

DEVELOPING OUR IMAGE -

WHO'S IN CONTROL?

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Disabled people have, for a long time, been challenging their portrayal in charity advertising. This topic, however, has recently taken the attention of various non-disabled researchers, thus ensuring that books and newspaper articles have been printed, debates and documentaries televised. Even Ben Elton is on our side! In a recent Times article he comments, "it is an issue I am very interested in, especially spasticity which involves problems of communication, for communication is so much part of my life"! The issue is certainly on the agenda - but who's agenda? And are they getting it right?

As far as disabled people are concerned, I am in no doubt that we are getting there. I am, however, very sceptical where other bodies - namely the researchers, television programmes and personalities - are concerned, particularly at a time when we do not even know ourselves what the way forward should be in terms of our portrayal in disability targeted advertising. Indeed, do we want to be portrayed at all in this way? The debate is very much alive at this time in our movement.

I certainly believe that, give the opportunity, the majority of disabled people would agree that 99.9% of charity advertising is negative, personally insulting and a lie. It should be challenged and its perpetuation stopped. It is appropriate that we, as disabled people, must lead and develop that challenge, but in order to do that we must know the reasoning behind our campaign.

So where does such negativity derive? I suggest that images of us largely stem from the traditional view that disability is a medical tragedy which we suffer from as individuals or, at its best, courageously battle against to make us as "normal", i.e. able bodied, as possible. In charity advertising, people are invited to praise or pity

us. We are either the super-crip percussionist or the beautiful woman torn to shreds (literally) by her progressive disability, as a recent MS campaign demonstrates.

By this way of thinking (known to many of us now as the medical model), medical help offers the only real possibility of reducing disability. At the centre of charity advertising campaigns lies either a cure or a piece of equipment to help us to function more normally. If the campaign is a public awareness venture then, again, it focuses on who we individually cope with our various medical conditions in an unchanging able bodied world. To "help us to help them" is at the heart of their thinking.

So, how do these medical images compare to the vision we have of ourselves as disabled people? Well, unfortunately for many of us, probably all too well. Due to its intensity we are often fooled into believing what society tells us through the media and advertising. If you are told often enough, by different people and organisations, that you are "a sufferer" who needs to be cared for in an institution, then you are very likely to believe it. This is known as internalised oppression.

I am, however, happy to say that more and more disabled people are rejecting this medical model approach which places the problem of disability with the individual. Instead, we look to the environment, social systems and people's attitudes as the real disability.

It has been, and remains, an enormous battle to counter the traditional societal view of us and our revolution in this area has been generally ignored and undocumented by charity images of us. This has happened for several obvious reasons:-

1. We have never been allowed to take an active controlling role in the charitable organisations which purport to represent us. Our image has been created by non-disabled people who "know" how to help those who cannot help themselves". Naturally, they got it all wrong.
2. The traditional charity advertising campaigns have segregated us further, and, in doing so, made their own existence even

more necessary. Disability has always been something that people do not want to look at or think about - it is uncomfortably close to home. Charities help non disabled people to maintain that distance. "Help us to help them" is a comfortable option.

3. By creating a passive, tragic, dependent image of us, the charities have been able to build their empires. By setting up individual, medical condition charities (often in competition with each other) and by using harrowing pictures of us plastered on billboards, they are able to raise the cash to build more segregated schools, homes and workshops which, in turn, maintain our image of dependency on them. Their dependency on us for jobs and, above all, power is ignored in this equation. Charities have developed into big business. One only needs to look at the Spastics Society with 4,000 staff and a 50 million annual budget to realise why our revolution may have been silenced until recently.

BUT THINGS ARE CHANGING, I HEAR YOU SAY! I must agree that there are less pictures of sad, lonely individuals - indeed charities, including the RNIB and the Spastics Society, are fervently looking for POSTIVE IMAGES, it's the buzz word of the 90's! But hang on, let us not get sucked into the next phase of our oppression.

I think we have to ask ourselves, is this just another PR exercise? Is their stress on ABILITY and ACTIVITY reflected in their organisational practices? One only needs to look at the five new bodied regional managers at the Spastics Society or the new segregated hotel in Scotland sponsored by Arthritis Care or the new segregated computer training centre for young people with muscular dystrophy to realise that positive images may well be providing them with a cover to keep us off their backs - while they continue to maintain us in our unequal place. Is the change only POSTER DEEP? I have often come across bodies who state in all their publicity that they are an equal opportunities employer, only to find when I get there - not a single black person in sight, in a sea of white male managers.

Let us take a brief and very basic look at the development of our charity image before we think about our possible future strategy:

1950 - 1970

FUND RAISING GARDEN PARTIES

The image of disabled people then was of checked rugs and tea parties. The charity advertising or publicity was naturally less prolific but the publicity that was around was very philanthropic. One would read of titled people (titled ladies especially) fund raising for the "poor unfortunates", devoting their lives to raising money for institutions where the "Incurables" (the name of a famous home until 18 months ago) could be cared for. Disabled people were not highly represented in much of the postwar advertising because there was far more emphasis on the monied folk who were doing the "selfless deed". The garden party publicity portrayed the bone china and fairy cakes being consumed by the providers, with not a disabled person insight. As a friend of mine, who experienced this time, informed me "we were all in the other room with a plastic mug and digestives - if we were there at all! ... Our image was developed around the deserving poor, a class apart". Disabled people were not consulted, we were 'acted upon'.

1980's

THE DECADE OF THE COURAGEOUS AND EXCEPTIONAL

Things began to change in the late 1970's as the class dynamic altered. Institutions began to be questioned as the only alternative, and disabled people became more visible in society. However, our shift into the community was still portrayed by our abled bodied experts, COURAGE and BRAVERY becoming the defining characteristic of charity advertising, how to "battle against all odds" and become an "example to everyone". We had to either achieve Douglas Bader - like feats of fortitude or demonstrate happy smiling faces of gratitude when taken out by our caring charity workers. I think that the International Year of the Disabled, 1981, really nurtured the myth that we were all so brave to undertake everyday tasks. Remember the headlines around the "thalidomide heroine" when she passed her driving test? Or the bravery awards for disabled children who were talented pianists, artists or mathematicians? But where were ordinary disabled people in this equation? As silent and isolated as ever.

1990

LOOK AT THE ABILITY, NOT THE DISABILITY

We are now moving into a new decade and, yet again, our image is changing. There is still a lot of the old rubbish, but consultation has been attempted with us, albeit on a very superficial level. As disabled people, we have often asked that less concentration be placed on our medical conditions and more recognition be given to our contribution to society. This has been taken to mean that our individual impairments should be ignored because these are the negative elements, and our achievements (the more normal/able bodied the better) celebrated and publicised. In this way, we are pulled into what I see to be the 'ability not disability' syndrome.

This may appear to be a welcome breakthrough, but to myself and numerous others it offers us no status as disabled people and disregards and denies us as far as it is able, our culture. Again, the 'ability not the disability' trend has been appropriated by charities. They suggest that not only can they help us to develop our abilities (the age of the computer programmer!) but that they can also educate society into recognising these abilities and how 'normal' we can be. Again we have little control over our new image. But what is this ability? Is it just another term for normality? If we do not fit into their ability image of us, which, I'm sure, many of us do not and do not wish to, then where do we feature?

Do positive images of disability, a term which has become very warped by charity advertising this year, mean that black people with disabilities are now being consulted on the new community care programme? Do they portray a disabled lesbian on a gay pride march? Do posters reflect the power and strength of older disabled people at work? I do not think so. I do not think that we have yet worked out positive images of ourselves, as the groups mentioned feature little in the images we, as disabled people, have created and promote so how can the various charities and advertising agencies begin to know what a positive image is composed of? They may all think that they do, because they have consulted with us and have said that we want our abilities and not our disabilities to be seen. But did we really think it through? Were we not forgetting in these

statements that it gave them yet another golden opportunity to home in on us as individuals and not on the disabling society in which we live?

So, has this third phase in our image development sucked us in to yet another set of labels ... or oppressive fashion? I think not. I believe that enough of us are very concerned with the way in which we are portrayed in all advertising, not just in the worst traditional type. I think we have demonstrated over the past couple of years that we are wise to this "ability" phase and we are not going to allow it to oppress our disabled brothers and sisters (the 99%!) who don't fit. I believe that we will organise to counter the images of us in charity advertising and beyond, especially as we are about to be plastered all over the television. What we must consider, and this involves proper consultation amongst ourselves as women, black, lesbian, gay or elderly disabled people, is whether we want to develop a set of principles or guidelines for good practice in charity advertising. Will this merely maintain the perception of disabled people as objects of charity, or, will it help to bring about their eventual demise?

That is for us to debate now.