

Not Marketing to People with Disabilities? You're Missing Out

Most Marketers are Ignoring Loyal Consumer Segment That has 'Sizable Spending Power'

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Would it be surprising to you to that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20% of the adult population reports having a disability? To bring it closer to home, imagine 54 million adults with various disabilities spending nearly \$200 million every year on food, electronics, health and beauty products, home goods and much more. As if those figures are not staggering enough, there are an additional 23 million parents in the U.S. who have at least one child between the ages of 5 and 16 who has a disability. I have two.

When looking at those parents, it's important to note that their incomes, assets and home ownership are the same as those of the general population, but the factors that affect their purchasing decisions are often somewhat different. And what happens when they are no longer around? Often it's an adult sibling or another caretaker who steps in. These individuals, like parents, make decisions on where to live, vacation and shop with the child's needs in mind.

Therefore, the question must be asked: Why is the special-needs community largely ignored by marketers?

Three reasons:

1. People are generally uncomfortable with disabilities.
2. The special-needs community is regarded as a "niche."
3. Companies fear they will "do it wrong."

I can remember the day a "close" friend who was pregnant told me she could no longer see me because she did not want her unborn child "catching" whatever disease my daughter had. Then there were the so-called friends whose children mysteriously were always busy when it came time to schedule a play date with my daughter. This idiocy even spilled over to couples' nights out (no kids). Then, of course, there are the stares.

Not all bad

Thankfully, the people to whom I refer are in the minority. Most people today recognize that adults and children who have disabilities are no different than they are and know they can't "catch" a disability. Of course, it doesn't always feel that way when I take my teenage daughter to a makeup counter at a department store. Why don't cosmetic companies understand that teenage girls, whether they have facial deformities or other disabilities, are still teenage girls who want to wear makeup and get makeovers? What about women who are in wheelchairs, whose faces don't even come close to the tops of cosmetics counters? Not only are these women largely ignored, but when they ask for makeovers, it is usually obvious that none of the reps are comfortable showing them how to apply makeup properly in spite of their deformities. I'm sure there are willing cosmetics salespeople out there, but the ones we've encountered often seem to think that if they touch my daughter's face they might catch something.

Certainly there are instances of good marketing in this regard as well. A handful of companies are successfully marketing to the special-needs community, or at least trying to. Take Toys "R" Us, for example. It has a guide that describes toys for different developmental needs at different ages. The company markets the guide through key strategic alliances and on the web but needs to raise awareness of it among parents, grandparents, service providers and the like. Once the company learns how to market this incredible service and perhaps even expand it, Toys "R" Us will have a home run.

Another example of a marketer that is catering to this population is Avis. The car-rental company provides a full range of special products and services for physically challenged drivers and passengers, such as swivel seats, hand controls and easy-access buses. For adults with disabilities who travel for business and pleasure, this is an incredible offering. I do wish, however, Avis would make it easier to find out about its services. Information is even somewhat hidden on the company's website, though Avis does advertise it in print media targeted to adults with disabilities. It would be great if they marketed products and services for parents of children with disabilities who need special seating devices in the car.

MetLife also is reaching out to this community. What started as a pilot marketing initiative today is a dedicated division to help families who have children or other dependents with special needs plan for their futures (guiding families through legal and financial issues). They have a very integrated campaign, with TV ads during prime time that feature individuals with special needs, a comprehensive website, strategic alliances with national nonprofits and heavy PR. They have even won awards in the past from the National Business & Disability Council. I actually created this service for MetLife almost nine years ago.

Finally, Ford recently launched its "Bold Moves" campaign, which includes TV commercials featuring individuals with special needs.

Learn the language

As with any consumer segment, marketers must take special care in communicating appropriately to the special-needs community. Extra care should be taken so they do not appear

to be taking advantage of the market and to keep from insulting a particular segment of the population through politically incorrect language. Sensitivity is key.

For example, a children's store that decides to market a particular product or service to families who have children with disabilities should be cautious when referring to a child. Is the correct language "a disabled child," "a special-needs child" or "a Down's Child?" No. The correct language is "a child with special needs" or "a child who has Down Syndrome." The point here is that the disability should never define the person. It's known as people-first language.

What about someone who is visually impaired and wants to purchase a product on a company's website? While there are many disabled adults who leave their homes daily to work, run businesses, eat out and travel, there are many more, over 10 million, in fact, who have disabilities so severe that it's difficult for them to leave. Of course, they do make purchases, but they rely heavily on the internet and catalogs to obtain what they need. I rarely see an internet site appropriately set up to meet the needs of these individuals (known as Bobby Compliance), and I almost never see catalog companies marketing directly to these folks.

Marketers must recognize that the special-needs community is not just one market but three: adults with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and siblings, grandparents and other caretakers.

All three subsegments have sizable spending power and are extremely loyal to businesses that make an effort to understand and accommodate their needs. Gain their loyalty, and a company can make quite an impact with new customers and increase revenue dramatically.

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