

Shifting the Narrative on

Disability and Neurodiversity Inclusion in Marketing



CANNES LIONS
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Shift 20 Initiative



Shifting the Narrative on **Disability and Neurodiversity** Inclusion in Marketing

At its core, Cannes Lions is a celebration of breakthrough ideas that change the trajectory of brands and shape culture. Yet for decades, the industry has been constrained by the same talent pipelines, the same processes for productivity and innovation, and the same set of voices.

Brands and marketers are under more pressure than ever to break through cultural noise. But they're overlooking an influential and creative population who could help: people with visible and invisible disabilities — from physical impairments to chronic pain, or neurodivergent conditions like ADHD, dyslexia, and autism.

The disabled community makes up **16% of people worldwide**. But they're still significantly misunderstood and stigmatized. They often spend their lives navigating systems, environments, and products that weren't designed with their needs in mind. The result? They know how to adapt, improvise, and solve problems creatively. Those are all much-needed skill sets in an industry that celebrates originality.

Disability inclusion is no longer just a DE&I initiative. It's a creativity and business unlock as well as a competitive advantage. There are **significant risks — financial, legal, and reputational** — for companies that retreat from this.



The LIONS team convened the **Unstereotype Alliance**, **Understood**, and the **Shift 20 Initiative** to share the latest research and guidance on authentically engaging people with disabilities in marketing and advertising. Together, they explore how embedding inclusion principles across the entire marketing process can help brands unlock new storytelling, create resonant products, and deliver truly differentiated ideas.

This joint paper brings together insights from our organizations to provide practical guidance and real-world examples for embedding inclusive representation at the heart of both creative decision-making and business strategy.



Inclusion has slipped down some boardroom agendas. In some cases, it has disappeared. Or it has become merely performative. But many organizations are still committed to creating equity for colleagues and authentic representation of customers.

Confident, inclusive decision-making starts with leadership. It requires frameworks that authentically connect brands with communities while driving business growth.

We all play a role in shifting the narrative and advancing inclusion — especially for marginalized communities. I hope this convening acts as a catalyst for leaders who are still deciding how to engage. In this decade of disruption, actions will matter more than acronyms.

— **Frank Starling**,
Chief DEI & Impact Officer at LIONS

Unstereotype Alliance

The [Unstereotype Alliance](#) is a thought and action platform that seeks to eradicate harmful stereotypes in all advertising and media content. Convened by UN Women, the Alliance brings together partners and seeks to collectively use the advertising industry as a force for good to drive positive change all over the world.

Disability is part of everyday life for an estimated [16% of the global population](#), and for [1 in 5 women and girls](#). Yet recent research shows that advertising is still not reflecting that reality:



Progressive Unstereotype Metric data, developed in collaboration with Unstereotype Alliance and Kantar, found that in 2025, **only 3% of ads tested featured someone living with a disability**. Since testing began in 2019, this number has barely edged forward.

Data from the 2024 Effies in Türkiye paints a similarly stark picture. TV ads continue to construct [a world where disability remains absent](#). Ads portraying disability declined **from 2% in 2023 to 0% in 2024**.

It's critical to close this persistent gap in representation. Advertising helps shape whose stories are seen and valued. The collective work of the Unstereotype Alliance is working not only to close representation gaps, but to help reshape narratives, break down stereotypes, and prioritize inclusion in the stories that brands tell.

Recognizing disabled talent as an essential driver of creativity



The [Unstereotype Alliance's 2026 State of the Industry report](#) clearly illustrates the compounding benefits of an inclusive workforce across several dimensions, including creativity, retention, and profitability.

For the advertising industry specifically, organizations that cultivate and maintain diverse teams are better equipped to create content that reflects varied perspectives, to avoid stereotypes, and to connect with broader audiences. In contrast, a lack of diversity within creative teams often leads to repetitive, narrow portrayals that undermine originality and trust.

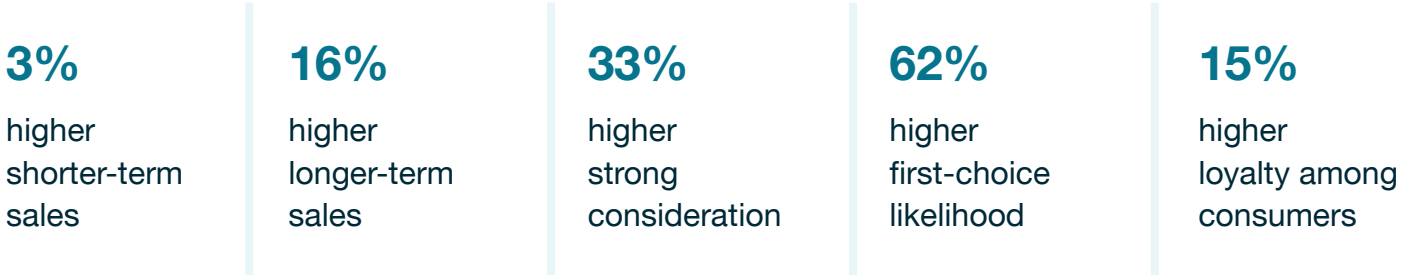
The report also shows the cost of falling short on inclusion:

1 in 7 employees would consider leaving their company or the industry because of a lack of diversity and inclusion.	76% of employees across sectors are more likely to stay when their employer supports inclusion efforts.
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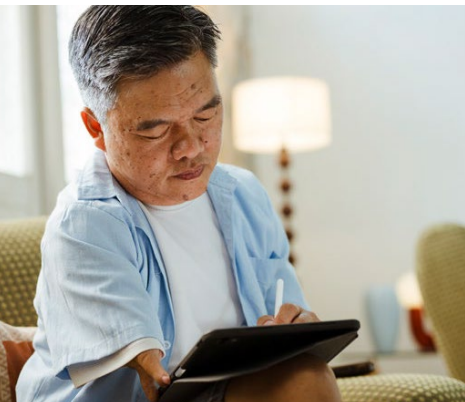
For disability inclusion, that means recognizing disabled talent as essential to the creative insight, authenticity, and future relevance the industry needs.

Making the business case for inclusion

[Unstereotype Alliance research](#) shows that inclusive advertising delivers measurable business returns. Inclusive campaigns generated:



The Alliance's [trends analysis of the industry](#) over the past five years shows that this evidence base is growing.



Inclusion is no longer just a values-driven aspiration. It's a strategic imperative for growth, resilience, and long-term brand relevance.

Brands that fail to reflect the full diversity of their audiences risk missing major market opportunities, weakening trust, and being left behind by consumers who increasingly expect authenticity and inclusion.

An [analysis of branded Instagram posts](#) from 2021 and 2023 across eight industries found that disabled creators generated an average of over 21% more media value and 20% more interactions. At the same time, research has found that creators that identify as being from diverse groups find it more difficult to work with brands in multiple capacities — from maintaining creative freedom to securing approval and receiving timely payment.

Ignoring disability representation means overlooking a significant consumer segment, as well as families, caregivers, and wider communities whose expectations of representation and accessibility increasingly shape brand choice and loyalty. Assistive technology, digital technologies, and accessibility features in advertising all have the potential to fundamentally change the experiences of people with disabilities and beyond, promoting autonomy, communication, and access to essential services.

Disability inclusion should be a mainstream creative and commercial imperative. The opportunity is not only to better reflect the real world. It's to build stronger brands, unlock more resonant storytelling, and ensure that the industry doesn't leave talent, audiences, or growth on the table.

Understood.org



Understood.org is the leading nonprofit focused on raising awareness of the challenges, skills, and strengths of people who are neurodivergent, and providing them with the tools and resources to thrive throughout their life.

Neurodiversity refers to the fact that every person has a unique nervous system, which includes the brain, with a unique combination of abilities and needs. Neurodivergent conditions include autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and learning disabilities like dyslexia and dyscalculia, among others.



Globally, an estimated **1.5 billion people are neurodivergent.** Awareness around neurodivergence is growing, due in part to a generational shift.

About half of U.S. Gen Zers identify as neurodivergent. This generation has now surpassed baby boomers in terms of size in the workplace. And after years of underdiagnosis, many millennial and Gen X women are receiving ADHD and autism diagnoses. In the U.S. alone, [new ADHD diagnoses among women](#) ages 23 to 49 doubled between 2020 and 2022.

These shifts are leading to more open and honest conversations about what it means to learn and think differently in today's fast-paced world — and what non-inclusive workplaces are missing out on. Research has found that:

- [Teams with neurodivergent professionals](#) in some roles can be 30% more productive than those without them.
- Inclusive organizations are 75% more likely to see ideas become productized, 87% more likely to say they make better decisions, and more likely to recognize [higher revenues derived from innovation.](#)

Still, major gaps exist.

Thinking outside the box

Today, the creative industry responsible for shaping representation and culture is not designed for the very minds driving it.



Because most neurodivergent conditions are “invisible,” they remain widely misunderstood and highly stigmatized.

People with ADHD and autism often have trouble with executive function. This is a group of key skills that help people focus, manage emotions, organize, and plan.

Some may also communicate or interact differently than what workplaces have traditionally defined as “professional.” For example, they may avoid eye contact or struggle with small talk.

Too often, these differences are mistaken for disengagement, lack of confidence, or poor interpersonal skills, rather than recognized as differences in communication and processing. This leads to many neurodivergent people being overlooked, underestimated, or excluded by systems and workplace norms that were never designed with them in mind.

Yet many of the strengths commonly associated with neurodivergence are the very qualities the creative industry depends on. Understood’s first-of-its-kind research found that nearly **1 in 2 people working in the U.S. creative industry identify as neurodivergent.**

That’s significantly higher than the **31% in the general population.** Neurodivergent creatives reported their top strengths as problem-solving, connecting the dots, resourcefulness, and thinking outside the box.

These are all widely recognized as hallmarks of creativity.



Still, [1 in 3 neurodivergent employees in the industry are dissatisfied at work](#). The industry's norms — centered on neurotypical communication, processing, and focus — create overwhelming environments for neurodivergent employees. Standard practices like back-to-back meetings, instant messaging, real-time brainstorming, rigid briefs, and reactive timelines are blockers to creativity, forcing neurodivergent talent to overwork just to meet baseline expectations. And 90% of neurodivergent employees in creative fields report masking — hiding their true selves — at work. That's twice as many as their neurotypical peers.

This misalignment between industry operation and how creativity thrives means that neurodivergent talent is an untapped asset. By intentionally building more inclusive systems, brands and marketers can unlock this creative advantage.

Developing brand loyalty

Neurodivergent consumers represent a high-engagement, high-creativity, and high-value segment that marketing currently underserves. This community holds significant market potential, with an estimated [global spending power of nearly \\$1.9 trillion](#).

[Understood's latest research on ADHD](#) highlights a powerful opportunity for brand loyalty:

While people with ADHD are often perceived as unpredictable, 90% of adults with ADHD stay with a brand they like to eliminate the cognitive burden of researching new habits.	However, only 20% of consumers with ADHD feel that brands currently understand their needs.
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To successfully tap into this market, brands must involve people with lived experience to ensure that their work is authentic and resonant.

We also know that [neurodivergent consumers over-index on being creators, influencers, and amplifiers](#). Nearly 1 in 7 neurodivergent (ND) consumers also identify as content creators (14.3% ND vs. 7.8% non-ND). They're producing content on the community platforms where this audience lives and reaching other neurodivergent consumers through voices those communities already trust.

Shift 20 Initiative



The [Shift 20 Initiative](#) is an industry-leading Australian program designed to increase representation, inclusion, and accessibility for people living with disability in marketing and communications. Created in partnership between the Dylan Alcott Foundation and Special Group, Shift 20 convenes many of the leading brands in Australia to shift the perception of what disability is and what it can be.



People with disability represent over **20% of the Australian population** — that's [5.5 million Australians with a physical, psychological, behavioral, or cognitive disability](#) that impacts their ability to do activities.

The number of people with disability is growing. In 2018, 17.7% of Australians had disability, rising to 21.4% in 2022. That's an increase of nearly a million people in only four years, and the number is likely to continue growing.

The increase in disability comes from many different sources, most significantly an aging population and an increase in awareness of neurodivergence and subsequent diagnoses (the latter as articulated by Understood earlier in this paper).

People with disability represent the largest minority group in the world. But they're severely underrepresented on our screens.

[Global representation in advertising](#) currently sits at only 3%, according to research from Kantar and the Unstereotype Alliance.

Creating pathways for success

The [Advertising Council of Australia's industry-wide census](#), last conducted in 2023, revealed that 26% of respondents identified as having disability, with only 37% of that group having disclosed their diagnosis in the workplace.



As an industry, we aren't adequately supporting our talent with disability. In fact, **1 in 4 who are neurodivergent say they will likely leave the industry due to discrimination.**

When we don't voice our support for people with disability in the workplace, or make it clear that workplace adjustments can be requested, people are less likely to disclose their disability. Lack of support creates an environment where people with disability are more likely to leave the industry entirely.

In Australia, we know that there are people with disability already involved in our industry, or who want to get involved. Shift 20 works to create pathways for people with disability to meaningfully contribute to campaigns.

The phrase **"nothing about us without us"** is used by the disability community globally. It's a standard that Shift 20 is entrenching with some of the world's largest brands — like Uber, Amazon, and PepsiCo — through the inclusion of disability consultants in their campaign development.

Closing the representation gap

The representation gap needs addressing — not only because it's the right thing to do, but because there's a strong commercial case.



People with disability and their loved ones collectively represent over **\$18 trillion of spending power globally.**

People with disability are consumers, just like anyone else. But they don't often get to see themselves represented as such. As a result, brands are leaving dollars on the table.

More importantly, brands are limiting pathways for people with disability — because you can't be what you can't see. In fact, research by the Valuable 500 shows that 98% of people with disability think that the portrayals they do see don't accurately represent their reality.

Consumers expect to see representation from the brands they interact with — regardless of whether they have disability. Shift 20's "Disability Visibility in Advertising" research shows that:

2 in 3 Australians feel more positive about brands that include people with disability in their campaigns.

Nearly 1 in 2 Australians are more likely to purchase from these brands.

These numbers reflect *all* Australians, not just Australians with disability. This highlights that representation isn't just something that people with disability deserve. It's something that a majority of Australians expect.

Inclusion in marketing in practice



Paris & Pups

From inclusion to impact: Neurodiversity representation in kids' media

The challenge

Only about 1% of characters in children's programming have any visible disability. Research shows kids begin to form biases as young as ages 2–5. When Paris Hilton's 11:11 Media Impact started work on *Paris & Pups* with HappyNest Entertainment, they wanted to feature characters with ADHD and worked with Understood.org to build authentic characters.

The work

Understood.org consulted on the entire *Paris & Pups* series — from storyline and script to co-creating two characters with ADHD. Consultants brought both field expertise and lived experience. Understood, 11:11 Media, and HappyNest Entertainment also partnered on [companion educational resources](#).

The results

105M+ views

across all platforms in the first 10 months.

~40,000 visits

driven to Understood.org, connecting families with ADHD resources.

18M lifetime Roblox views

Playmates Toys line launching at Walmart (Aug 2026) and Amazon (Oct 2026).

Inclusion in marketing in practice



Shift 20 Casting Call

Breaking down barriers to inclusive casting

The challenge

To tackle the disability representation gap, we spoke to casting directors around Australia to understand the barriers around casting people with disability in campaigns. We identified three key barriers:

- Specificity of briefs
- Tight production timelines
- A relatively small pool of talent with disability with formal representation in Australia

The work

To break down these barriers, we launched Shift 20 Casting Call. It was designed to be a first step in the casting process and fully accessible to anyone with disability around the country — whether they're aspiring actors or have years of experience. Anyone with disability can submit a personality tape from the comfort of their home. Then it's uploaded to a TikTok page open to casting directors, agencies, and brands. This creates accessibility in a process where it has historically been lacking, and it gives the creative industry easy access to talent with disability.

The results

More than 100 people around the country have signed up. So far, we've cast people with disability in more than 20 paid roles for brands like ALDI, Uber, and Anytime Fitness. Importantly, we've helped build connections between the industry and talent with disability, creating meaningful pathways to acting experience and paid work.

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Due to my disability, I never thought I would be able to do anything like this. I always wanted to see more disabled models and actors. Now I am a part of it! It's so surreal and I am honored.

— **Kat Waller**,
Actor

Conclusion



For the creative industry to truly break through and evolve, it must put inclusive representation at the center. The research and examples shared here by the Unstereotype Alliance, Understood, and the Shift 20 Initiative prove that disability and neurodiversity inclusion is a strategic imperative that fuels talent, innovation, and commercial success.

Ultimately, the next generation of Cannes-winning work will come from recognizing that inclusive representation is the core driver of creativity and business itself.

To learn more, get in touch with the organizations below.

Cannes Lions

www.canneslions.com ↗

Cannes Lions is part of LIONS. LIONS is the global platform for creativity and marketing effectiveness. Helping businesses grow through intelligence, benchmarking, training, and advisory services, backed by 150+ years of expertise across Cannes Lions, WARC, Effie, Contagious, Acuity Pricing, Content Marketing Institute, and the Market Research Event. LIONS is part of Informa PLC.

The Unstereotype Alliance

<https://www.unstereotypealliance.org> ↗

The Unstereotype Alliance seeks to eradicate harmful stereotypes from advertising and media to help create a more equal world. Convened by UN Women, the Alliance collectively acts to empower people in all their diversity by using advertising as a force for good to drive positive change all over the world. Launched at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in 2017, the global membership of the Unstereotype Alliance currently stands at 240 companies. Twelve national chapters across five continents tackle culturally nuanced stereotypes at a local level.

Understood

<https://www.understood.org> ↗

Understood is a nonprofit focused on shaping the world for difference. We raise awareness of the challenges, skills, and strengths of neurodivergent people. Our resources help people navigate challenges, gain confidence, and find support and community so they can thrive. Together, we can build a world where everyone can reach their full potential. Understood is a 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in New York. For more information, to donate, or to partner with us, visit u.org/partnerships and follow us @UnderstoodOrg.

The Shift 20 Initiative

<https://shift20.org/> ↗

The Shift 20 Initiative was created by the Dylan Alcott Foundation, Special Group, and some of Australia's leading brands to increase representation, inclusion, and accessibility for people living with disability in marketing and communications. The initiative demonstrates the importance of disability representation and inclusion, by encouraging brands to commit to fair representation of people with disability, whilst providing the opportunity and opening doors for people with disability to see themselves represented