

How To Attract the Largest Minority Market

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, September 2007

The largest minority market in the United States is not Hispanics; it's people with disabilities. But traditional marketing efforts might not be effective with this highly networked population, one expert suggests. Learning what it takes to reach this audience can help an organization realize its marketing and staffing goals.

People with disabilities and their families are now the largest minority market, said Nadine Vogel, president of Springboard Consulting LLC during an Aug. 16, 2007, U.S. Business Leadership Network and Job Accommodation Network webinar. U.S. Census Bureau announcements released in 2007 put the number of people with disabilities at 51.2 million, or 18 percent of the population, compared with 44.3 million Hispanics who represent close to 15 percent of the population.

According to Vogel, parents of children with disabilities have the same income, assets and homeownership as the general population of parents of the same age-group of children. And, because many individuals with disabilities have difficulty getting out to shop, there are significant opportunities for those companies that make efforts to market to this group electronically and through catalogs, she said.

The HR Connection

The Bobby Dodd Institute, an Atlanta-based nonprofit organization that provides job training and career services to people with mental and physical disabilities, says there are three links between HR and the disability community that can impact business efforts:

- Employees might acquire a disability.
- The next job candidate could have a disability.
- HR actions can lead to business results.

According to the institute, HR professionals can help organizations reach the disability market by providing ways for employees to share their experiences and knowledge about disabilities and how that impacts the company's offerings.

Grass-roots Marketing Pays Off

“What businesses need to keep in mind relative to marketing is that people with disabilities and their families are a very highly networked community,” said Vogel, who has two daughters with disabilities. “We talk often through support groups, social networks and organizations. It means marketers can market at the grass-roots level.”

Vogel said this is a different model for many companies that are accustomed to “big bucks marketing” involving TV ads and campaigns costing millions of dollars. But she said such efforts are not necessary to achieve results. “It’s incredible because you spend so much less [at the grass-roots level] to generate so much more in revenue.”

Vogel said grass-roots marketing begins with an understanding of the disability community’s perspective. For example, if just one child in a family has a disability, every decision that family makes relative to travel, dining and the like will be made based on the needs of that one child, she said.

But, in addition, companies must recognize that there are many different types of disabilities, preferred terminology and perspectives within the broader community. “Companies must approach their efforts in a sensitized and appropriate manner,” she said, but they must avoid “bringing out the violin” and treating all disabilities the same.

People want to know that they are valued as consumers, Vogel added, which she said is demonstrated by companies that market not in spite of a disability but because of it. For example, an ad that merely includes a picture of a person with a visible disability isn’t likely to convey that the company understands the needs of people with disabilities and is striving to meet their needs with a particular product, service or employment opportunity.

But Vogel said advertising--whether for products or jobs--shouldn’t single out a person with a disability as a “poster child.” Instead, the disability should be fully integrated into the ad, as was the case in a well-received Kohler ad in which an actor portrayed a visually impaired man telling his companion she should “see” the beautiful bathroom he just visited.

A company’s marketing efforts should also include an educational component for customers and the sales staff, Vogel said. It should be clear to customers, for example, how a company’s product or service will meet their needs for safety and access without making them feel embarrassed or singled out.

At the same time, Vogel said, sales and service people should be trained so they treat people in an appropriate and respectful manner. “If you do a great job in marketing, you don’t want to have a disconnect when the consumer comes into your store,” she said. A lawsuit against McDonald’s in which a customer with no arms was refused service was given as an example of what not to do.

Vogel said company efforts to contact people with disabilities pay off in brand loyalty. “As a parent of children with disabilities, if someone does something to benefit my child or my family, I will shout it from the rooftops,” she said. “These consumers are brand zealots. If we know that you are really there to do things to benefit us, we are going to stick with you. You are going to get our family, our friends and everybody else that we know.”

Getting Started

Approximately 15 percent of any employee population has a disability or has a family member with one, according to Vogel. Hosting an employee focus group is a great way to learn more about ways in which a company can reach consumers and applicants with disabilities, especially if an employer opens the group up to anyone who has any experience with disabilities.

Vogel said employers can form an external focus group of leaders from nonprofit organizations serving people with disabilities who can advise the company about the needs of their constituents. If an employer's efforts to reach the disability market are later questioned by the public, Vogel said, the company can point to the efforts it took to explain the decisions it made.

Little things do make a difference. "Don't have the disability be the first call-out in an ad," Vogel said, and avoid an over-reliance on the "iconic disabled person" in a wheelchair. Instead, she suggests that companies use an amputee, someone with a service animal or a child with a walker. "Please make sure you use real people," she added. "Companies have received negative feedback from the disability community for failing to do so."

If resources are scarce, Vogel said, companies should focus on making the customer's or applicant's experience a positive one, and on grass-roots communication. "Leave the advertising and big campaigns for another time," she added.

Communication Essentials

Web technology is used by the disability community to clarify expectations, Vogel said, so it is a critical communication tool and must be accessible. "Flash is not acceptable. Closed captioning is great. Graphics and Java script can create problems," she said. "The web is just a touch point to the company."

Although news travels quickly in the disability community, Vogel said, organizations need to start somewhere by promoting their efforts as they would to any other market group. Some companies are hesitant to promote their efforts to serve the disability community, she said, because they don't want to appear self-serving. But Vogel said communication is key: "I do not believe in 'if you build it, they will come.'"

Moreover, Vogel said, people with disabilities want the world to know that companies are taking steps to benefit the disability community and are acknowledging that they are consumers like anyone else. She suggests that organizations focus on what they are doing, how they are doing it and the intent behind it.

Strategic alliances can help a community demonstrate intent, according to Vogel. Unlike short-term financial sponsorship of a particular event, a strategic partnership is more like a co-branding effort in which a company and a nonprofit organization find a mutual benefit to working together to communicate about a company's products or services. The disability community will notice such efforts, Vogel promised. "They will switch brands and stay with you forever."

"The [disabilities] marketplace wants you to speak to them and is happy to see you generate revenue as long as you do it well," Vogel said.

Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is online writer/editor for SHRM.