

ADVERTISING

Using Humor in a Campaign Supporting Disabled People

By Stuart Elliott

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A NATIONAL effort to encourage businesses to employ workers with disabilities is not your father's hire the handicapped campaign.

One difference is that the new ads are paid rather than pro bono, with an estimated budget of \$4 million for the first two quarters of 2010. The ads will appear on television, in print, online and outdoors; there is also a sponsorship deal with NPR.

The ads are being financed largely by agencies in 30 states that provide employment services as well as health and human services to their citizens who are disabled. The agencies have set a goal of raising \$10 million for the campaign's budget for the full year.

Typically, ads that seek to make a case for employing people with disabilities run as public service announcements. That makes them dependent on the kindness of media outlets to place them prominently on television, in print or online.

"We'll never have enough money to oversaturate the media," said Barbara Otto, executive director at Health and Disability Advocates in Chicago, which is overseeing the campaign, "but we wanted to do something different, something that didn't look like a P.S.A."

To that end, the campaign takes a light-hearted tack rather than a sober or earnest tone. The ads try to challenge conventional wisdom about workers with disabilities by offering humorous examples of people with "differences" already employed.

For instance, in a television commercial, a worker in a wheelchair points out her colleagues who "you could label as 'different.'" Among them are a woman dressed in a nightmare wardrobe of clashing patterns, who is "fashion deficient"; a klutzy young man at the copier, who is "copy incapable"; and a shouting man who suffers from "volume control syndrome."



A print ad from a new campaign using comical labels, intended to encourage employers to ignore labels when hiring people with disabilities.

The punch line of the commercial is that the worker in the wheelchair is different, too: Her skills at a basic office function are so bad that she is labeled “coffee-making impaired.”

Print ads introduce employers to a man in a suit whose awkward dance moves make him “rhythm impaired” and an awkward man who is hard to understand because he is “jargon prone.”

The text of the ads elaborates on the point the campaign strives to make.

The ad with the worker who is rhythm impaired declares: “Just because someone moves a little differently doesn’t mean they can’t help move your business forward. The same goes for people with disabilities.”

The ad with the jargon-spouting worker reads: “Just because someone talks differently doesn’t mean they don’t bring something of value to the conversation. The same goes for people with disabilities.”

The tongue-in-cheek differences in each ad appear as Dymo-style labels across the faces of the employees, to set up the theme of the campaign, “Think beyond the label.” The theme is repeated in the address of a microsite, or special Web site (thinkbeyondthelabel.com), where additional information is available about, as the home page puts it, “just how silly labels can be.”

The concept was tested, Ms. Otto, said “to get that employment decision-maker thinking that everyone in the workplace is different,” but not so much that it would make anyone with disabilities or otherwise feel uncomfortable.

“We knew it needed to be disruptive,” Ms. Otto said, “but we wanted it to be tasteful.” In the research, “people said they liked the funny and human tone,” she added.

The tenor of the campaign was endorsed by the actor in the wheelchair, Alana Wallace, who is an advocate for people with disabilities as well as a performer.

“I knew I needed to be a part of this campaign,” Ms. Wallace said, because “there were enough of the pity-party approaches” to the subject.



The commercial “speaks to our similarities in that we all have a label someone could put on us,” she added. “We never use the word ‘disability’ throughout the entire ad.”

Among those collaborating on the campaign are Wirestone; Kelly, Scott & Madison; and Fuor Digital, a unit of Kelly, Scott & Madison, all based in Chicago.

“People go through life labeling other people: ‘the funny guy,’ ‘the bald guy,’ ‘the girl with the glasses,’ ” said Brian Addison, director for brand strategy at Wirestone. “The labels can go from harmless to hurtful.”

“We’re saying, before you label someone, think twice whether it correlates to productivity in the workplace,” he added.

In developing the creative approach, “we wanted it to be on that fine line of provocative but not polarizing,” Mr. Addison said, adding that he believed the campaign accomplished being “human instead of being overly serious.”

The ads are being concentrated in media outlets preferred by the intended audience of people who ought to, as the campaign suggests, “evolve your work force,” those who influence hiring decisions at small, midsize or large companies. They include senior managers, executives and staff members of human resources departments and hiring managers.

The commercial is to run during Sunday morning news programs on ABC, CBS and NBC and on cable channels like BBC America, CNN, ESPN and HLN.

The print ads are to appear in publications like Fast Company, HR Magazine, Inc., Time, The Wall Street Journal and The Week.

Among the Web sites scheduled to run the digital ads are CNN.com, ESPN.com and WSJ.com. There will also be search-engine marketing tied to keywords on Web sites like Google.

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