

## Ten Tips: Connect with People with Disabilities

- 1. People with disabilities and their loved ones are your audience. 56 million Americans have a disability.** The market size of the extended disability community is 63 percent – when you include family members, those with close friends with disabilities and those who work on behalf or volunteer for a disability cause. Some of the most talented people in history – from Beethoven (deaf) and Harriet Tubman (epilepsy) to Selena Gomez (lupus), Richard Branson (dyslexic) and Steven Hawking (ALS) – all succeed while living with disabilities. Today few companies are fully reaching out to the disability market. The market of people with disabilities and their loved ones is more than one trillion dollars.
- 2. People with disabilities have been erased by films and TV – and you can change that.** Fully one in five people has a disability, and the majority of people have a loved one with a disability. However, disability is rarely seen on television. By simply showing more people/characters with disabilities, you can help bring disability out of the closet and into the open. This will help people feel with disabilities – and those who love them – feel more accepted, valued, respected and appreciated.
- 3. Disability cuts across every demographic – gender, age, race, sexual orientation, etc.** Too often, people with disabilities are represented by straight, white men in a wheelchair. Ensure that people of color also are included. *NCIS: New Orleans* features a character in a wheelchair, Patton Plame. Daryl “Chill” Mitchell, an African American actor who uses a wheelchair, plays Plame. Currently, a large majority of people with disabilities that are portrayed in film and on TV are white, which makes Mitchell’s role on the show important. People with disabilities come from all communities, and they deserve more representation. Additionally, think about the diversity of disability – not just wheelchair users but also people who are deaf or blind, have a cognitive disability like Down syndrome or an invisible disability such as a learning disability like dyslexia or mental health like anxiety or depression.
- 4. Portray characters with disabilities as successful members of the community.** Like people in the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities should be able to be “out” in the open and accepted as equals. This includes people with “hidden disabilities” such as learning disabilities, mental health disorders and chronic pain. Not an ordinary reality

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For more information, see *The Hollywood Disability Inclusion Toolkit: The RespectAbility Guide to Inclusion in the Entertainment Industry*: [www.respectability.org/hollywood-inclusion](http://www.respectability.org/hollywood-inclusion). Contact Lauren Appelbaum at [RespectAbility.org](http://RespectAbility.org) for free help on any of these issues: [LaurenA@RespectAbility.org](mailto:LaurenA@RespectAbility.org) or 202-591-0703.

show, *Born This Way* stars seven diverse young adults with Down syndrome as they move toward full independence and deal with issues around employment, independent living, education and romance. By promoting success stories of people with disabilities, *Born This Way* helps to change negative perceptions of people with disabilities. *Born This Way* has won three Emmy awards, including for being the best-unstructured reality show on TV today. In scripted television, *Speechless* is a sitcom centered on a family that happens to include a son with cerebral palsy, J.J. The fact that J.J. is played by Micah Fowler, an actor with cerebral palsy, is important. Actors without disabilities play more than 95 percent of characters with disabilities on television. By continuing to avoid the “pity frame” of the Jerry Lewis Telethon and movies like *Me Before You*, you can connect even more authentically and deeply with audiences in the future.

5. **Give characters with disabilities a success story and showcase their skills in innovation.** Why not show doctors and teachers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who use a wheelchair or a prosthesis? Show a store clerk, hospital aid, food-service team-member who has Down syndrome? A hero who is dyslexic or blind and uses speech-to-text to type, and audio text-to-read? Today people with disabilities are shown either as X-Men with strange super skills or as losers. But most people with disabilities are neither. What they do have, however, is naturally built and refined abilities to innovate as they are constantly finding “work arounds” to succeed in life.
6. **Think about the language that you use.** Avoid terms like “wheelchair-bound” and “suffers from.” The National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ) provides the industry’s only disability language style guide. The guide is intended for journalists, communication professionals and members of the general public who are seeking the appropriate and accurate language to use when writing or talking about people living with disabilities. The guide covers general terms and words on physical disabilities, hearing and visual impairments, mental and cognitive disabilities and seizure disorders. View: <http://ncdj.org/style-guide/>.
7. **Use your shows to inspire parents of children with disabilities to take full advantage of the success that early interventions can bring their children.** Being a successful parent of any child is hard work. Parenting a child with disabilities can be even harder and there is a clock ticking. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience have proven that children’s’ brains are “neuroplastic,” especially in the first six years of life. This means that with good early intervention, children’s brains can literally be rewired to become more successful. In film, *Finding Dory* presents a realistic portrayal of what it is like to parent a child with disabilities. The first scene of the film shows Dory’s parents teaching her how to play with the other children in the aquarium through role-play. Throughout the film, the scaffolding that they built for Dory as a child pays off, leading to her finding them again. Such modeling in future television shows can be

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transformative for children and parents alike. You literally can inspire parents, teachers and other caregivers to help their children build skills, resiliency and success.

**8. Reach out to experts.** As a member of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, which represents more than 100 national disability organizations, RespectAbility can set you up with experts on a wide variety of disabilities. Our Communications Director is a former NBC News journalist who understands the importance of deadlines. RespectAbility is ready to be your partner in ensuring accurate coverage.

**9. Prepare tool kits and teaching guides on disability-related topics that connect to your shows.** RespectAbility is ready to be your partner for these and to help you use social and mass media to build both your brand and more success for families around the world.

**10. Ensure that people with a variety of disabilities have access to your products.**

Make your website fully accessible and have both captions and audio descriptions available for all of your products for those who have either visual or auditory disabilities. People who have both auditory and visual disabilities watch TV and film; this assistive technology ensures they are accessible to all. For your website, add tags, captions, a site index and alt text to images. Ensure that all videos have captions. Video hosting sites such as YouTube and Vimeo have free tools that allow users to add automated subtitles to their clips, but this is not as reliable. Auto-captioning, which is great technology from YouTube, is not always perfect. We would recommend ensuring the accuracy of the captions. Making a transcript of the video available online is also an incredibly helpful resource for users who have auditory disabilities, like Deafness or are Hard of Hearing. Many of these things also increase your Search Engine Optimization, increasing your reach and readership.

**11. BONUS TIP: Create a plan to both hire and retain employees with disabilities.**

Look at places like Exceptional Minds, which trains students with Autism in creating graphics for films and TV shows, as well as to USBLN, National Organization on Disability and ASKJAN.org – all great resources on this. Create an Employee Resource Group for employees with disabilities. How many employees with disabilities, or employees with family members with disabilities, does your company or organization have? Do they feel comfortable to bring their authentic 360-degree selves to work? Do they have a support system with other members of the team? Also ensure that people who identify as a woman, African American or LGBTQ who also have a disability is welcomed into that particular group as well. People who live with “multiple minority status” should be able to feel comfortable in all groups.

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