

PurpleSpace

Stance

Attitude, Outlook, Posture, View, Opinion

10 ways to start establishing your
disability identity

Building Disability Confidence From The
Inside Out

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Overview

When it comes to the diversity agenda 90% of companies claim to make it a business priority, yet only 4% specifically consider disability ([Return On Disability Group](#)). Of those 4%, very few publicly communicate their commitment to disability inclusion and building a better working world.

And we're not just talking about adding a standard equality statement on a website. We're talking about organisations who understand the value of using the real-life experiences of disabled people to inform and shape key messages about their commitment to disability inclusion.

During the Coronavirus lockdown trend for 'Zoom centric' adverts, people with disabilities were conspicuous by their absence. McCain and Mars Chocolate UK are rare recent examples of organisations casting disabled actors and models in advertising campaigns.

In 2018, our members at [Channel4 did something amazing and created a film](#) which stemmed from an idea from their own disabled staff network. They brought together disabled employees from different organisations, not actors, talking with passion about their own disability identities and their respective employers' proactive commitment to disability inclusion as [part of the #PurpleLightUp movement](#).

Whether this apparent reluctance to go public on disability is due to lack of corporate drive on the disability agenda or through fear of getting it wrong and offending, taking the first steps to communicating your disability identity can be a daunting one. Just how do you talk about your approach to inclusion, or the work of your disabled staff network / resource group or disabled ally programmes in a powerful way?

The simple answer is you start internally by bringing together communication professionals, Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) leads and your own home-grown experts, your disabled employees, to deliver authentic, brand aligned stories that show your organisation's commitment to disability inclusion in action.

So whether you want to create a distinct brand for a disability network/resource group, create an internal storytelling campaign, show potential employees customers and stakeholders that you take meaningful action on disability or are ready to start planning a stand-out advertising campaign this short guide is for you.

Vanessa Hardy,
Special advisor to PurpleSpace
Inclusive content design and marketing

1. Are you just paying lip-service or does disability really matter to your organisation?

You are probably reading this guide because you work for an organisation that is committed to building an inclusive culture, knowing that getting it right for disabled colleagues offers a greater chance of getting inclusion right for potential employees, external customers and stakeholders.

You are also likely to want disabled employees to build their inner disability confidence.

[Since Caroline Casey and The Valuable 500 put “disability on the business leadership agenda” at Davos 2019](#), there has never been a better time to spotlight an organisations commitment to disability inclusion. Former CEO of Unilever and Chair of The Valuable 500, Paul Polman finds it “extraordinary” that “over 54% of our global boards have never had a conversation about disability” calling it an enormous missed opportunity,” with the disability community representing an estimated global spending power of \$8 trillion.

If your Board is serious about addressing disability inequality, tap into your own 'grass roots'. Ask your disabled employees, customers and stakeholders to tell you what works well and where you can improve and then use their real-life experiences to show the world that you are serious about demonstrating an authentic commitment inclusion can make a significant difference to the sustainability of your business.

If this is where you are at, read on for our top tips on communicating your stance on disability inclusion. If not, we recommend going back to base and begin by asking the “big question”: are we just paying lip-service or does this agenda really matter to us?

2. Build the inclusive communications dream team

We're big fans of collaboration at PurpleSpace. Time and time again we see how bringing the right people around a shared agenda leads to more robust and inclusive results. With this in mind, here's our list of who to include in your inclusive communications dream team.

- Disabled employees, disability staff network / resource group – your own people who are experts on living, working and thriving with a disability or health condition.
- Colleagues who are likely to be connected to other D&I networks e.g. LGBT+, BAME - who may be able to share experience on developing effective communication strategies.
- Communications and marketing colleagues – who have the power to help you to raise your profile, using the best platform and ensuring that you are aligned with the organisations' wider brand.
- Your senior disability champion or sponsor – they will understand the key organisation priorities and will see ways of building your disability stance by aligning it with business-critical objectives. That could be about improving access to products? Or ramping up

your online sales? Or building better blended on-site/remote teams? Or demonstrating your sustainability goals? Whatever is on the mind of your senior champion is likely to provide a clue as to how you develop your public stance when it comes to your disability identity.

3. What does it really mean to live with disability / ill health – and then use those words?

One of our key roles at PurpleSpace is helping our members to help their own people to develop their personal disability confidence. We know that working with a disability or long-term health condition can sometimes present challenges, but with time and the right support and adjustments we can have a thriving career. You can use the experience of members of your disability network/ resource group to shape your organisation's disability identity – and to start to build a much more sophisticated (and authentic) way of describing that.

- Think about using the types of words we frequently hear when people describe their disability confidence journey such as resilient, flexible, creative.
- Think about how many disabled employees channel their frustration and fear to become passionate about the possibilities in your organisation – how do you convey 'possibility'?
- Most disabled people will tell you about the ironies and funny moments that come with living with disability – how can your organisation use clever humour to build your disability brand?

4. Factor in accessibility from the get-go

This is a big one yet something that is so often left until the end. You've created some great key messages about your organisation's approach to disability inclusion. You recruit the media team to film disabled colleagues sharing tips and experiences for getting on at work. The video is published on your intranet and then you get a message from a disabled or deaf colleague asking where the subtitles are?

Whether you are communicating in writing, pictures, video or audio always ask yourself will everyone be able to access this communication or do you need to make adjustments such as large print or adding image descriptions to make it fully accessible? Your communications team may include accessibility experts, if not take a look these easy to understand dos and don'ts posters from [Home Office Digital explaining how to approach accessibility from a design perspective](#).

5. Be a recognisable member of the corporate brand family

Organisations that are particularly good on disability are those who have created a positive and recognisable brand for their disability network / resource group. Think about creating a simple visual identity that makes people curious to know more about your disability identity, or even better make it so provocative and enticing that people develop FOMO (Fear of Missing Out).

One of our members at [Nationwide Building Society](#) faced the challenge of creating a visual identity for their disability network. Working alongside other 'People Networks' across the organisation they developed a series of logos for internal use based on the Nationwide

house logo but using a different colour to represent each D&I strand. By aligning the network logos with their corporate logo they found that this significantly increased interest in and the credibility of the disability network.

6. It's all in the name

Those of us who have been around the block on our own disability confident journeys are more likely to be out and proud about being part of the disabled community. But not everyone will be as comfortable talking about disability.

What to call your disability network / resource group is still one of the most divisive topics that we see. Some disability networks try to focus on the positive 'can-do' aspects of living with a disability by dropping the 'Dis' and emphasising the 'Ability'. On the other side of the coin some prefer to proudly include the word 'disability' after all it's nothing to be ashamed of.

Our advice here is consult, consult, consult. Gather together a representative group of disabled employees with visible and non-visible disabilities to agree a name that resonates with all of you. Whether you are called Ultra Violet (Virgin Media), 4Purple (Channel 4), Ability (EY) or Purple Network (Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust) if it makes lots of people feel proud, then it's right for your organisation.

7. Normalise the human experience through storytelling

"When you share your story of disability, ill health or difference you share what it means to be human. Working while managing impairment is an experience that thousands of people successfully navigate – but you don't often hear about the economic contribution of purple talent." (Kate Nash OBE, CEO PurpleSpace)

Your communication and marketing colleagues are experienced storytellers and are the best port of call when you're thinking about sharing your story of disability. We've helped hundreds of disabled people to learn how to frame their own personal experience to capture hearts and minds when it comes to the importance of disability inclusion. [Our publication 'Purple Stories' is a great place to start.](#)

8. Look for opportunities to sprinkle in some purple humour

Laughter is a huge motivator to drive change. The subject of disability can be serious but you don't have to be too earnest. It can be off putting to those who want to do their bit, but don't know how... Having the confidence to be playful in your work is worth the risk.

[The following quote from our very first publication 'In The Chair' sums up the value of using humour when talking about disability:](#)

"Disability doesn't have to be doom and gloom. Watch comedy shows such as 'The Last Leg' to see how humour can be used. Humour can smash through barriers, reduce awkwardness and educate and inform. Use humour in your internal newsletter to talk about experiences and the light-hearted side of disability."

9. Be authentic – disabled people representing disabled people

If you work in communications and marketing you'll be familiar with trawling through stock image libraries to find the perfect picture to illustrate your story or D&I initiative. And you'll be equally familiar with pictures of smiling models from diverse backgrounds in the perfect workplace scenario. And you may even spot the wheelchair that has been hired for the photoshoot.

If you takeaway just one tip from this guide it's to always use images of people who have real life experience of the story you are telling. If you are talking about your disability inclusion agenda, ask members of your disability network / resource group to model. If not commission models or actors with lived experience of disability.

10. Be proud, passionate and public

You're starting to create your organisation's 'disability identity'. Your communications team has supported disabled colleagues in delivering an attention-grabbing storytelling campaign. You're now ready to publicly share your disability commitment. The most common starting point is your website and there are a number of key components.

- A personal message from a disability champion or senior sponsor talking about why they care about the subject will really set the tone.
- Feature members of your disability network / resource group sharing their stories, both challenges and successes. This is likely to encourage potential disabled employees to apply to work with you. [Our members at M&S feature disabled colleagues sharing their stories.](#)
- Showcase products and accessibility services for disabled customers. [Our members at Barclays provide information to help customers with different disabilities.](#)

11. Become a global disability identity evangelist

Inclusive businesses that share the real stories of disabled people are a magnet for attracting talent, have a more diverse customer base and drive innovation. [Microsoft show us how it's done.](#) What are you waiting for?

Established in 2015, PurpleSpace is the world's only networking and professional development hub for disabled employees, Network / Employee Resource Group (ERG) leaders and allies from all sectors and trades.

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