications team consult and partner with major advertisers, including AT&T, Bank of America, HP, Macy's, Mattel, Microsoft, Starbucks, Toys "R" Us, Walgreens, Mondelez and advertising agencies and professional organizations, including Droga5, BBDO, the American Association of Advertising Agencies and the Association of National Advertisers among others.²³ Squire explained in 2015 that "media has the power to shatter stereotypes or reinforce images, and I wanted to work directly with the media to create more realistic images."²⁴

Championing inclusion of people with disabilities in the media since the late 1970s, Squire won the Visionary Award for 25 years of collaborative leadership as founding executive director of Media Access and for launching the Screen Actors Guild performers with disabilities committee. Squire's advocacy initiatives expanded in 2015, when EIN SOF Communications in partnership with the Loreen Arbus Foundation committed to launch Lights! Camera! Access! 2.0 (LCA2.0) to address underrepresentation of people with disabilities in media through events that bring together advertising, media and entertainment professionals to provide mentoring opportunities for high school and college students with disabilities.²⁵ In 2017 LCA2.0 events were held in major markets across the country including New York and Los Angeles and at the highest levels of government, including an event in Washington, DC facilitated by the White House. While these events foundationally create guidance and insights for youth, these gatherings of seasoned media executives, academicians and consultants further foster bonds, add networking opportunities and build camaraderie and recognition among the professionals that attend.

Among advertising and marketing professional organizations, the US Association of National Advertisers (ANA) took the lead in recognizing inclusion of people with disabilities. In 2014, the

ANA introduced the Multicultural Excellence Award in the People with Disabilities category, the first award of its kind in the industry, honoring outstanding work in the disability sector. Breakout sessions and a presentation on the main stage centering on advertisers and disability added value for the conference attendees not only to participate in recognition and awards but also to educate and empower advertisers as advocates. Janine Martella, former director of committees and conferences for the ANA, said, “The ads show that these people are part of family and friends of all abilities and within a larger multicultural community.”²⁶ The 2016 Multicultural Excellence Award recipients recognizing people with disabilities included the following brands, campaigns and agencies:

- Duracell (Berkshire Hathaway) “Stay Connected,” Anomaly;²⁷
- Walt Disney World “Unforgettable Happens Here—The Mansfield Family,” Disney’s Yellow Shoes (in-house); and²⁸
- Autism Speaks “The World of Autism,” BBDO New York.²⁹

These winners recognize that best practices on portrayals and inclusion of people with disability isn’t as simple as hiring actors with disabilities. Two advertising campaigns from Australia show, for better and worse, the opportunities and pitfalls of diversity and disability inclusion.

What was touted as one of the of the most diversity-friendly commercials to date, to promote enjoying lamb on Australia Day, was in fact one of the worst examples of progressive inclusion in media. With so much diversity, how could this commercial, the ad agency creative team and ultimately the client miss the mark so completely when it comes to inclusion best practices? Simply put, people were props.

The campaign with the hashtag #unitedwelamb was to show how lamb could bring everyone together on Australia Day. The client, Meat and Livestock Australia, shared “What’s the best thing about diversity? Everything! So let’s all unite with the meat that doesn’t discriminate, lamb.”³⁰ While the supposedly light-hearted commercial brought together dozens of Australians with varied physical looks and abilities and from diverse races, religions and cultures, the execution came across as stereotypical and hackneyed.

In some ways we can applaud the fact that more advertising is inclusive of people with disabilities. But this newfound visibility without informed and educated planning and portrayals could potentially be more damaging than no inclusion at all. By continuing and even adding to misconceptions and misrepresentation, or simply not telling as rich a story, ads can create more barriers.

Some brands are making a difference, though. Australian retailer Target took a more grounded approach with a commitment to diversity, inclusion and representation of people with disabilities in advertising. Robyn Lambird, a 19-year-old, who has cerebral palsy and is an advocate for people living with disability, is featured in Target Australia’s activewear catalogue. At the time of the campaign, she was believed to be among the first adults with a visible disability to star in an advertising campaign for a major Australian retailer.³¹

Commercials and Controversy: Inspiration Porn

At the intersection of disability narratives, inspiration and advertising, there is a crossroads where differing interpretations arise centering on topics of realistic portrayals and inspiration porn. The late writer and disability advocate Stella Young put inspiration porn on the international stage through her 2014 TED talk, saying that everyday activities and daily lives by people with disabilities should not be aggrandized or glorified and that doing such could be considered inspiration porn.³² From an ableism perspective, inspiration porn is the interpretation that when a person who is able-bodied interacts with a person with a disability whether directly or via engagement

through media, the person who is able-bodied feels better about themselves, has a higher perceived self-worth and considers the individual with a disability pitiful and less than themselves. When a person who is able-bodied uses phrases such as “you are so inspiring” directed towards individuals with disabilities, the usage of the word *inspiration* is often empty, without any attributed action to do something based on the inspiration other than the able-bodied individual gaining perceived empowerment. In an Australian Broadcasting Corporation blog article Young observed,

But using these images as feel-good tools, as “inspiration,” is based on an assumption that the people in them have terrible lives, and that it takes some extra kind of pluck or courage to live them. For many of us, that is just not true.³³

Supercrrips, Paralympics and the Super Bowl

At one end of the spectrum of the portrayal of people with disabilities in the media is that of the “supercrip,” a person with disabilities who “overcomes” some obstacle to become what could be perceived as superhuman.³⁴ More often than not, when people with disabilities are included in commercials centered around sporting events, the person with disabilities in the advertising is an elite athlete, one of only a few to achieve certain sporting goals, typically unattainable by the majority of both able and disabled people; therein presenting an unachievable narrative that inhibits true-to-life narratives and interactions.

On the grand stage of the Super Bowl, every aspect of advertising is heightened, from the multimillion-dollar production budgets to the cost of the airtime, to the TV commercial storylines and the people in the ads, including those with disabilities. One disability-inclusive commercial during the 2015 Super Bowl XLIX was the Toyota Camry ad featuring double-leg-below-the-knee amputee Amy Purdy accomplishing a number of athletic achievements.³⁵

Does this Toyota ad cast a positive or negative light on physical disability?

Some could argue that the ad is a continuation of media’s portrayal of people with disabilities within the supercrip stereotype, which may be emotionally engaging to non-disabled audiences but also glorify an unattainable reality for many of those with the same or similar disabilities.

What if the Paralympics competitions expanded into awarding medals for each country’s best inclusion of people with disabilities in advertising? Britain would be leagues ahead of the United States and here’s why. Nike’s *Unlimited Will*³⁶ featuring Kyle Maynard, the first quadruple amputee to climb Mount Kilimanjaro without prosthetics, was one of the most remembered commercials, but there were some challenges with the creative execution. The spot opens with Maynard climbing a snowy mountain peak as the voice-over says, “Here is a man, working hard, pushing his limits.” He then asks Maynard if he has “got this,” with the mountaineer replying in the affirmative, then the voice-over is taken aback when the camera pans out to reveal that Maynard is making the climb without arms and legs. The voice-over says, “You don’t have legs either!” and Maynard replies “Oh really? I must have left them at home.”

Seeing Kyle climb is inspirational, but is it the right kind of inspiration or the best inclusion? What if Kyle was another minority; a woman, person of color or an individual in the LGBTQ community and the voice-over, instead of saying “you don’t have arms” said, in a shocked tone, “you’re black and you’re on a mountain?” This portrayal, to an extent, presents an oversimplified and one-dimensional representation of a person with a disability, or any other minority. This also presents the person with a disability as a supercrip, a format that does not easily resonate beyond the ad execution into the real world. Inclusion also does not work to its fullest when only the minority, in this case, a person with a disability, is the primary focus.

This is where British candy brand Maltesers® truly won the day, by being inclusive, in everyday situations in a campaign that brought humor and unprecedented international press coverage

to the rarely discussed topic of advertising and disability. The campaign featured three different commercials:

- *New Boyfriend*—When a romantic moment is interrupted by a spasm, our heroine takes it in her stride ... Maltesers believes that life is better when we don't take things too seriously.³⁷
- *Dance Floor*—When wedding celebrations end in disaster, at least one guest manages to look on the light side ... Maltesers believes that life is better when we don't take things too seriously.³⁸
- *Theo's Dog*—Theo's dog is in the doghouse ... at least until tomorrow! Maltesers believes that life is better when we don't take things too seriously.³⁹

Adweek's Tim Nudd, commented,

The spots are very well done, and manage the difficult trick of helping to normalize disability, through funny and relatable anecdotes, without taking away from the very real challenges that disabled people face. That light-hearted approach should help viewers think about disability in a more open way.⁴⁰

Cat Collins, strategy partner at AMV BBDO noted,

Rather than creating distance by putting disabled people on a pedestal, we believed we could achieve more by showing disabled people simply as ... people. For Maltesers, that meant seeking out the hilarious stories from their lives that they look on the light side of, just as the characters in the rest of our campaign do. It meant using a powerful weapon to break down discomfort, division and prejudice—a good laugh.⁴¹

Realistic Portrayals and Inclusion Becoming the Norm in Advertising

“Nothing About Us Without Us” is a rally cry championed by people with disabilities, which references the fact that any interpretation, inclusion, historical documentation or other narrative of people with disabilities should, as a central tenet, welcome and include people with disabilities in the formation of that messaging. The slogan's power derives from its location of the source of many types of disability oppression and its simultaneous opposition to such oppression in the context of control and voice.⁴² For advertising to truly shift towards realistic portrayals and greater inclusion of people with disabilities, it is integral for people with disabilities to be a part of every phase of creative and campaign development.

Apple recognizes the positive power of technology tied to accessibility and continues to advance momentum not only within their devices and operating systems featuring advanced functionality for people with disabilities, but also in conveying that message to a broader audience. To help introduce new accessibility features incorporated on all Apple devices in 2016, the company collaborated on a commercial⁴³ that didn't just include people with disabilities, but embodied the “Nothing About Us Without Us” mantra by utilizing the post-production and editing talents of Sady Paulson, a Final Cut Pro expert, who by the way, is non-verbal with cerebral palsy. At the end of the commercial it is revealed that Paulson was the editor of the ad, and therein brought to the forefront consideration of shifting perceptions of people with disabilities.

Mondelez International, maker of Honey Maid graham crackers, has added layers into their brand messaging that go beyond consumer packaged goods' features and benefits to show how the brand fits into inclusive families. The advertiser partnered with ad agency Droga5 to develop

the “This Is Wholesome” campaign, which, over the course of the commercials, featured a mixed-race family, same-sex family and, in July 2015, introduced a spot with a disabled aunt and her niece making a snack. With no spotlight or significant focus on the person with disability, the narrative quietly conveys the normalcy of the reality of a family made up of people of differing abilities.

Gary Osifchin, portfolio lead for biscuits at Mondelēz International, said that:

The “This Is Wholesome” campaign [was] launched in March 2014 and has been committed to featuring a cross-section of the American family. From a same-sex couple and single dad, to a mixed-race military family, a blended and an immigrant family, the sweet moments between a disabled aunt and her niece are just another example of Honey Maid’s commitment to feature real American families and the wholesome connections they share.⁴⁴

Stephanie Woodward, the woman who portrayed the aunt is a disability rights lawyer and activist who is currently director of advocacy at the Center for Disability Rights, signed on for the project, Honey Maid says, “because she—and many in the disabled community—want real disabled people featured on TV and in the media, not actors playing disabled people.”⁴⁵

The Honey Maid commercial⁴⁶ was innovative not only in the narrative and overall message, but also in the use of assistive technologies. It was one of the first TV spots to include audio description on the 15-second TV version, which describes what’s happening on-screen for blind and low-vision audiences, along with standard closed captioning.

Honey Maid’s campaign continued to include diversity and people with disability with the commercial *Husband*⁴⁷ about a veteran returning home. Creative Director Devon Hong explained, “What was important to us was that there was a change in the family, where a situation needed to be accepted. It was a natural fit to go down the road of looking for an injured veteran.”⁴⁸

Watershed Moment with Consumer-Generated Media

Advertising not only reflects, but shapes cultural norms, and it has been argued that mass media and advertising are drivers of cultural hegemony.⁴⁹ For many decades those top-down messages were highly curated and crafted from the advertisers and ad agencies, but social media is allowing everyone to participate in larger ways to continue creating and extending brand messaging through consumer-generated content. Douglas Atkin, partner and chief strategy officer at advertising agency Merkle + Partners, explained:

The consumer is looking to brands to give a sense of fulfillment that society and religions used to offer. They want brands to take stands on things. Brands have values. Brands have points of view. Brands have personalities. Brands are whole societies in which they participate. If you don’t have those things, then you’re likely to fail, or at least not to be as profitable as you could be.⁵⁰

In the summer of 2014 an online movement rapidly swept across the world with such force that presidents and prime ministers, sports stars, Hollywood celebrities, journalists and millions of others took part in a simple, yet compelling, process of pouring ice water on themselves. This was the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge that according to the ALS Association “became the largest global social media phenomenon to date.”⁵¹ Participation involved pouring ice water on oneself, filming it within 24 hours of receiving an invitation or donating USD 100 toward ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) research. While the ice bucket challenge was not initially developed by the

ALS Association's marketing team, as the campaign took hold and more people focused their donations towards the ALS Association, the organization guided efforts to continue momentum.⁵²

The challenge went beyond a viral video shared online to more than 17 million people uploading their videos to Facebook, which were watched by 440 million people and shared a total of 10 billion times. These challenges translated into international media coverage and USD 115 million donated in an eight-week period in 2014.⁵³ It is now an annual event to raise awareness and funds to find treatments and a cure for ALS. Barbara J. Newhouse, president and CEO of the ALS Association said,

Words cannot express how incredibly grateful we are to the tens of thousands of people who have donated to support the fight against ALS. The money and the awareness generated through this effort are truly game-changers in the fight against this disease.⁵⁴

So successful was the campaign that the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge won two gold Lions in Cannes' Branded Content and Entertainment category in 2015 and the coveted Grand Prix for Good, one of the highest honors within the global advertising industry.⁵⁵

With so many dollars donated, exposure garnered and awareness gained, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge appeared to be the perfect example of what to emulate. While marketers and advertisers concede that there is no magic formula for creating a viral social media sensation like this, many have tried to replicate similar interactive challenges with the goal of generating worldwide attention and action. So far, none have been as successful, including efforts of the ALS Association themselves.

Some in the disability community have also criticized the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, believing that it oversimplified the disease, treatment and donations. Melissa Lovitz, a writer with a pain syndrome, said in reference to a similar social media challenge using ice water and trying to connect it to complex regional pain syndrome that, "I don't need anyone to experience my pain to empathize with me."⁵⁶ Also, the many more millions of dollars and attention gained for the ALS Association through the Ice Bucket Challenge means millions of dollars less and lower visibility for other deserving non-profits. Defined as fundraising cannibalism,⁵⁷ people are limited in how much they are willing to donate, and if someone donates money to the ALS Association, he or she will likely donate less to other charities. Among other criticisms, the challenge encouraged participants to use large amounts of water during a major drought across much of the United States. While the Ice Bucket Challenge did raise millions of dollars, it also raised questions about hashtag activism⁵⁸ and increased *slacktivism*, a portmanteau of the words *slack* and *activism*. *Daily Telegraph* journalist Willard Foxton described the challenge as "a middle-class wet T-shirt contest for armchair clicktivists."⁵⁹ A simple click of the "like" button on social media and sharing the action with online friends and followers presents an immediate gratification towards perceived accomplishment and philanthropic engagement. Ultimately, though, similarly themed online challenges may be a detriment to more educated, ongoing care and commitment to a cause.

Social Media's Rising Chorus of Disabled Voices

Recognizing the significant impact of social media on propelling awareness and action for major efforts such as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, there have been increasing examples of people with disabilities sharing their stories and connections to brands, advertisers and media in general, including film series and podcasts. Manicured communication from advertisers, however well crafted, now has a sounding board online and in social media wherein brand activations and social activists collide and come together, to share in conversations about advertising, media and the advancements of people with disabilities and challenges still to overcome.

Examples of the people and groups that combine to create just a small part of a much larger chorus of voices surrounding media, advertising and disability show a variety of approaches. *Rooted In Rights* is an advocacy group based in Washington State that produces videos and social media campaigns exclusively on disability rights issues.⁶⁰ The *Accessible Stall* podcast series, produced and hosted by Kyle Khachadurian and Emily Ladau, is described by the hosts as two people trying to untangle the giant web of disability.⁶¹ Film director, activist and speaker Dominick Evans hosts #FilmDis, a weekly discussion held on Twitter that explores film, television and other aspects of media through a disability perspective.⁶² The blog *Advertising & Disability*, founded by Josh Loebner, looks at, with a critical lens, current portrayals and inclusion of people with disabilities in advertising.⁶³ Lawrence Carter-Long, director of communications for the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund can be found on all manner of social media and traditional media enthusiastically and emphatically advocating towards greater media inclusion for people with disabilities. His #SayTheWord campaign brought light to the fact that the word disabled is still misunderstood, and often maligned.

Embracing Disability Inclusion in Online Experiences

Today, advertising goes well beyond TV commercials and print ads into the digital world of immersive online experiences, in-app advertising, campaign landing pages, pre-roll videos, digital display ads and so many other interactive engagements where best practices for disability inclusion needs to be considered. A study by IBM Research in 2013 showed 95 percent of the pages of 1,000 popular websites had known accessibility problems for people with disabilities.⁶⁴ Todd Bankofier, CEO of accessibility software company AudioEye, contends,

Even the most well meaning brand leaders and site designers have too narrow a view of what constitutes disability ... It's not just people who are blind, deaf, or use wheelchairs: people with autism, PTSD, visual impairment, epilepsy, dyslexia or colorblindness all have different needs for digital access.⁶⁵

There are dozens upon dozens of accessibility consultants building and rebuilding online platforms to meet accessibility guidelines, and while it's good that these consultants are optimizing websites to be more inclusive through universal design to meet web-content accessibility guidelines, it's challenging that we need to have consultants in the first place and that more advertising agencies and interactive firms aren't training their teams to build with universal design in mind from the ground up on web development.

SapientNitro's Associate Creative Director, Philip Golub noted,

Your clients have more users with disabilities than you probably realize, and those disabled users have great purchasing power. Accessibility does not limit innovativeness or interactivity, but not planning for Accessibility can have a very limiting effect on profitability. With proper planning and a little forethought, your projects, your clients, and their users can all reap the benefits of Accessibility.⁶⁶

Conclusion

While only a handful of ads inclusive of people with disabilities are discussed in this chapter, numerous other print ads and TV commercials exist and can be found through general online searches and dedicated databases. In many ways, people with disabilities are gaining visibility

within advertising, but there is still a large need for advocacy, education and guidance. Academicians, advertisers, organizations both within the ad industry and the disability community, journalists and individuals' collective voices on social media can all play a part.

Many in the disability community want to be seen within, and representing the disability minority group, owning unashamedly every aspect of who they are—"Nothing About Us Without Us." Ad campaigns should welcome and incorporate these differences rather than try and fit the disabled minority into the standards of society's ableist hegemony.

When people with disabilities are included in advertising there is a creative pendulum where, at one extreme, portrayals convey pity, support ableist discrimination and show that people with disabilities are less than considerations of normalcy. At the other extreme, people with disabilities are portrayed as superhuman, disingenuous or misguided inspiration that individuals with disabilities may not desire. At the center of the creative pendulum of disability, advertisers have an opportunity to be inclusive within storylines that convey realistic portrayals, expand meaning and engender persuasion in a powerful and positive way.

At the college and university level, where students are gaining foundational knowledge and academicians are guiding future professionals, diversity and inclusion needs to be incorporated into courses within advertising and communications programs.

Greater inclusion of people with disabilities in ad agencies and among advertisers starts with better-targeted recruiting efforts for people with disabilities. In creative and administrative staff positions people with disabilities will not only be able to be internal champions for greater inclusion, but also to add their voices to best practices in portrayals of people with disabilities in the advertising.

Advertisers and agencies pay close attention to brand sentiment and conversations within social media channels. Now, more than ever, people with disabilities have significant opportunities to utilize social media and online platforms to rally, engage and activate decision makers at agencies and among brands and foster conversations about advertising and disability.

Creative directors, copywriters, producers and other industry decision makers need to be advocates for hiring agency staff and working with actors with disabilities to portray people with disabilities, but their inclusion and portrayals in advertising shouldn't be about typecasting or tied to using them as props. Yes there are potential risks and pitfalls to including people with disabilities, but the same is true with diversity and inclusion of any minority, and on the other end of the spectrum there are major rewards and benefits. For creative directors and directors of marketing there is an opportunity to be creative, but also to be informed and to take an approach to inclusion that isn't just for one ad or to meet a diversity quota, but as part of a long-term campaign plan, where the creative planning process is proactive in reaching out to people and organizations in the disability community to ensure messaging is on target.

For those making decisions that tie back to bottom-line profitability, recognizing that the inclusion of people with disabilities in market research will not only elucidate how the largest minority group in American relates to a brand, but also how a brand can better relate to them. This requires being open and understanding that people with disabilities are part of the customer mix—buying products, using services, being brand loyal and impacting the bottom line for the better.

The advertising industry has made significant strides in championing and hiring people of color, LGBTQ and women minorities. Now is the time for advertising agency leadership to recognize the value people with disabilities bring to campaign development, creative narratives and customer conversions.

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