



## Developing Disabled Veteran Inclusive External Marketing and Communications Plans

***Inclusiveness of disabled veterans and other people with disabilities is not limited to the workforce. It is also a principle that should permeate marketing and communications plans.***

Developing effective external marketing and communication plans that are inclusive of disabled veterans and other people with disabilities begins internally. Commitment to inclusiveness at all levels of the organization and a culture of appreciation for diversity are the foundations of acceptance and understanding. A true culture of diversity and inclusiveness permeates everything the organization does, from recruiting and hiring talent to market research.

For this reason, external marketing and communications plans are based on an internal acceptance of the value of diversity that includes people with disabilities. People within the organization, including marketing professionals, should have a high level of sensitivity and awareness of diversity, and this guides their thought processes and behaviors. Inclusive communications mean using inclusive language, framing communications with an understanding of the challenges and issues people with disabilities manage each day, and ensuring all marketing – from website to brochures – is consistently inclusive.

### Inclusion as a Corporate Asset

Not many people think of an intangible like "inclusion" as a corporate asset, but that is exactly what it is. The disability market is huge with an estimated 56.7 million people and over half a billion in disposable income.

The U.S. Census found there are more than 19 million military veterans as of 2014, of which 9.4 million are 65 years old or older and 1.7 million are younger than 35. In this population, approximately 3.8 million veterans have a service-connected disability rating. These numbers continue to grow each year.

Including disabled veterans and other people with disabilities in the workforce, product development, and marketing efforts is a good business decision. Otherwise, an enormous market of talent and opportunity is missed. Tapping into this market requires sensitive marketing and communications. Sensitive means reaching out to people with a deep understanding of demographics, unmet needs creating opportunities, and effective messaging.

This process begins with developing an internal culture of inclusion which includes effective communication. Companies that are fully inclusive communicate the organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion for all people without regard for race, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender, or disability.



Everyone in the organization needs to be on board so that inclusion is a principle that permeates everything the employee does. Internal branding promotes diversity and inclusion through employee policies and procedures, newsletters, learning and development sessions, and groups like ERGs for disabled veterans. With D&I firmly embedded internally, external branding will naturally include the same principles.

### Invisible in Corporate Media

One of the first rules is to make sure that all, not some, corporate communications and marketing materials reflect the corporate value of inclusiveness. Even one brochure that misses the mark can reflect poorly on the corporation. Think for a minute about a television advertisement, website, or other marketing channels that tout the company as inclusive of all people. The picture shows men and women who are all colors, reflect a variety of ethnicities, and are clearly multigenerational.

Something is missing if the company wants to attract the disabled – the inclusion of one or more people with disabilities. People with disabilities have been almost invisible in corporate media, or they are included almost as an afterthought. Even for those that include a person with a disability, it is usually someone in a wheelchair who has an intact whole body. Millions of disabled veterans have lost limbs or disfigured faces, often due to bomb detonations. The U.S. culture places great value on beauty and remains uncomfortable with people who are "different looking." Corporate America has the power to change this perspective through its business culture, and marketing and communications approaches.

There are different strategies for attracting disabled veterans. First set a marketing goal of increasing awareness of disabled veterans, followed by setting a strategic goal supported by specific action plans. The organizational culture of inclusiveness is critical because it drives marketing and communications professionals to look at their efforts with new perspectives. They will look at wording, images, and messages with a perspective that says, "Are we attracting the people we want to attract?" The answer can be surprising.

### Involve People with Insights and Use the Right Language

A marketing and communications plan is going to be more effective when the people who have insights are included in the development process. One of the ways companies damage their brand and make themselves appear as if they are being self-serving is by making serious mistakes because they did not involve the people they are targeting.

The disabled veterans market can be understood through focus groups, development of consumer surveys, ethnographies, pilot marketing projects, and other efforts.

Language matters in inclusive marketing and communications. This is another area where organizations continue to learn. Language in messaging, marketing, and online media has a major influence on an organization's brand and sincerity in connecting with the disabled community.



Using colloquialisms like "veteran physically challenged" are not well accepted. The reason is that these terms seem like an uncomfortable effort to be inclusive rather than a sincere appreciation for the value people with disabilities bring to organizations.

### Not a Cause ... an Asset

Developing strategic alliances is important. Organizations that understand how to reach out to people with disabilities is important because good intentions can go very wrong. The connection between internal commitment and external brand is ironclad. Everyone in the organization must be inspired to understand people with disabilities – true understanding and not what culture has taught or what is assumed to be correct.

To truly embrace disabled veterans and other people with disabilities, organizations need to deeply understand the demographics, needs, and perspectives of people with disabilities and their family and friends. Disabled veterans have unique perspectives because they have the training, knowledge, and experience that corporations need to succeed in a global marketplace.

The key to success is getting the message right. Disabled veterans are not a cause. They are a group of people with immense talent and high-level training, and comprise a market of opportunities.

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