An Interpretation of How Best to Represent Disability in Advertising

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**Abstract**

Inclusive advertising is a segment of the marketing field that allows me to bring together my two passions: advertising and the inclusion of people with disabilities. No matter what company I work for post-graduation, an understanding of how to best represent this minority group in advertisements will be a much needed and interesting perspective to bring to a team. Although advertising can take many forms today, television commercials incorporate both visual and audio aspects, making them the most complex form to study. With an understanding of how to include people with disabilities well in commercials, I can apply similar principles to print and radio ads. Through this essay, I will dive into the different aspects that are necessary to consider when producing a TV advertisement that includes a person with a disability.

**The Debate of Language**

The “right” language to use when addressing a person with a disability has long been debated. People argue whether person-first language is the best choice over dozens of other options, because it’s an option that “emphasizes the person, not the disability; by placing the person first, the disability is no longer the primary, defining characteristic of an individual, but one of several aspects of the whole person” (The Arc). For example, one might say “a person with a disability” or “a person with autism”. Yet, within the disability community, there are disagreements. Some prefer identity-first language, like “disabled person” or “autistic person”. They want to embrace their disability and feel as though it *does* define them.

In Petra Kuppers’ introduction on Disability and Language in the 2010 addition of *Profession*, a publication of the Modern Language Association, she addresses this issue and lists a number of word choices, some more offensive than others. She asks, “What about differently abled, Down syndrome child, wheelchair bound, mad, freak, exceptional? Why do some people prefer person with a disability and others disabled person? Are people without a disability non disabled people, normal, or TAB (temporarily able-bodied)?” (Kuppers, 2010, pg. 109). While there are some terms that are universally unacceptable, it comes down to personal preference whether someone prefers one mildly neutral phrase over another. Some people want their label to encompass that their disability defines them, whereas others don’t want to be associated with it. The question of “exceptional,” the only potentially positive word in the list, is an interesting choice. Michael Bérubé, an Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Literature and former Director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Penn State University, wrote the book *Life as We Know It: A Father, A Family, and an* ***Exceptional*** *Child*, referencing his son with Down syndrome*.* He is mentioned in Kuppers’ discussion on “social model” vs. “medical model.” The social model says that disability is caused by the way society is organized, not the person. By contrast, the medical model says something is wrong with the individual, not society, and advocates for change (or medical intervention) to fix whatever is wrong. In other words, Kuppers says that “the social model locates disability at the meeting place of personal impairment and a disabling social world; the medical model locates disability in individuals and employs various techniques to normalize them” (pg. 109). Again, people within the disability community vary on which model they prefer. For example, individuals who are deaf and wear cochlear implants tend to side more with the medical model; they have chosen to fix their hearing impairment. By contrast, people who use sign language to communicate and view deafness as a language barrier fall more into the social model.

These divisions within the disability community can make it difficult for advertisers to pick what language they use when creating an ad campaign. Within a campaign, language could appear in social media copy, press releases, in conversation during a commercial, and more, which makes language a critical consideration that needs to be discussed when forming an inclusive campaign. The advertisers must know, though, that no matter which option they use to address people with disabilities, they’ll likely receive some backlash and need to have a media strategy in place for how to respond.

I spoke with Melissa Blake, a contributor for *The New York Times* and other major news publications. She’s a disability advocate and provides an interesting perspective in many of her articles by including comments about her own disability. She prefers to be called a "woman with a disability" when talking about herself, but knows that language preference can vary greatly across the board. She believes language preference is an individual decision, which, of course, can make it difficult for advertisers to pick a universal phrase to use when describing someone with a disability (Blake, 2018). In an article posted on her blog, “Thoughts on Person-First Language and Disabilities,” Blake says, “I wonder about that sometimes, like, am I being a ‘*bad*’ disability advocate if I don’t have a preference? Am I somehow not standing up for the disability community?” (Blake, 2018). When she was younger, identity-first language was never something she considered using. She says, “I felt like saying I was a ‘*disabled person*’ sort of dehumanized me. It was like saying that my disability came before my personhood. It was like saying that my disability was the most important thing about me” (Blake, 2018). As Blake has grown up, though, she’s become more comfortable with both identity-first and person-first as language options. “My disability is just one partof who I am. Just like I have red hair and am right-handed. Those are parts of me, just like my disability is. Saying this doesn’t mean I’m ashamed of my disability or that I hate it; I’ve actually come to embrace my disability and am proud of the person it’s helped me become. But in the end, it doesn’t define me or overrides the other ‘*parts*’ of myself” (Blake, 2018). Although Blake is a woman with a disability and a professional in the disability advocacy field, not everyone with a disability will agree with the terms she prefers. Her opinion does, however, provide insight that some people may change their opinion overtime regarding which terms they prefer.

For the purpose of a TV advertisement, the choice in language can come down to what’s most popular within the community that has that specific disability. If casting someone with a disability for a commercial, it is always a good starting place to ask what the actor or actress prefers before filming.

**Casting**

One of the most important discussions involving disability representation in TV shows and movies is the debate over whether people with disabilities should be cast for roles of people with those same disabilities. This same discussion can be applied to advertisements. There’s the argument that acting, by definition, is the activity of pretending to be someone you’re not. So, able-bodied actors and actresses should be considered for these roles; many times, the argument is that the best actor or actress should be chosen. In many situations, casting directors may consider experience and celebrity status as two of the factors when determining who is best for the role, but don’t consider that people with disabilities haven’t had a lot of experience in Hollywood because they aren’t hired for roles nearly as often as able-bodied people. Depending on their disability, they may also be unable to fulfill some of those able-bodied roles, making opportunities to play people with the same disability as them a good fit.

This year, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson was cast to play the lead role of Will Sawyer, an FBI agent with a prosthetic leg, in the movie *Skyscraper*. After accepting the role, he posted a video announcing his pledge to support the Ruderman Family Foundation, a campaign group that supports actors with disabilities (Taylor, 2018). While this had the potential to be a strong endorsement given Johnson’s celebrity status in Hollywood and the sports industry through his former career as a WWE athlete, this endorsement came shortly after Johnson, himself, had taken on a role for a disabled character, despite the fact that he is not disabled. According to the Ruderman Family Foundation, “20% of the US population have a disability, yet feature in only 2% of on-screen television roles, and of these, 95% are played by non-disabled actors” (Taylor, 2018). In his pledge video, Johnson said, "I certainly encourage the entire [entertainment] industry to take steps forward to audition and cast actors with disabilities to play characters with and without disabilities” (Taylor, 2018). While the movie showcases that Sawyer’s disability does not define or limit him, a strong message that should be shared through media, the message could have been stronger if a person with a physical disability was cast in Sawyer’s role. What I like about Johnson’s message, though, is that he doesn’t limit people with disabilities only to playing roles of people with disabilities; he insists that they can play roles of able-bodied people too. Limiting people with disabilities to disabled roles is what is described as typecasting, which is when a role is repeatedly assigned to a certain person based on the appropriateness of their appearance in such roles. If a person with a disability can play a non-disabled character, I think they should have that ability, but first things first, we need more people with disabilities being cast in general.

Unsurprisingly, this debate spreads across to race and gender too. Hollywood has received backlash for casting actors and actresses of races different from the characters. Most recently, Scarlett Johansson was in negative light for her role portraying Japanese character Motoko, in *Ghost in the Shell*. The movie was accused of whitewashing, which is when white actors are casted to play non-white characters (Rose, 2017). This is seen with gender as well. Johnanason was also recently criticised for her role as a transgender prostitute ring leader in *Rub & Tug*. The transgender community argued, “You can play us, but we can’t play you.” So, communities being underrepresented is not a foreign concept; it’s a perennial issue that multiple minority groups are still trying to change (Associated Press, 2018).

An example of good representation of disability in TV is the show *Speechless*; in the show, the main character is disabled on and off screen. Micah Fowler plays JJ Dimeo who has cerebral palsy, just like Fowler, but in real life Fowler is able to communicate verbally unlike JJ. Fowler has become a huge advocate for the disability community through his role and as an ambassador for the Cerebral Palsy Foundation (CPF). The cast of *Speechless* works with CPF to spread awareness about cerebral palsy, especially through their online Facebook video posts, where the cast is a part of short informational videos about cerebral palsy. With videos on topics like “What’s it like to be a part of the Dimeo family?”, these videos are an interesting way to educate fans of the show without being too blunt in the show itself about what cerebral palsy is (King, 2016). This concept of running a social media campaign that provides more information about a disability parallel to a TV show is interesting for agencies and companies to consider when producing an advertising campaign. The combination of the two could give the brand the ability to educate and promote inclusion outside of their ad campaign.

*Glee* is an interesting show to look at as well in terms of representation, because two of the main characters, Becky and Artie, have disabilities in the show, yet Artie was portrayed by a non-disabled actor, Kevin McHale, while Becky’s role was played by Lauren Potter, who has Down syndrome like her character in the show. One episode that sparked a lot of controversy was called “Dream On” in which Artie revealed his desire to dance. Even though wheelchair dancing is something thousands of wheelchair-users participate in, the show decided to have Artie dream about his disability being magically cured through a Christmas Guardian angel so he could dance out of his wheelchair in a scene, singing Feliz Navidad. *The Guardian* wrote about this episode and said, “Not only was this episode offensive to the numerous and very talented dancers who perform in wheelchairs all over the world, it was also an example of how the show backed itself into a corner. Because *Glee* hadn't cast a wheelchair user, it didn't have an actor who knew how to dance in a wheelchair” (Smith, 2010). *Glee* had the opportunity to really highlight a group of people, specifically a group of specialized dancers, by casting someone who uses a wheelchair in real life, but they missed that opportunity. It’s clear why this episode could be deeply offensive for some in that community; it makes me question if they consulted wheelchair users before making it. Becky’s character, on the other hand, is shown in a better light. Through Becky’s position as a member of the cheerleading squad, viewers are able to see how important inclusion is. Cheer coach Sue Sylvester “gives Becky a chance because she wants to treat her like anyone else, and give her the experience of being a cheerleader” (Smith, 2009). Sue treats her with the same tough attitude that she does the other girls, showing that she doesn’t hold Becky to a lower standard because of her disability. Later in the show, it’s revealed that Sue’s older sister has Down syndrome like Becky, which is why she wanted to put her in a position where she wasn’t seen as different from the other girls.

While I understand that acting is a form of entertainment in which people have the ability to play characters who are unlike them, I believe that whenever possible, a person with a disability should have an equal chance to get a part as someone who is able-bodied. In some cases, people with disabilities may not have the ability to play an able-bodied person, so the number of roles they can audition for is a much smaller number than able-bodied people, so to not equally consider someone with a disability does not seem fair. Of course, acting experience plays a role in how qualified an actor or actress is for a role, but with people with disabilities only being cast 2% of the time, there aren’t as many options for them to grow their experience. Acting in advertising commercials could be an important step for people with disabilities to be considered for larger movie and TV show roles. There are many talented actors with disabilities who aren’t being cast, which is a great pool of people for advertising agencies to go after when casting for commercial roles (Taylor, 2018).

I spoke with Deb Horne from Special Olympics’ Connecticut office about this topic. She noted that this debate is a two-way street. Yes, in order to see change, we must influence casting directors and encourage them to pick people with disabilities for the role; however, at the same time, we also need to be encouraging and empowering people with disabilities to try out for these acting roles. At Special Olympics, they use sports to empower people with disabilities. One of the best parts of the program, Horne noted, is that you usually can’t tell who has a disability and who doesn’t at Special Olympics events. People of all abilities are able to come together and bond over a shared experience and interest in sports (Horne, 2018). I agree with Horne that in order for change to happen and more people with disabilities to get chosen for roles, agencies must be seeking actors and actresses with disabilities and these entertainers must also be actively looking for those opportunities. An agency isn’t going to hire someone with a disability if they don’t come out for an audition. Just as Special Olympics empowers people with disabilities to be athletes, there are other programs promoting acting.

For example, Louise Dyson created an agency called VisABLE, an agency for disabled actors, presenters and models. On her website, it says, “The whole point of VisABLE is to persuade advertisers and producers to offer bookings to artists irrespective of the fact that they have characteristics, which distinguish them in the eyes of some people as ‘disabled’” (VisABLE, 2018). Programs like these can propel a shift in attitude and behavior in people with disabilities, so that they have the confidence that they can land a casting role for an advertisement. One of Dyson’s models, Shannon Murray, told BBC, “If someone's advertising a product like shampoo and they happen to have a disability which is not directly relevant it's the perfect form of inclusivity” (Rose, 2017). Advertising has the ability to promote inclusion and change people’s perspectives and should utilize its role in society to do so, like Murray suggests.

**Depiction in TV Shows & Movies**

Even though some movies and shows have included disabled characters, they don’t always depict them in a good way. The recent movie *The Greatest Showman* depicts people with disabilities as extraordinary—but not in a positive light. The movie tells the story of P.T. Barnum, who used people with disabilities to show their freakishness to impress an audience for years. This movie was made many years after scholars had already written about Barnum’s exploitation of people with disabilities. Despite all of the scholarly work done before the 2017 movie release, the movie does not seem to acknowledge any of that in their portrayal of Barnum. In the film, we learn nothing else about the disabled characters, other than what their disability is. This shows that Barnum didn’t see this group as human, like everyone else. Instead, he allowed their disability to be the only characteristic he saw in them; he allowed it to become their identity. The directors missed an excellent opportunity to utilize the scholarly work to show the flaws in how Barnum treated people with disabilities.

At the other end of the continuum is *Atypical,* a Netflix TV series that shares the story of Sam, who has Asperger’s, and his family. Personally, I believe it’s one of the best depictions of autism out there in the media. After watching three seasons of the show, I have a clear sense of what autism is and how to talk to someone with autism. Ultimately, that’s the sort of education I look for in good representation of disability. When a viewer can watch a show and feel more comfortable around someone with that disability, that’s a good step forward. Of course, all types of autism are different. This is clearly explained through Sam’s peer group, made up of other students with autism interested in post-high school plans. In one episode, Sam says that he’s going to go into the abyss, when talking about college; his guidance counselor used the term “abyss”, so Sam reused it in peer group. One of his fellow students was worried about him going to a dark place, an abyss, so she stole his college art portfolio so he wouldn’t get into college and have to leave. Later in the show, her mom explains this was her way of telling Sam she cares about him and wanted to protect him, but she isn’t very good at communicating that and tends to take action instead. Sam, on the other hand, is always very vocal about how he feels, which adds some humor to the show. The contrast in the two characters’ reactions to college shows viewers that people with autism are all totally different, just like everyone else; not everyone with autism will act like Sam does. This relates to Kenny Fries’ rule of disability representation (itself based on the famous Bechdel Test for the representation of women), which states that in order to properly represent disability, a creative work must “have more than one disabled character, the disabled characters need to have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a non-disabled character, and the characters' disability should not be eradicated either by curing or killing” (Fries, 2017). *Atypical* passes this test by providing viewers with multiple perspectives on autism and creating a storyline that doesn’t solely revolve around disability.

Disney loves to use disability in their animated movies. *Finding Nemo* is one of the most talked-about movies that includes multiple characters with disabilities. While many minor characters in the film have disabilities, Nemo and Dory are the main ones. Nemo has a physical disability, which ultimately affects his ability to swim away and not get caught by the divers at the start of the film. Later in the film, it is his small fin that allows him to move a rock better than anyone else in the fish tank in the dentist’s office; this action ultimately helps him to escape. Dora on the other hand has short-term memory loss. At the beginning of the film, she can’t even remember what happened seconds before and has to reintroduce herself to Marlin. Throughout the film, she begins to remember more and more and by the end, she seems to have cured her disability. Ato Quayson also noted in his book, *Aesthetic Nervousness,* that Dory propels Marlin to find his son (Quayson 40). Without her, the father-son duo likely would have never been reunited, yet, Dory gets left out of the story of Nemo as it develops and she doesn’t receive any sort of recognition at the end of the film for her assistance. As Quayson points out, it is as if the film itself mimics Dory’s memory loss by leaving her out of the narrative the characters tell each other.

There are many ways disability can be depicted on screen. In Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s essay, “Seeing the Disabled,” she notes that there are four types of visual rhetorics of disability in photography, which I believe can be easily transferred to TV. She breaks them into the wondrous, the sentimental, the exotic, and the realistic modes of representing disability. The wondrous “positions the people with a disability above the viewer”; the viewer looks at them with wonder and awe (Thomson, pg. 341). The sentimental does quite the opposite; “the sentimental places the disabled figure below the viewer, in the posture of the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor” (Thomson, pg. 341). The exotic depicts disability in a freakish nature. The realistic tries to “normalize and often minimize the visual mark of disability” (Thomson, pg. 344). While these modes help categorize different forms of depiction, these cannot be solely relied upon as it isn’t always so cut and dry; sometimes multiple modes are present. Also, Thomson’s use of the word “normalize” is an tricky one, because it then provokes the question of what normal is; this idea can be problematic. When creating an advertisement, an agency should be aware of these modes as they can be harmful depending on how characters are depicted.

As mentioned with Melissa Blake’s response to the different types of language used in the disability community, consulting a group of advocates and people with the disabilities represented in a campaign is very important. The movie, *Tropic Thunder*, is an excellent example of a movie that did not consult people with disabilities when they should have. It was supposed to be an edgy comedy/satire that included offensive content; while the directors did contact the NAACP regarding Robert Downey Jr.’s, character wearing blackface, they failed to contact a disability group regarding the portrayal of Ben Stiller’s character. In the film, a conversation takes place between these two characters in which they talk about “never going full retard” in an acting role, because that won’t win awards. For many reasons, this was deeply offensive for the disability community, especially because actors and actresses in the intellectual disability community don’t have the choice to turn their disability on and off, and thus, the film’s satirical point—which was actually intended to criticize movies in which non-disabled actors play people with intellectual disabilities—turned into a public relations debacle. On top of that, many organizations, including Special Olympics, have taken steps to get rid of the word “retarded” when talking about people with disabilities. This is an example of how one group was consulted, but not the other, and it backfired. Disability shouldn’t have been treated differently in this case, just as it shouldn’t be misrepresented in commercials without consultation of the appropriate group. *The Ringer*, though, is an example of a movie that was cleared with an organization, in this case the Special Olympics. Johnny Knoxville played a non-disabled character who wanted to rig the Special Olympics, so he acted like he had an intellectual disability in order to compete. After consulting with the directors, “the Special Olympics decided [the movie] could humanize their athletes and add a new cachet of cool to their organization,” giving it the green light to be produced (The Associated Press). Most importantly, this movie did cast many people with intellectual disabilities, regardless of the fact that Knoxville was able-bodied. This movie is one of few that followed the practice of reaching out the group discussed to avoid misrepresentation and offensive content.

**Past Advertising Commercials**

Disability definitely isn’t completely absent from advertising, but it also isn’t popular. When I flip through TV channels, I find that it’s rare to see an advertisement that includes someone with a disability. When people with disabilities are included, I tend to find flaws in the representation; however, sometimes, there are also some good aspects in the commercials that I would love to see more of. Of course, how people respond to advertising is subjective; what I find offensive or inappropriate may be different from others, even from people with that disability.

In some forms of advertising, people with disabilities are portrayed as having greater abilities than the average person, rather than a lack of abilities. In 2016, the “Superhumans” Paralympics promotional video was released. This 3-minute ad captures people with disabilities participating in sports and other activities, some of them showing off abilities many non-disabled people do not have, like playing the drums with their toe (Catchpole, 2016). The commercial’s title itself, “Superhumans,” unfortunately invites the question of whether superhuman is the best form of representation for this group, as it may not represent the majority of the community and shows people with disabilities as having super powers, distancing them from the average on the other side of the spectrum now. This is an excellent example of Thomson’s “wondrous” mode, in which the commercial “[invokes] the extraordinariness of the disabled body in order to secure the ordinariness of the viewer” (Thomson, pg. 341). Melissa Blake, understandably, especially dislikes the wondrous mode of representation. When interviewed about TV commercials, Blake said, “Growing up, I NEVER saw people like me on TV or in movies and that always bothered me. And when they were featured, it was always in an ‘inspiration porn’ way, where the person with the disability is portrayed as inspirational solely because of their disability. It's incredibly objectifying and I can't stand it” (Blake, 2018). Blake wrote about wanting to see more women like herself on TV for *Glamour*. In the article, she dives deeper into this idea of “inspiration porn,” which she defines as “the idea that people with disabilities, by virtue of simply living their day-to-day lives, are somehow inspiration for the able-bodied. I imagine the whole scenario like that column in *Us Weekly,*you know, Stars—They're Just Like Us! Only in this case, it would be, People With Disabilities—They're Just Like Us! They go to work! They take the bus! They go shopping for groceries! They do the laundry!” (Blake, 2017). Blake’s point is well-taken, and cautionary: some advertising agencies, believing that they are representing people with disabilities in a positive light, are actually rendering them “spectacular,” in ways that ordinary people with disabilities see as contemporary versions of P. T. Barnum’s displays. In some situations, they’re treated poorly, and others they’re praised for doing everyday tasks simply because they have a disability. Finding a happy medium of representing them equally is what advertising can help to achieve.

McDonald’s used to have a running campaign in the 80s with Mike, a man with Down syndrome. The commercials ran on TV and focused on how McDonald’s hires people with Down syndrome and how they can succeed working at McDonald’s. While I applaud McDonald’s for casting an actor with Down Syndrome and showing that Mike’s disability does not take away from his ability to work and fit in with the McDonald’s community, I believe the footage in McDonald's could have been better executed. Mike’s friend, Jay, does not seem very comfortable or enthusiastic around Mike like friends tend to be. It seems very forced. When Mike lists who his friends are at the beginning of the commercial he lists adults, his mom, his dad, and his teacher instead of talking about the students that are walking with him in one of the first clips. I wish this commercial had showed a more inclusive clip of Mike and his friend Tracy, who also appears to have Down syndrome and some of Mike’s non-disabled friends. Inclusion is such an important message and I believe that highlighting a friend his own age without a disability could have made the commercial stronger.

Katie Driscoll is a woman who also feels like there is a lack of good representation of people with disabilities in advertising and has chosen to take steps towards change. What started as a desire to see little girls like her daughter, who has Down syndrome, in back-to-school magazines has turned into a career. Her company, Changing the Face of Beauty, “empowers people living with disabilities by advocating for inclusive imagery, thus changing perceptions and igniting futures in the media and advertising industries” (About Changing The Face of Beauty, 2017). She has met with the top advertising agencies in the country to discuss the inclusion of people with disabilities in their ads and is still working to change industry norms and include more people with disabilities in advertising. It’s companies like hers that can help to propel change in the world of advertising through proper advocacy and education, so that commercials don’t showcase people with disabilities through inspiration porn, for example.

**Past PSA Commercials**

Unlike commercials, PSAs are made specifically to raise awareness, change public attitudes, and change people's’ behavior about social issues. With these types of commercials, the group discussed in the campaign and advocates for that community are always consulted, so that the PSA is accurate in its depiction of that group.

In 2015, the Cerebral Palsy Foundation came out with the “Just Say Hi” campaign, which included a number of celebrities, like William H. Macy, spreading the message that talking to a person with a disability can be easy. It combatted the common belief and behavior that leads non-disabled people to treat people with disabilities with embarrassed silence—to just not say anything to someone with a disability who looks or acts different. The campaign was created by the CEO of the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, Richard Ellenson, who was tired of people asking him about his son, who has cerebral palsy, when his son was sitting right next to him. This campaign was developed with the input of many people with disabilities. Ellenson has a background in advertising and noted how pivotal a simple message like this campaign’s could be. Ellenson says, “It gets all of us to a place where we’re ready to have a conversation about 1) getting to know each other better and 2) making sure people with disabilities have what they need to participate and be acknowledged” (Coffey, 2015). Unlike PSAs, commercials are used by companies to increase sales and raise brand awareness rather than to advance any educational objectives; therefore, there is less of a burning desire for companies making commercials to educate potential markets about disability inside of their commercials, which is why the combination of commercials and PSAs on TV and social media can work together to spread the message of inclusion.

In 2016, Publicis New York worked with CoorDown, Italy's national organization for people with Down syndrome, to release a commercial packed with humor, picking fun at the phrase “special needs”. Lauren Potter of *Glee* fame stars in the commercial, questioning what “special needs” means and denies that people with Down syndrome have special needs. Potter says, “It would be special if we needed to be massaged by a cat.” Cue the massaging cat. She continues, “[It would be special] if we needed to be woken up by a celebrity.” The commercial does a great job in spreading the message that people with Down syndrome aren’t special, they’re just different like everyone is in their own way. At the end of the commercial, Potter says, “What we really need is education, jobs, and opportunities, friends, and some love, just like everyone else” (Jardine 2017). The PSA stresses that these are human needs, not special needs. I really love this commercial because it provides a funny twist on a topic that some people are nervous to talk about because they don’t know what to say to or about people with disabilities. It helps break down that barrier and give viewers a little bit of educational on terminology to use. Katie Driscoll sees a future for advertising where education can be incorporated into ads. She says that the next steps for the advertising industry are to advocate, educate, and create content to continue the conversation of inclusion and “give the disability community a platform to speak out about what it’s like to be seen and not to be seen” (Driscoll, 2018).

**Conclusion**

It is clear that disability representation will never be all things to all people. There is always the possibility for backlash, and people’s responses to advertising, like everything else, will be subjective; however, there are some guidelines and best practices that companies and agencies should follow when including people with disabilities in their advertisements. For starters, they should always consult the disability group first. Consulting the appropriate group can allow people with disabilities to be better represented and can help to avoid or stave off negative media attention. The negative effects of not doing so were evident in the wheelchair episode of *Glee* and in the movie *Tropic Thunder*. Companies and agencies can reach out to non-profits, like Special Olympics and the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, who can speak on behalf of these groups or direct them to people who have these disabilities, as well as advocates like Melissa Blake. It’s hard to believe that advertising is lagging so far behind in the representation of people with disabilities and consulting appropriate groups, like *Speechless* does with the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, even though advertisers only need a few 30 second or 10 second clips of proper representation, instead of full seasons of shows.

Avoiding inspiration porn is another important guideline to follow. Showing a person with a disability in an atmosphere of awe, through the wondrous mode, should only be used when they are achieving something truly remarkable, the same way we celebrate people without disabilities who do something remarkable. As Melissa Blake said, people with disabilities do not need to be celebrated for completing daily tasks like taking the bus and going to work. Of course, showing people with disabilities as helpless, as seen in the misconception of the phrase “special needs” expressed in CoorDown’s commercial, is not a good angle either.

Lastly, following the Kenny Fries rule of disability representation is extremely important. As seen with the show, *Atypical*, including more than one person with a disability is a wise decision, as disability can come in many forms and no two people are identical even if they share the same disability. If more than one person with a disability is not included in the ad campaign, strategies like using a parallel social media campaign, as seen with *Speechless*, can help to propel this message.

What it would really take to make a substantial, transformative change in this area is for a company to create a position in-house for a person who has a background in the field, who can fuel this change, and who knows what steps need to be taken to better include people with disabilities in advertising. The adoption of this model would allow brands to be known as innovative, disability-friendly industry leaders; the field is wide open, since at present, there are few companies or ad agencies that make this an explicit and appealing aspect of their corporate portfolio. This is especially relevant for companies that make products for daily family use, like shampoo, to use Melissa Blake’s example, which is a product used by people of all abilities. A shampoo brand could utilize this opportunity as a chance to show what the human family can look like. While this undertaking would add additional research and work to a company’s spreadsheet, it could attract a drastically untapped market of consumers and allow the company to pioneer a new standard for the industry. Moreover, from a public relations standpoint, the coverage on this sort of program could be incredible depending on the brand and the execution. Agencies could also adopt this sort of model, marketing themselves as the agency that has a desire to accurately include and consult people with disabilities when working on campaigns with their clients.

I believe advertising has the power and reach to really break barriers and promote inclusion for people with disabilities in a positive way. If agencies were to work with companies like VisABLE and Changing The Face Of Beauty, entering the market to serve as a third party between people with disabilities and agencies, there is hope for change in a market that is clearly underserved—and it is a project that I look forward to being a part of myself.

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