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**The Branding of Diversity: by Nadine O. Vogel**

DiversityBusiness.com Article/- "Branding" is a bit of a buzz word right now and rightfully so. Organizations realize that the way they present themselves to the community, the way they communicate their mission and values is important in both connecting with consumer markets and attracting and retaining top-level talent. If perception is reality, then branding is, too. "Accessibility", "disability", and "special needs" are not buzz words. In fact, many organizations shy away from the special-needs market, not realizing its potential -- and that potential is huge. First of all, consider the numbers. Fifty-four million American adults identify themselves as having a disability, and another twenty-three million are parents of at least one child between the ages of five and sixteen with special needs. Some companies don't reach out to this population because they believe that the money isn't there. They need to think again. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the adult disabled population has discretionary spending of approximately \$200 billion a year -- two times the spending power of teens and seventeen times the spending power of tweens. Add to that friends and family, and the market grows exponentially.

**Overlooked Potential**

With such obvious potential, why is the special needs market largely ignored? Many consider this community a niche market. While people with disabilities are inarguably a minority, they are also the largest minority in the world, as well as the most diverse. Disability doesn't discriminate: people of all races, cultures, and socio-economic groups can become disabled, or give birth to a child with special needs. By reaching out to this community, companies are embracing diversity without even being aware of it.

Companies may also be unaware of their own biases. Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of disability, and this discomfort may translate into business practices that ignore the special needs market. Companies may also overlook this market for fear that they will "do it wrong"-- that somehow they'll fail to reach the market or even offend the community. This last reason may sound familiar to diversity professionals. Traditionally, marketing departments do not regularly meet with their diversity counterparts, but to market effectively to diverse communities, these two internal organizations need to come together. Many companies still view diversity as a service, looking inward to the company's health rather than looking outward to a diverse population of consumers -- minority markets that they can't afford to miss. Unfortunately, this somewhat narrow take on diversity is especially true of the view toward people with disabilities, though there's a bit of a twist. When the special needs community is considered, it's often in carefully measured charitable efforts. Charity can be a good thing, but it's not marketing. It's vital for brands to engage the community with more than the occasional sponsorship. If marketing and diversity departments worked together to produce a co-branded effort, and if that effort resulted in branding that was applied 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it would speak volumes to the public.

**A Beautiful Example**

But what exactly might this effort entail? How can companies break down the invisible walls that inadvertently exclude this market? "The first step is to have a complete understanding of this market," says Gianna Locasto, Director of Store Marketing for Sephora Cosmetics. "This will then allow a company to best meet the community's needs." Sephora's understanding of the community and its needs allows them to connect with consumers by capitalizing on the company's strengths. Sephora is a cosmetic industry pioneer, who created an open-sell environment, where more than 200 beauty brands are sold under one roof. This open-sell model, which provides easy access to the products and without high or intimidating cosmetic counters, creates an ideal shopping experience for people with physical disabilities. Sephora also understands that women in the special needs market are just like women everywhere. "Like everyone else, moms who have children with special needs and women with disabilities want to feel and look good in a comfortable and safe environment," says Locasto. "As professionals in the beauty business, Sephora realized this and wanted to serve this population by showing them that we truly care about their beauty needs, from the inside out."

**"Like Everyone Else"**

Too often in the past, people with disabilities have been thought of as "other", sometimes patronized, even pitied. There's no place for any of those outdated ideas in today's market. Marketers must take special care in communicating appropriately to the special-needs community, as with any consumer segment. Diversity departments can help marketing departments to understand the culture of disability. For example, the special needs community, like other diverse segments prefer the use of person-first language, which involves putting the person before the disability, e.g. referring to "a person who is blind" instead of "a blind person". It's not only a preferred use of language, but a great philosophy that gets back to that idea of people as people -- "like everyone else".

Another important distinction when using language: adults who are disabled prefer to use the term "disability" when referring to themselves, whereas parents of children typically prefer the term "special needs". And like person-first language, this difference points to a larger idea; these are actually two different (though often connected) communities and markets. Companies may decide to market to either or both, but should take into consideration their unique needs and wants. Sephora, for example, markets to both, taking into account the subtle differences between them. "One of our goals was to pamper mothers who care for children with special needs by offering personalized beauty treatments and skincare consultations," says Locasto. "Our second goal was to educate women with disabilities by offering one-on-one appointments, in which they learned a number of beauty tips, tricks, and application techniques." The results in both cases have been positive. "Deserving moms feel a true sense of appreciation and belonging at Sephora, while women with disabilities not only feel more knowledgeable about beauty, but emotionally safe and comfortable in an environment where they can shop and play without judgment."

**Communication and Connection**

But how did women know that they could come "shop and play"? How did Sephora let the community know about their universally accessible environments and their understanding and trained staff? They tested their new in-store concept by hosting "Special Needs" events in a number of stores in markets that included New Jersey, Chicago, and Atlanta. Springboard Consulting LLC, experts in the special needs marketplace, helped Sephora every step of the way. From developing this exciting initiative and reaching out to their nationwide contacts within the special needs community to providing accessibility guidance and delivering Disability Etiquette and Awareness training, Springboard ensured Sephora's success. Sephora also worked with DeVries Public Relations to generate media alerts and secure calendar listings.

Internal diversity departments can also help to connect a company (and its marketing department) with the disability community. Many communities have independent living centers, community-related disability organizations, and even listservs dedicated to specific populations like the local deaf community. Websites are another marketing and communication avenue, as long as they are accessible.

Inclusion may be just as important as accessibility. That's where branding comes back into the picture. Consider Sephora: with their targeted outreach, they're introducing consumers to their unusually accessible stores, showing them that Sephora understands their needs and wants to support their community. They are branding Sephora as an accessible, inviting and supportive place that actively includes women with disabilities and mothers of children with special needs. These women, in turn, pass on the word that Sephora is doing something right.

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**About DiversityBusiness.com**

Launched in 1999, DiversityBusiness, with over 48,000 members, is the largest organization of diversity owned businesses throughout the United States that provide goods and services to Fortune 1000 companies, government agencies, and colleges and universities. DiversityBusiness provides research and data collection services for diversity including the "Top 50 Organizations for Multicultural Business Opportunities", "Top 50 Diversity Owned Companies in America", and others. Its research has been recognized and published by Forbes Magazine, Business Week and thousands of other print and internet publications. The site has gained national recognition and has won numerous awards for its content and design. DiversityBusiness reaches more diverse suppliers and communicates more information to them on a more frequent basis than all other organizations combined. We also communicate with mainstream businesses, government agencies and educational institutions with information related to diversity. Our magazine reaches over 300,000 readers, a monthly e-newsletter that reaches 2.4 million, and website visitors of 1.2 million a month. It is a leading provider of Supplier Diversity management tools and has the most widely distributed Diversity magazine in the United

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