

Being Blind Was Never Going to Keep Josh Loebner From a Career in Advertising

Josh Loebner has spent more than two decades in advertising and marketing as an account strategist. But he wishes he could've gotten started sooner.

Born without sight in one eye and legally blind in the other, Loebner didn't even know the industry was an option for him until completing an undergraduate degree in forestry that he struggled to use. It took a strategist at the agency then known as Wunderman Cato Johnson to do a SWOT analysis and ask if he'd ever considered advertising. He hadn't, so he returned to the University of Tennessee to try it out.

"I love to have conversations, and I love to be creative," he said. "I couldn't see myself doing anything else."

After graduation, he arrived in New York and "just did a lot of door-knocking" until landing at Young & Rubicam in 1999. Along the way, he has held jobs at several agencies, including Edelman. Now, he is back in Tennessee leading strategy at Designsensory, a Knoxville-based ad agency where he is currently working with the government to create Covid-19 resources for the more than 1 million disabled residents in the state.

The question you're probably wondering: In a field where image is everything, how does a blind person fit in?

"The industry is all about celebrating differentiation," Loebner noted. "And people with disabilities have to be able

to maneuver and adapt in ways that are unique to them. And so I literally see the world with a different perspective every day.”

Loebner has been an educator almost as long as he’s been in advertising, mentoring young people with disabilities to ensure they know their career options. His advocacy has been recognized by the American Advertising Federation, which awarded him a silver medal for serving on its Mosaic Council, a premier think tank for diversity, equity and inclusion in the industry.

Loebner is also a 2020 National Federation of the Blind scholarship recipient, which he received based on his doctoral focus of disability and inclusion within the advertising industry.

“Advertising is powerful,” he said at Adweek’s recent Disability Inclusion Summit. “It shapes our reality well beyond the features and benefits of a product or a service, but really about our society and how people with disabilities should be a part of it. Not only who’s on screen, but those people in the agency.”

Big Mistake

“I didn’t get [career] guidance when I was in college,” Loebner recalled, “and I made the wrong decision that led to years of not being in an industry that I love.”

Lesson Learned

“Everybody talks about authenticity within the creative framing of a finished ad or campaign, but that human authenticity needs to be shared with colleagues, to identify as part of that community of people with disabilities so that their peers can connect with them,” he said.

How He Got the Gig

“My wife [who’s an art director] and I were looking to move to a different agency together, and so we created this plan that showed our strengths together as a professional team,” Loebner said.

Pro Tip

“To any person with a disability: Pursue a career in the creative arts. Just go for it,” he advised. “Don’t let your disability get in the way of who you are. Your ideas can define who you are as a person and how you can connect with the industry.”

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