

Covid-19 Advertising Has Had a Glaring Lack of Disability Inclusion



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Before Covid-19, disability in advertising was on a positive upward trend, with creative recognition at Cannes and brands formalizing inclusive efforts for the 2020 summer Paralympics Games.

But over the past several weeks, the exponential upward trajectory of Covid-19 cases, state lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, industry furloughs and layoffs have seemed to create a downward spiral in momentum for disability in advertising, and it couldn't come at a worse time.

Most, if not all, of the precautionary measures we are taking—from simple handwashing to sheltering in place and social distancing to facemasks—help prevent the spread of the virus to populations that may be more susceptible to contracting it. This group includes millions of people with disabilities, yet among the PSAs and brand messages of hope,

disability is somehow not part of creative considerations.

Advertisers such as Campbell's Soup have captured society's collective moment in what many see as heartfelt commercials celebrating everyone together staying apart. But these attempts at unity are framed from an ableist viewpoint, vacantly inconsiderate of audiences with disabilities. We are comfortable documenting the wine toasts in Zoom meetings and social sing-alongs among the 80% of the population the virus is least likely to impact and at the same time are oblivious to the erasure of disability and those in the 20% that are most susceptible.

This acknowledgment of a lack of disability visibility in advertising's current state isn't a nudge to suggest the industry do better someday down the road in a new normal. It's a plea for immediate action. Alarming, when news headlines suggested hospitals may not be able to handle the surge of patients, the disability community had to fight for their voices to be heard in literal life and death scenarios, where based on medical guidelines, some may have been passed over for treatment. Many are feeling like society, including brands, have disregarded them as second-class citizens in this crisis.

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As we plan advertising's roadmap forward, where will disability fit in? We are all isolating, but that does not mean we need to forgo inclusion in recognizing the value and voice disability brings to brands and society.

Here are six tips for implementing immediate disability inclusion in advertising:

Include user-generated content from brand ambassadors with disabilities

People with disabilities are sheltering, working and parenting

from home just like everyone else. If you're capturing content by reaching out to brand ambassadors, consider connecting with someone in the disability community.

Consider disabled influencers and actors

There are amazing disabled influencers and talent available to work with. Blind influencer Molly Burke and Paralympian Amy Purdy are just two examples among thousands of talented disabled influencers, actors and athletes ready to add their voice to your brand message.

Use appropriate disability stock photography

If you don't have the budget for influencers or the time to research brand ambassadors, consider using stock photography featuring authentic disability representations from Getty's Disability Collection.

Ensure your digital ecosystem is accessible

During these challenging times more than ever, people are embracing social media and getting information online. Digital accessibility needs to extend beyond your brand's website to social media and email to ensure that people with disabilities can connect with your brand and important information where and when you need.

Be informative to everyone

Brands that are essential businesses and organizations need to be informative to all audiences, including those with disabilities. If there is a press conference, video or other messaging platforms, be sure to incorporate alternate forms of messaging. Interpreters and closed captioning allow D/deaf to connect; live text across digital platforms support screen readers; audio captions allow blind and visually impaired users to gain information; and alternate forms beyond digital, such as phone messages, support those that may not have internet access.

Plan ahead

As creative teams, agencies and advertisers look ahead, everyone needs to ensure strategic planning efforts as we emerge from the crisis include diversity and disability representation. Just because the Paralympics are postponed for a year doesn't mean disability in advertising should be postponed. If your brand is trying to better understand the mood and momentum of customers, bring people with disabilities into that research.

We all know that advertising can't cure Covid-19, but it can be curative. Advertising has an opportunity to be a powerful voice of support and solidarity during this challenging time.

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