The power of inclusive portrayal in advertising

By Emily Stander   28 May 2021

On 27 May 2021, Kantar, in partnership with Affectiva, presented a webinar on how inclusive portrayal in advertising is important for the progression of media.

Source: www.unsplash.com

Speakers who presented research and topics were:

- Daren Poole, global head of creative domain at Kantar
- Graham Page, managing director of media analytics at Affectiva
- Vera Sidlova, global brand manager: Creative at Kantar

In this article, we cover what their research involved, the three main means of creating effective inclusive portrayal - with examples - and takeaways we have from the research.

Inclusion in advertising is evolving

There is a growing awareness globally which speaks to the need for the presence of underrepresented groups in advertising. For example, research shows that the world grows older everyday - and will age further in the next 30 years. However, advertisements rarely have significant and realistic representations of older consumers. Despite being a significant portion of the global population, only a quarter of advertisements include a presence of people over the age of 40. Moreover, only 6% of advertisements include people over the age of 65.

More examples include:

- People with disabilities, who have $8tn buying power, appear only in 1% of advertisements
- People who identify as LGBTQ+ make up 5% of the population, who have $4tn buying power, appear in 1% of advertisements.

Movements like #BlackLivesMatter have also had an impact on the way advertisers create their content. In fact, representation of people of colour peaked in the month of June 2020, but since then, effective representation has started to trickle down again. In the aftermath of George Floyd's death, brands also took the opportunity to express their position.

Although there is definitely a better presence of women in advertising, the representation is still significantly stereotypical. This specifically concerns the reinforcement that women look after the household - with most cleaning products targeting women as their primary market. The casting is more inclusive, but the message stays the same. Beyond this, the issue of holding women to unrealistic body standards still exists in advertising.

Heineken is one company which subverted expectations by showing that men drink cocktails and women drink beer.

As we see here, Heineken specifically tries to subvert expectations by pointing out that everybody can enjoy whatever kind of drink they like - man or woman. This is an excellent example of the power of positive portrayal. Presence doesn't matter as much as meaning; you need to ensure that you go beyond mere presence. Progressive portrayal can help with an advertising brand's building capabilities.

There are three key ideas to follow for positive progression in advertising:

1. Inclusive casting

Inclusive casting refers to ensuring underrepresented groups are casted to tell a story everybody can relate to. What matters in this concept is the power of the idea and the story.

Subaru released an advertisement for their CrossTrek, which uses this idea well, as well as using intersectionality effectively. The premise is also simple: a granddaughter and grandmother are on a roadtrip together.

In the research conducted by Kantar, people across many age groups (from 25 to 59) reacted in the same way to the advertisement - displaying enjoyment throughout, specifically when the grandmother displayed elements of being 'naughty'.

2. Inclusive storytelling

Inclusive storytelling is the effective use of narrative to produce emotionally effective stories. The idea is that the narrative is more powerful *because* of this inclusion, and more often than not, expectations are subverted. A good example of this concept in action is Starbucks' 'Every name's a story' initiative.

As we see here, this story is more powerful because of the meaning the name 'James' has to the transgender person in the advertisement. It's not the story of everybody's life, but it is one that is relatable and emotional. Viewers can still enjoy it. While it was a more challenging story to tell, the research done by Kantar showed that this was enjoyed in the same way across ages 25-59, which is interesting, especially since younger people have been seen to be more accepting.

3. Inclusion as purpose

The premise of this concept is to purposefully use advertisements to speak to inspiring change. The example used here was Proctor & Gamble's 'Widen the Screen' initiative.

This initiative was aimed at pointing out how the viewer may have preconceived notions that they need to challenge. In this, it was mainly aimed at grasping and understanding the black experience, and using people of colour in it was crucial to the message.

Takeaways

The main takeaway from this webinar was that inclusivity is a powerful means of communicating different stories and serving as a form of education.

There is an issue of underrepresentation in the actual working advertising industry, as well. As such, it is important to either diversify the creative team, or if that is not possible, make sure that outside input from underrepresented groups is taken when creating content.

Progressive portrayal makes a significant impact.

Inclusivity is creatively liberating and it can be achieved in a variety of ways.

Actively seek out opportunities for inclusive casting, explore opportunities for inclusive storytelling and ensure you address relevant social topics if your brand has identified those as important to your messaging.

ABOUT EMILY STANDER

Freelancer specialising in games and entertainment | My first loves are writing, music and video games
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