

Inclusive marketing

How research makes all the difference

Edito

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Much like ‘woke’, the word ‘inclusion’ has come to stir up strong feelings. Everyone has an opinion on it, and it evokes both positive and negative emotions. But stirring the pot once again is far less interesting than going back to basics. What exactly is inclusion, especially in the context of marketing? How does inclusive marketing impact society, your target audience, your brand, and your business? And how can you balance all those interests?

To handle inclusion effectively as a marketer, a nuanced approach is essential. Dismissing inclusive marketing as ‘not for us’ can seriously damage your brand, as can jumping in blindly with a ‘let’s see what happens’ mindset. A prime example of the latter attitude is one of Bud Light’s more recent campaigns, as we’ll discuss later in this deep dive.

So, nuance is key. Brands can no longer afford to ignore diversity and inclusion. Both are important topics of debate in society, and as a marketer, you need to consider them from both an ethical and a commercial perspective. Doing nothing is simply not an option. But does that mean that a niche brand suddenly needs to appeal to everyone? Not at all.

Nuance is only possible when your starting point is clear. What are your business and marketing objectives? And how do you align them with the expectations of your target audience and society at large? These are the questions you need to consider before diving into inclusive marketing. The strategic insights you gain will shape your approach.



And that approach will be different for every brand. A disruptive, inclusive campaign might be perfect for a brand that has been embracing inclusion for years. But if your brand is new to the inclusion game, it's better to start with the basics – such as making your own organisation more inclusive – before presenting yourself as inclusive to the outside world. Rushing ahead comes with the risk of serious backlash. And in today's marketing landscape, where authenticity is paramount, you just won't get away with blatant opportunism.

This document is designed to help you approach inclusive marketing from a strategic perspective. You will quickly see that the fundamentals of marketing still hold true. As Hanan Challouki, an expert in inclusive communication, aptly puts it: "People just want to feel represented." If you genuinely listen to your audience, understand their diversity, and acknowledge it in your marketing, you're already well on your way to achieving inclusive marketing – and to doing marketing right overall.

Happy reading.

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Intro

Breaking out of your bubble



We tend to trust brands more when we see ourselves reflected in them. However, everyone is different, which is why inclusive communication is essential for marketers. By understanding the diversity in our society and representing it in your campaigns, you can create and convey authentic messages and reach a wider audience. Doing so can be challenging, however, if your organisation itself lacks diversity.

Data on workplace diversity in Belgium is limited, although insights from Boston Consulting Group and Google provide a snapshot of the situation at the Belgian management level. In 2022, only 9% of CEOs and 18% of executive committee members were women, despite women earning more master's degrees. Additionally, just 2% of CEOs were people of colour.¹ Moreover, the employment rate for individuals with a migration background (i.e. who are not born in Belgium) is about 13 percentage points lower than for those born in Belgium (60% versus 73%), which is roughly 5 percentage points below the European average.

Through the Voices of Our Industry initiative, we gain a clearer picture of diversity in Belgian agencies. The 2023 study by Creative Belgium and iVOX reveals the homogeneity of our marketing landscape and the significant underrepresentation of certain groups²:

- 53% of people working in marketing are between 18 and 34
- 86% are heterosexual
- 94% do not have a disability
- Finally, 13% have a migration background, while 77% are white and European, even though about one-third of Belgian residents have a foreign background, according to [Statbel](#)³

Lack of diversity makes it more difficult to achieve inclusive marketing: for teams working in a bubble of similar perspectives and experiences, it's harder to empathise with other demographic groups and deliver nuanced work.

You might wonder: is inclusive communication really necessary for my brand? While not every company instantly benefits from it, weaving inclusion into your strategy can be a smart move nonetheless. This and much more will be explored in our deep dive.

The basics of inclusive marketing

Inclusive marketing reaches target groups from all walks of life – or from all segments within a specific audience. It acknowledges the diversity of our society and reflects that diversity authentically in both marketing and communications, in both words and imagery.

Inclusive marketing is about diversity in gender, age, ethnicity, religion, marital status, orientation, sexuality, and more. As an inclusive marketer, you identify what is relevant for each target segment and connect with their world as much as possible. You make everyone feel welcome, valued, and connected to your content and brand.

Are you new to the world of inclusion, diversity, and equality? On page 44, we provide a glossary to explain some key terms.

How to get started with inclusive marketing?

Zooming in on inclusive marketing, this deep dive gives you a nuanced understanding of what inclusion can mean for your brand. It touches on your responsibilities as a marketer, the potential pitfalls of inclusive communication, and how to avoid them through comprehensive research. Get ready to discover the right approach for your campaigns and brand, and to establish a genuine connection with your target audience.

Also featured are two interesting interviews with Hanan Challouki (Inclusified) and Marilyn Debisschop (Telenet).

- As an expert in inclusive communication, Hanan Challouki helps companies and brands stay relevant in today's super-diverse society.
- Telenet has made significant efforts to boost diversity, equality, and inclusion. Marilyn Debisschop, Director of Brand & Communication at Telenet, shares the opportunities and challenges Telenet encountered on its inclusive journey.

01

Your responsibilities as a marketer

Inclusive marketing can boost your brand's growth, provided diversity becomes a fundamental part of your strategy. It means that, as a marketer, you have a responsibility to society and your customers as well as your organisation. By fulfilling these responsibilities, you can create a positive impact on society, and foster strong, lasting relationships with customers, which ultimately contributes to your organisation's success.



01.

Responsibility to society

Razor brands have [made smooth legs and armpits the norm for women](#), and we have only recently moved past the era of size zero – thank you, Victoria's Secret. Similarly, the Flemish '[Milk is healthy for everyone](#)' campaign convinced us that we need to drink more milk, despite the lack of scientific evidence. In other words, advertising undeniably influences our social norms, our expectations, and even our self-esteem.

Advertisements shape our perception of reality, and inclusive campaigns ensure that this **reality is accurately represented**. They help debunk stereotypes and encourage tolerance. A study by American researchers Tsai and Han, both PhDs in marketing and advertising, shows that groups view each other more positively when advertising accurately reflects the complexity of our society, uniting minorities and majorities.⁴ You create a positive impact by highlighting similarities between groups, not by accentuating differences.

However, what is being depicted in advertisements often does not align with the world we live in. **The Belgian Ad Barometer** indicates the diversity of ads in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. From August to October 2023, 1,000 advertisements from the top 100 Belgian advertisers were analysed each month.⁵

- Only 19% of the characters in ads appear to be 45 years or older, even though people aged 45 and over make up 46% of the Belgian population and account for about 53% of purchasing power.
- Men and women are represented almost equally, but women are generally younger. Women over 45 are particularly underrepresented in ads, with younger women predominantly featured in beauty product advertisements.
- 82% of the characters are perceived as white, Mediterranean, or Middle Eastern, versus 18% characters of colour. Since 17% of the Belgian population has a non-European migration background, these figures are realistic. However, it is mainly the campaigns of international brands that best represent ethnic diversity.⁶



02.

Responsibility for business results

Building a trustworthy brand

Inclusive marketing can also be viewed as a business model because it fosters trust and positively influences consumer behaviour, especially among younger generations. Microsoft's 2020 whitepaper, **The Psychology of Inclusion and the Effects in Advertising: Gen Z**, highlights that customer relationships based on shared values and authenticity will stand the test of time. Why? Because brands that champion causes important to consumers become reliable friends they can trust.⁷

Microsoft supports this assertion with its own research into the perception of inclusive marketing among American Gen Z (2020). The study found that 76% of respondents are more likely to support brands that appear authentic in their advertising, and 49% said they have stopped supporting a brand that did not align with their values. While these numbers should be viewed through an American lens, the study provides several valuable insights:

- Inclusive ads that authentically represent society create genuine connections, making the brand feel like family.
- Young consumers are more likely to purchase a product or service if they see themselves reflected in its marketing and feel personally addressed.
- Inclusion is a vital tool for building brand loyalty.

“Inclusive marketing isn’t just about targeting niche segments or policy compliance. It’s about building genuine relationships with people that celebrate diverse values, respects them, across a wide range of human experiences.”

YPulse (2022) ⁸

“Playing it safe is riskier than taking a stand,” Microsoft concludes. This is also evident from a study by the research agency YPulse on European youth (Gen Z and millennials): “Young Europeans want to see marketing that represents their values – and that means they want to see diverse and inclusive ads.”⁹

- According to YPulse, Gen Z and millennials are tired of ‘perfect’ advertisements. They prefer marketing that showcases all types of bodies.
- 46% feel that brands do not understand what matters to young people.
- Two out of five respondents no longer purchase from brands whose advertisements they find less appealing. This underscores the importance of **delivering the right message**.
- 64% view advertisements featuring interracial couples more positively, and 66% feel the same about ads featuring people with disabilities. “Though these moves can feel controversial, these days, it’s imperative that brands break out of the status quo and reach young consumers with inclusive marketing,” YPulse adds.

How (much) should you be focusing on inclusion?

How does inclusion fit into your strategy? There's no ignoring it, so finding the right focus is crucial. Your primary goal, after all, is to sell products or services, which requires defining a target audience – a practice that often isn't very inclusive. Sometimes, clichés are in fact necessary to reach your target audience. For example, it makes sense for lingerie brands to primarily feature women in their campaigns as that yields greater financial returns than targeting individuals with male characteristics who also wear lingerie.

Ultimately, inclusive marketing revolves around one core principle: **knowing your target audience inside and out.**

Bud Light has demonstrated the critical importance of understanding your market. Even though the brand had been supporting the queer community for a while (mostly behind the scenes), its American customer base did not respond well to their campaign featuring trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney. Bud Light's aim was to appeal to a younger, unisex audience. Conservative Americans, however, replied by boycotting the brand. Consequently, Bud Light retracted the campaign – and fired its marketing director. By doing that, however, Bud Light offended the queer community, who then turned their backs on the brand as well.



© Instagram, @dylanmulvaney, [\[link\]](#)

What can we learn from the Bud Light debacle?

- Inclusion is indeed essential, but the degree and speed at which you integrate it into your campaigns can be a delicate matter. Inclusive marketing doesn't necessarily require an 'all or nothing' approach. Small steps often work better than big, sudden changes.
- As a marketer, you are not the market you serve. View the world from your customers' perspectives, not your own.

In short

Inclusive campaigns are a societal necessity. They hold up a mirror to society and can connect different groups. However, be careful not to lose track of the commercial side of things: stay authentic to reach your current customers while gradually changing the world for the better.

02

Pitfalls of inclusive marketing

Despite good intentions, many companies still miss the mark when it comes to inclusive marketing. The biggest pitfalls are lack of a long-term strategy, losing sight of your brand's relevance to target groups, one-dimensional thinking, and unconscious bias.



01.

Jumping in without a plan

Inclusive communication is not a quick fix; it's a **long-term strategy**. You should not only understand what resonates with your target audience but also continually adapt to its changing needs. So, it's crucial to draw up a framework with specific objectives and guidelines. Without a clear plan, you risk inconsistencies in your communication, making it difficult or even impossible to reach your audience effectively, as was the case with Bud Light.

Mondelēz International, one of the world's largest food conglomerates, demonstrates how to implement such a framework. The organisation has an extensive web page dedicated to [diversity, equity and inclusion](#), outlining Mondelēz's future vision as well as the actions to achieve it. Some of their goals include promoting an inclusive culture in storytelling and establishing representation goals. They reinforce their vision through collaboration with the [Unstereotype Alliance](#), an organisation that helps address harmful stereotypes in media and advertising.

One notable effort from Mondelēz is the [#proudparent](#) campaign, a short film and platform by Oreo to bring together individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, their families, and allies*. The campaign was accompanied by limited edition Oreo cookies with rainbow filling.

*Allies in this context are individuals who do not identify as LGBTQ+ but who actively support equal rights and opportunities for LGBTQ+ people. ¹⁰

02.

Losing track of super diversity

People are complex beings who cannot be pigeonholed. There are various aspects of diversity, such as ethnicity, gender, age, and social background, to take into account. So, it is not always easy to grasp all the nuances of this super-diversity. The danger lies in focusing on a single characteristic of a group, thereby presenting its members in a one-dimensional way.

For instance, pregnant individuals are often depicted in settings related to their pregnancy – like at the doctor’s office or in a nursery – when they typically spend most of their pregnancy at work. Similarly, people with disabilities are frequently shown in the context of their disability, such as leaving the hospital. We rarely see them in advertisements doing everyday activities like washing dishes, visiting a museum, or having a drink with friends. But no one is one-dimensional.

Maltesers breaks the stereotypical representation of people with disabilities in their campaign called The Light Side of Disability. The brand showcases individuals not as limited or defined by their disabilities, but as people who date and experience embarrassing moments just like anyone else.

03.

Becoming irrelevant

“**You don’t need to serve everyone to be inclusive,**”¹¹ says Forbes, debunking a major myth about inclusive communication. Indeed, you don’t need to address everyone in your communication, nor should you overcompensate by exclusively targeting underrepresented groups. It’s about the authentic representation of **relevant target audiences** and finding the right balance between different groups.

From this perspective, inclusive marketing is not necessarily about showcasing all segments of society but rather all segments of your target audience(s). Niche brands, for example, can hyper-personalise their campaigns by reflecting the diversity within their target group.

There is a difference between:

- Brands aiming to reach the **broadest possible audience**. They can attract new segments through inclusive marketing. Think of a brand like Telenet, which appeals to both affluent customers and low-income families.
- **Niche brands**, who have a very specific target audience. Their campaigns do not need to appeal to a wide array of people. Take **Mr. Marvis**, a clothing brand that specifically targets a wealthier, male demographic. Rather than featuring women to communicate inclusively, it makes sense for Mr. Marvis to accurately represent its existing niche audience by including men who do not conform to beauty standards, for example.

04.

Unconscious bias

Everyone has biases, whether consciously or unconsciously. In just a millisecond, we form associations that have slipped into our worldview through our own experiences. This unconscious bias is one of the greatest challenges for inclusive marketing, as assumptions often do not match reality. In a homogeneous team, the likelihood of members sharing the same associations is higher.

To authentically and credibly represent your target groups, you need to enter into dialogue with them. The best approach is to attract talent from diverse backgrounds, but if that is not immediately feasible, it is crucial to involve your target audience nonetheless.



“If you seek to enter diverse markets, your organisation must become the market you seek.”

Del Johnson (CEO Backstage Capital)

“If you seek to enter diverse markets, your organisation must become the market you seek,” Del Johnson succinctly puts it. Johnson is the CEO of Backstage Capital, a company that invests in organisations led by underrepresented entrepreneurs, primarily women, queer people, and people of colour. He argues that you can only truly unlock creativity by bringing in talents that are traditionally overlooked. These individuals have the power to influence decisions and to spot and counter biases. This, in turn, narrows the gap between teams and the commercial market.¹²

In short

Inclusive marketing requires a long-term vision that goes beyond ticking off a checklist. Success comes from understanding your (potential) customers and knowing how they behave in their daily lives. By engaging with their world, you can avoid stereotypes and highlight their multidimensional character. Your target audience will be a lot more likely to identify with your brand and campaigns.



“Through research and by bringing in expertise, you can easily counter criticism.”

Hanan Challouki
Founder Inclusified

Hanan Challouki is the founder of [Inclusified](#), a strategic agency that helps companies remain relevant in our diverse society. She works with organisations seeking to make their internal or external communications more inclusive. She also founded Hijabis At Work, a platform that connects talented women who wear hijabs with forward-thinking employers. Hanan is a key voice in the inclusion debate, so we gladly turned to her for advice.

01.

Feeling included

Inclusive marketing is a very personal topic for Hanan. “I have Moroccan roots but was born and raised in Belgium. I’ve experienced exclusion firsthand,” she says. “When I started studying communication sciences, I quickly realised that marketing can greatly influence how included people feel.”

So, what exactly does a sense of inclusion do? Hanan: “**People want to feel represented** because representation helps shape a positive identity. If you only see negative portrayals of yourself in ads, it can drag your self-esteem down. That’s why I became passionate about this topic more than ten years ago – and I’m not letting go just yet.”

“If profit remains the sole driver of inclusive marketing, consumers will quickly see through you.”

02.

Financial gain as a steppingstone

“You can’t ignore the societal importance of marketing, but as a marketer, you obviously work for a specific client or a specific goal. If you don’t approach a briefing inclusively, you miss out on a lot of opportunities.”

That brings us to the need for inclusive marketing in order to continue achieving satisfying results. “Companies often see a **commercial opportunity** in inclusive marketing,” confirms Hanan. “And that’s OK because it can be a first step in the right direction. Financial gain can convince them to do more with inclusivity in the long run. However, if profit remains the sole driver of inclusive marketing, consumers will quickly see through you.”

“Imagine a brand that heavily invests in inclusive marketing but actually doesn’t care about diversity or human rights – for instance, only hiring white employees and even allowing them to make discriminatory remarks ... That will eventually come out. In these digital times, people quickly find out who works for your organisation – and they will draw their conclusions.”

03.

Strategic approach

Inclusive marketing is a long-term commitment that shouldn't be confined to the marketing team. If it is, you risk a superficial approach that won't convince customers.

Hanan: "It's crucial to embrace inclusive values across the entire organisation. Ensure that the foundation is solid and that you're **working within a clear framework** with well-defined goals. I often see companies unsure of the direction they want to take. Without specific objectives tied to inclusive communication, they end up doing a bit of everything. But, like all marketing plans, there needs to be a strategy behind it."

Studies by Microsoft and YPulse highlight the importance of this strategy, as (young) customers tend to disengage if a message doesn't feel authentic. Hanan explains how brands can maintain consumer trust as they move towards more inclusive campaigns: "If campaigns come across as fake, it's often because they break from previous messaging or because companies try the inclusive approach once and then drop it. To project authenticity, you must consistently work on inclusion and diversity."

04.

Research as a starting point

How does Hanan help companies communicate more inclusively? "Research, that's where it all starts. Organisations often enter this process quite **naively**. They think they know who to address and how to do it. But you really need to analyse what's already on the table and then engage with the target audience about the company and the market. For example, I always start by finding out why organisations aren't yet meeting their goals and what data and information are still missing to **understand the behaviour and needs of their consumers**."

05.

A network of expertise

Hanan's ultimate tip: "You don't have to know everything yourself. Some companies don't take any action because they feel they lack the right expertise. But that's just an excuse. You don't have to do it alone. Simply establish partnerships with experts who will give you the insights you need."

"Through research and by bringing in expertise, you can **easily and sincerely counter criticism**. Change has never been brought about by people who don't take action. So, don't let fear of making mistakes hold you back."

06.

Diversity in your team

What's even better for gaining relevant expertise is having a diverse team yourself. "That's often the key. You look at a problem from **different perspectives**, which increases your chances of finding a solution. It also helps you better understand super-diversity."

Hanan continually emphasises the importance of team diversity, not just to communicate more inclusively but to elevate your company and its results to a higher level. "Studies show that **team diversity leads to positive outcomes**. There's more innovation, higher productivity, more and better output, and improved collaboration. However, sometimes processes can be so ingrained that they prevent certain people from fitting into the team. I maintain that you can't genuinely claim to support diversity and inclusion if you don't work on it internally," concludes Hanan.



In short

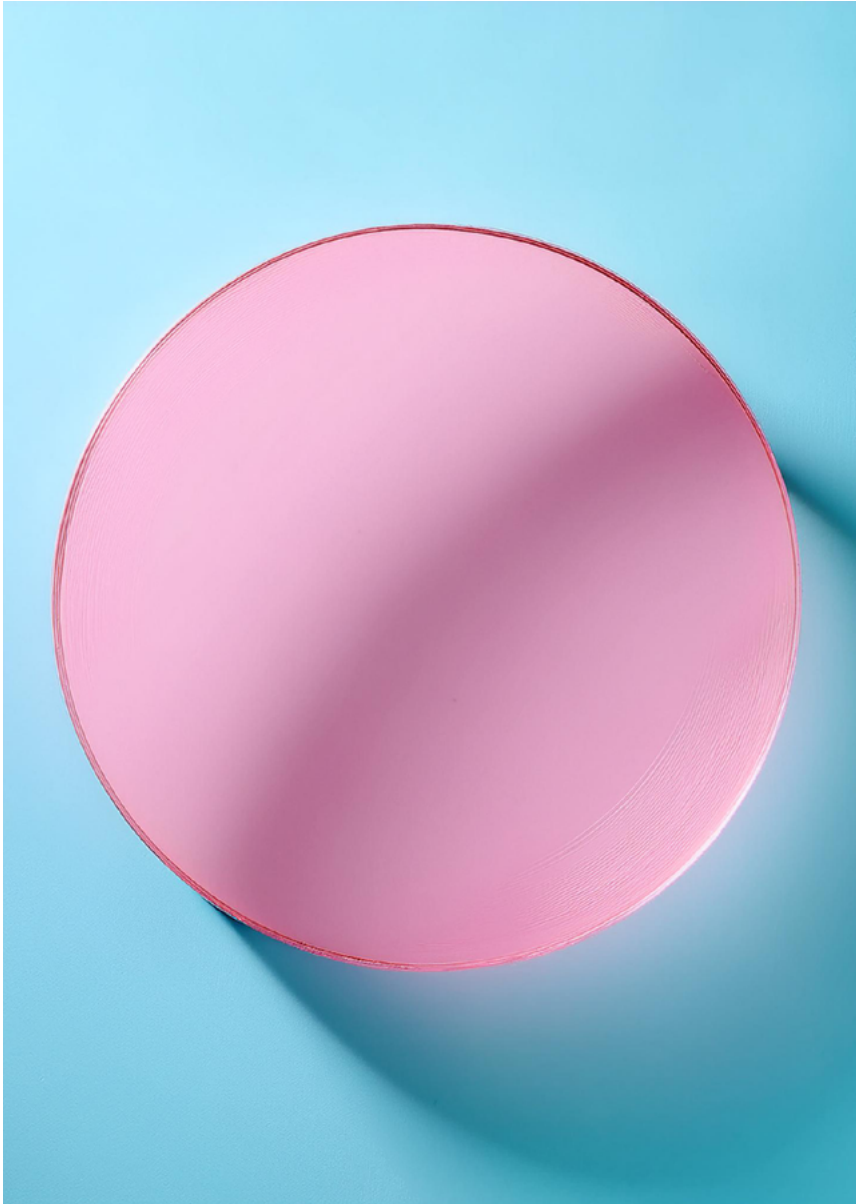
- Your first steps towards more inclusive communication might involve some risks. But any risks are outweighed by the consequences of doing nothing.
- Inclusive campaigns are more genuine if you dedicate enough time to them and also work on diversity, equity, and inclusion within your organisation. Don't just rely on your own viewpoint but collaborate with experts who can broaden your perspective. This research also serves as your defense against criticism, as you can demonstrate that your ideas and approaches are well-founded.
- If you keep it superficial and only jump on the inclusion bandwagon for commercial purposes, you'll quickly be exposed – especially by Gen Z, who are more driven by their values and principles than previous generations.

03

Avoid pitfalls through research

You've probably understood by now that inclusive marketing requires an open mind. In-depth research helps you go beyond stereotypes and create new opportunities in the market.

Follow this step-by-step plan to structure your research and embrace diverse perspectives.



01.

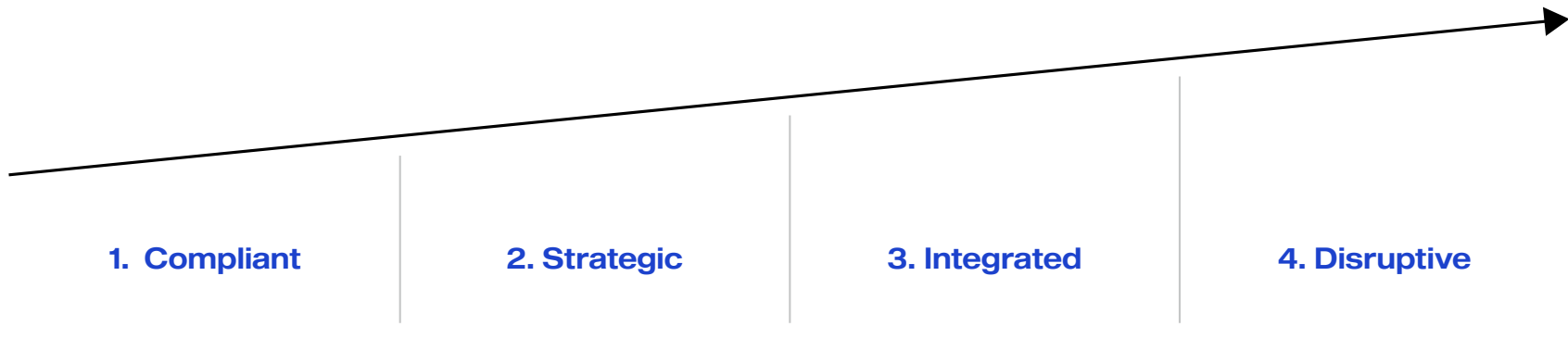
Position your brand

Inclusive marketing is a long-term strategy focused on authenticity. Before outlining your overall plan, you need to have a clear understanding of how you want to position your brand.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Where does your brand currently stand in terms of diversity and inclusion?
- Where do you want to go?
- What do you want people to associate with your brand?
- How can you achieve that?

The strategic framework below, from the Norm Thinking Masterclass by Allyens (an agency specialising in inclusive communication)¹³, can help you position your brand. It identifies four different levels of diversity and inclusion.



1. **Compliant** brands do the bare minimum. They follow the law but often (unconsciously) stick to the status quo. For example, Nestlé rarely undertakes initiatives that go beyond legal requirements.
2. **Strategic** brands focus on diversity when it suits them. They go a bit further than regulations require, but their messages often feel forced. Pepsi learned this in 2017 when they tried to leverage global protests (#metoo, Black Lives Matter, ...) with an ad featuring Kendall Jenner, aiming to unite different societal groups. Marketing Week noted: “Reducing the current global protest movement to a supermodel handing out cans of Pepsi feels terribly misjudged.”¹⁴
3. **Integrated** brands incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into their vision and values. All employees are aligned with this stance, and not everything they do is driven by profit. A human approach is prominent here. Bol clearly positions itself as an integrated brand.

4. **Disruptive** brands not only question the system but actively try to change it. Their ads often resemble activism, aiming to mobilise people. Compared to their competitors, they are leaders in DEI. Think of a brand like Zalando.

When a brand abruptly shifts from compliant to disruptive, it probably won't gain consumer support – as was the case with Bud Light. Such a shift requires a step-by-step approach. First, an internal change in mindset, then in communication.

As Hanan Challouki points out: “You can't claim to stand for diversity and inclusion if you're not working on it internally.” Consumers quickly notice if your internal practices don't align with the values you project in your communication.

02.

Identify relevant target groups with dynamic research

The next step is market research. Inclusive marketing doesn't necessarily mean targetting an entirely new group of consumers. It can also mean paying more attention to the diversity within your current audience, such as people with disabilities, singles, or varying income levels.

Use data to understand who your customers are and how to better serve them. Also, analyse which underrepresented segments you aren't reaching sufficiently. Whose story are you not telling? The best market research uses dynamic methods that go beyond first-party data.

During your research, try to answer the following questions:

- Which (underrepresented) target groups or segments would benefit from your product/service and are therefore relevant to your brand?
- Why aren't you reaching those people?
- How can you better accommodate consumers who are currently being overlooked?

Good to know

"Underrepresented" consumers are not necessarily minorities in society; they can also be minorities within your target audience. For example, if you sell a beauty product, men might be underrepresented in your marketing. It's up to you to determine whether a segment is relevant enough for your brand.

03.

Enrich your data

First-party data often do not provide information about your customers' backgrounds, such as education level, ethnicity, or disability. To make your campaigns more inclusive, it's best to supplement first-party data with other sources:

- **Community mapping (asset mapping):** analyse the market composition and identify what groups could benefit from your product. Find out who they are, what they like, and what they need. Then, compare this information with your current customer list.
- **Market mapping:** what are your competitors doing? Analyse their market strategies and try to identify gaps in your target groups which you can fill.
- **Demographics and ethnographies:** study not only the age, gender, and income of your customers but also their lifestyle, cultural background, purchasing behaviour, etc.
- **Surveys and focus groups** are a great way to learn more about the preferences, needs, and opinions of both existing and potential customers. You can discover barriers that prevent people from buying or using your product.
- **Artificial Intelligence:** AI tools can analyse large amounts of data, monitor social media, and even determine a tone of voice. They can provide concrete insights, but keep in mind that inherent biases within AI systems are possible. It's crucial to double-check and verify with other sources.
- **Trend forecasting:** by monitoring trends and cultural developments, and by predicting trends based on your data, you can anticipate the needs and desires of diverse groups.
- **Personal experiences and insights from a diverse team:** it doesn't always have to be about hard data. If you have a diverse team, listen to their experiences to discover new opportunities or come up with fresh ideas.

Beware of 'bias' in data and research

(Unconscious) biases can influence results at various levels, for example leading to assets that are not accessible to a large group, questions that guide respondents in a certain direction, or samples that are not relevant.

Be aware of bias in algorithms as well. The way a tool is trained determines how it collects, selects, and interprets data. As a result, algorithms can provide incorrect answers or show a preference for certain data, which is not representative of all relevant groups. This can occur, for example, if your dataset mainly consists of information from a specific demographic group.



04.

Get to know the people behind the data

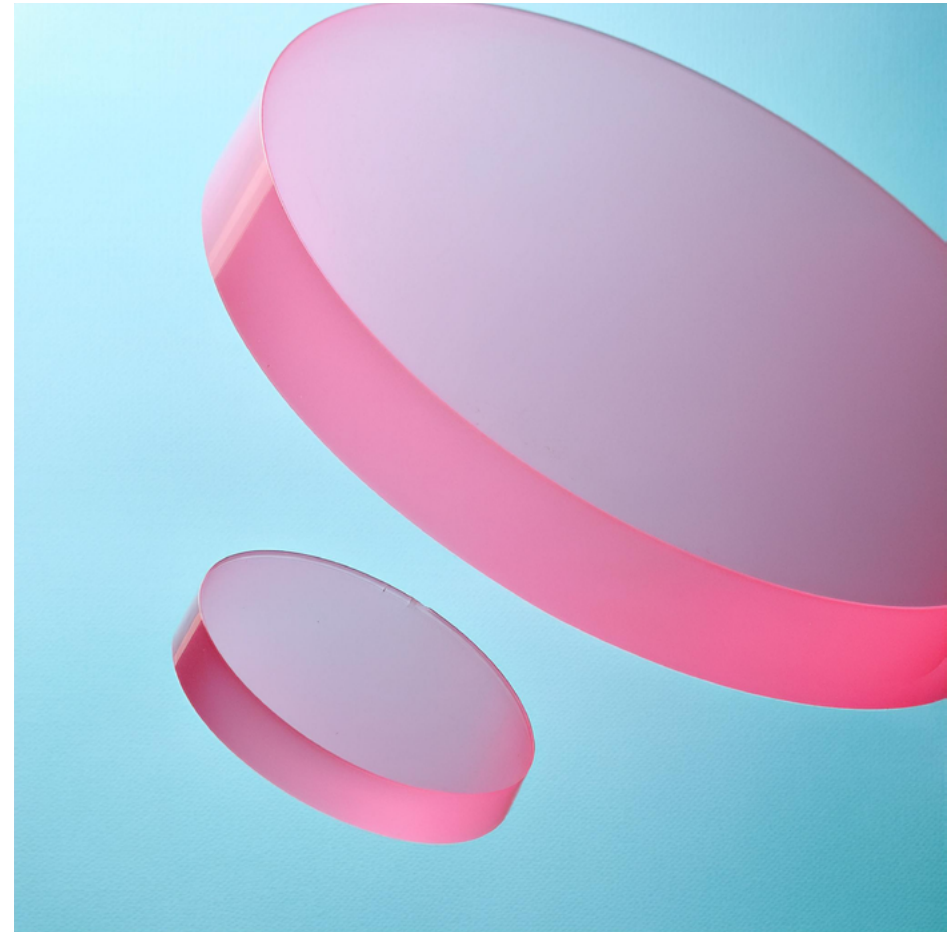
To establish a genuine connection with your target audiences, you need to understand the people behind the data. Numbers and data will tell you how consumers act, but only a real-life analysis will tell you why. It can also reveal certain language preferences and (cultural) sensitivities. Some companies like to base their research on personas, although personas can quickly reduce target groups to one-dimensional characteristics.

Try to answer the following questions:

- How do the different target groups identify themselves?
- How do they communicate?
- Through which channels can you reach them?
- What message will resonate with them?
- What are the similarities between your target groups?

The best practice here is to engage with experts who understand your target audience, or who are part of the target audience themselves. No single person is representative of an entire target group, so explore various perspectives. This list provides inspiration:

- **Influencers:** which influencers have a strong connection with your target group(s)? They can provide valuable insights for your campaign, and maybe become ambassadors for your brand.
- **Non-profits:** which non-profit organisations are working with the target group(s) you want to reach? They are literally part of the target group's environment and can help you better understand them.
- **Experts:** assemble a panel of experts who know your target groups and their communication styles.
- **Scientific research:** support your strategy with recent studies on how different communities identify, what concerns them, what media they consume, etc. For example, eMarketer researched how Gen Z uses social media and how marketers can tap into that.
- **Surveys and focus groups:** if you used questionnaires in the initial research phase, you can contact some of the participants to discuss certain topics in more detail.
- **Diverse team:** if you have a diverse team, chances are one of your colleagues can help you better understand your target audience by sharing their own insights and experiences.



05.

Ask the right questions to create an authentic campaign



© Stad Aalst

Now that you've gotten to know your target audience, you can create campaigns that authentically and accurately represent them. There are two main approaches:

- A specific campaign for each target group
- An overarching campaign that taps into shared values and experiences, and to which multiple target groups can relate

Below are our guidelines for creating authentic campaigns, based on tips from Allyens. Consider these questions during your creative process¹⁵:

Who will feature in your communications?

Carefully select your characters, and be critical: are they the right people to represent and reach your target group(s)?

From what perspective are you telling the story?

Context determines how people perceive your campaigns. The story you tell should be relatable and reflect the daily lives of the people you represent. Avoid stereotypes and consider whether your campaign could be misinterpreted.

The city of Aalst provides an example of what not to do. In a well-meaning attempt to feature more people of colour, they neglected the context of their campaign. Far-right individuals on social media quickly associated the 'nasty killjoys' (cigarette butts on the pavement) with the black youths in the photo.

Do your characters have enough depth?

Deaf people are more than their hearing impairment, gay people are more than their romantic partners. Try to combine different aspects of intersectionality: a deaf person can also be a dad, CEO, and footballer, for example.

Is your design inclusive?

Next to content and context, the presentation of your ad matters as well. All assets you deliver should be accessible. For example, choose a clear colour contrast and readable font, support your text with visual elements (such as diagrams), and opt for a simple layout.

Reading tips from the UK government

- 5 principles to make your campaign more inclusive
- Do's and don'ts on designing for accessibility

Is there a good mix between the target groups?

The art of inclusive marketing is to represent the diverse segments of your target audience in a balanced manner. This allows more people to see themselves in your campaigns and avoids the impression that you are favouring one group over another.

06.

Check your campaign with the target audience(s)

To ensure your campaign will succeed, test it with the target audience(s) you have in mind. You can, for example, ask advice from the individuals you surveyed in step 2. Many marketers skip this final check, but when you are still getting to know certain target groups or segments, a double-check like this is invaluable.

In this research phase, try to answer the following questions:

- Is your campaign accessible?
- Is your campaign authentic and representative of the target audience?
- Is your campaign free from stereotypes?
- Are there any errors in representation or approach?
- Is there any important information or context missing?

In short

- First, determine the direction you want to take with your brand and the steps needed to go there.
- To communicate inclusively, you don't need to cast a wide net to involve the entire society. Instead, focus on identifying the target groups relevant to your brand and ensure they recognise themselves in your campaigns.
- Your target audience is more than the data you collect. Make sure you grasp how people communicate, through which channels, and how different communities are connected. Organise focus groups, for example, to understand the people behind the data.
- Images and text will make or break your campaign. Don't just show people from a particular target group but place them in the right context – preferably real-life scenarios.
- Check, double-check, triple-check. Review your campaigns with experts to filter out any unconscious biases.

“By not focusing on inclusion, you are hurting your company.”

Marilyn Debisschop

Director of Brand & Communication at Telenet

Marilyn Debisschop is Director of Brand & Communication at Telenet, a broad brand with a very diverse target audience and an equally diverse set of challenges, which Marilyn and her colleagues tackle head-on.

01.

Inclusive mindset

At Telenet, it was an internal change of mindset that got the ball rolling. “A few years ago, we clearly felt the need to be more inclusive,” says Marilyn. “Engagement studies among our employees showed that 90% of Telenet staff felt at home in the workplace. That meant 10% felt less involved, and for us, that one in ten is very important. The study was a wake-up call: we realised we had to work on it intensively, and we did, making inclusion a KPI.”



“During that time, I listened to numerous podcasts and devoured literature on unconscious bias. I was quick to get on board with inclusive marketing, but my team wasn’t yet. I learned that you can’t just ask people to communicate more inclusively. Inclusivity requires awareness and is the result of a learning process.”

The first step at Telenet was creating an inclusive mindset. “We offered workshops that clarified why inclusion is important and necessary. Afterwards, we no longer needed to talk about the reasons for inclusive marketing, and how far we should take it. We then developed a charter outlining what inclusive communication means for us as a brand and as an organisation.”

02.

Commercial importance

Marilyn: “For us, our inclusive mindset not only serves a social purpose but also a commercial one. The more people feel connected to your brand, the more customers you attract and retain. In this regard, an inclusive approach is not just a nice-to-have but a must-have if you want to stay relevant. By not focusing on inclusion, you are hurting your company.”

According to Marilyn, rather than looking at the risks of doing something, we should be aware of the risks of not taking action. “It is very risky for a broad brand not to reflect a diverse society. Much riskier than a few negative comments on social media.”

03.

Universal and inclusive storytelling

After ‘why’ comes ‘how’. How does Telenet reflect the diversity of our society? “I used to think that ethnomarketing, focusing on a specific target group, was the best approach. But we are moving away from that. Different groups and communities have a lot in common. By segmenting them, you’re actually highlighting the differences. It’s better to focus on universal values and insights.”

“Of course, representation is important because you can’t be what you can’t see,” says Marilyn. “But it doesn’t make sense to show people from diverse backgrounds if they don’t recognise themselves in the story you’re telling. Just because you look like someone else doesn’t mean you have the same life experiences. That’s why we seek out inclusive stories that resonate with many people. Campaigns that tap into shared values across communities have a broader appeal.”

“Campaigns that tap into shared values across communities have a broader appeal.”

04.

Long-term consistency

Telenet has a solid strategy, but according to Marilyn, implementing it is not always easy. Maintaining long-term consistency is particularly challenging. “Keeping the inclusive mindset high on our agenda is no easy feat, especially when welcoming new colleagues who haven’t participated in our initial workshops,” she says. “Additionally, we work with various partners and agencies for whom inclusion is not always a priority. Fortunately, we’re not afraid of taking a leading role: there’s no longer any debate on the matter. We are committed to inclusion and have moved beyond skepticism.”

05.

Battling your own biases

Telenet’s commitment to inclusion is reflected in its internal operations, but Marilyn points out that no team, no matter how diverse, can ever represent all layers of society. “Yes, Telenet is a very diverse workplace. But we have our limits. For instance, our workforce mostly consists of highly educated individuals with salaries to match. There is a gap with less educated profiles, which means our approach is less broad than we’d like. Yet we do try to incorporate other perspectives too.”

Hence, Marilyn pushes her team to overcome unconscious bias. “We conduct checks with various consumers. Based on their input, we make conscious choices about our storytelling. So, whenever a campaign doesn’t go down well, we can show critics that we’re not guilty of ignorance and that we did enter a dialogue. It’s bad when a mistake slips through just because you were unaware of your own biases. For instance, it’s our policy to check new insights with focus groups, because that’s where it all starts. There’s no point in having focus groups around when the work is already done.”

Despite good intentions, not every inclusive marketing campaign hits the mark. But even then, you can always fall back on your research. Marilyn: “Sure, I’m afraid of getting it wrong sometimes. Despite our efforts, people might still not feel valued or might not believe what we’re trying to say. But if you have expert advice to fall back on, you can counteract criticism. You also must accept that it’s impossible to please everyone, all the time. That’s part of diversity as well.”

In short

- Inclusive marketing requires an effort from both organisations and their employees.
- Critically examine internal processes and give your team the opportunity to study and master best practices concerning inclusion and diversity. Only when the foundation is solid can inclusive communication become a habit.
- Focus not only on representation and ethno-marketing but try to bring a story that many people can relate to.
- Look beyond your own knowledge and experiences, and double-check insights with experts.

04

Food for thought

It's not always easy to get inclusive campaigns right. Some believe in shocking people to break the status quo, while others prefer to colour within the lines. There is no definitive answer to what works best – but hopefully, this deep dive can serve as a guide for your next campaign. One lesson that stuck with us: don't stay in your bubble but seek out other perspectives. So, we presented some cases to Hanan Challouki and Marilyn Debisschop, and asked for their expert opinion.



© YouTube, "bol - De winkel van zomerspetters (BE)", [\[link\]](#)

01.

A great example

Bol – De winkel van zomerspetters

Bol is a store for everyone, and their campaigns reflect that. Bol's adverts consistently show that it's perfectly okay to be yourself. Take, for example, this ad for their 2023 summer campaign. Instead of a typically toned lifeguard, it's an average looking man who could be your partner, neighbour, brother, or best friend, who plays the lead.

Marilyn Debisschop: "Big companies have a responsibility to challenge stereotypes in their media space. Bol does that very deliberately. They look at who would typically be cast for a certain role, and then they choose someone who is the complete opposite. Not every company needs to follow in their footsteps, but it certainly makes for interesting discussions."



02.

A not-so-great example

H&M: the coolest monkey in the jungle

In 2018, H&M faced heavy criticism for featuring a black boy in a sweater that said 'Coolest monkey in the jungle' on its UK website. Many deemed it a racist insult – think of Romelu Lukaku, who is often 'greeted' with monkey noises before a football match. H&M apologised and removed the image. But does this mean a black child can't wear a sweater with a monkey on it?

Hanan Challouki: "Just because you don't see what's wrong with an image and don't make the comparison yourself, doesn't mean it's not racism. As a marketer, you need to be aware of the insults black people often face. That's why this campaign is not okay. What makes it worse is that the same campaign featured a white boy wearing a sweater that said 'survival expert' on it. That almost literally creates a colonial pattern. It's a prime example of **'know your history'**."

Marilyn Debisschop: "You absolutely cannot be blind to the stereotypes that exist about people of colour. The creators may have chosen this image intentionally to show that they are, in fact, not discriminatory thinkers. But perhaps their choice was an unconscious one, as they've maybe never experienced racism themselves. The latter would mean that H&M fails to understand the struggles of their target audience."



© HEMA

03.

It's OK to cause a stir

HEMA: from pacifiers to sex toys

In early 2024, **HEMA** published a baby magazine: “Everything for you and your baby: from pacifiers to sex toys.” The striking cover quickly made the rounds on social media. There was a debate about whether this slogan was acceptable or not – some thought it sexualises babies, while others believed it empowers mothers. HEMA apologised and pulled the magazine from stores. But was that really necessary?

Hanan Challouki: “You can always say that you don’t see the problem, but not everyone looks at this brochure the same way. Some might find it funny, but we need to move beyond individual perceptions and be aware of potentially problematic patterns. We live in a society that sexualises children, and from a very young age at that. Many parents have an issue with this and **just want their children to be children**. It’s mainly about avoiding certain associations, especially sensitive ones like this.”

Marilyn Debisschop: “This campaign seems quite intentional to me. It aims to break stereotypes. Sometimes society just isn’t ready for that. But the only question you really need to ask is: ‘Was there a prior debate?’ If there was, then HEMA can use that to back this campaign and explain it.”

04.

Campaigns that match your company

‘Sincere’ and ‘relevant’ are two key principles of inclusive marketing. Indeed, experts recommend focusing on creating campaigns that truly reflect your company. It might require some internal changes first, so you can then genuinely embrace and express inclusion externally. The first step is to pause and reflect, the second is a mindset shift. Inclusive marketing campaigns follow next.

Inclusive marketing dictionary

01.

What is the difference between diversity and inclusion?

Diversity is about statistics – whether there is a mix of people from different backgrounds. Inclusion means managing diversity and the differences between people. With the latter, the focus is on ensuring that no one is disadvantaged or excluded. Van Dale dictionary defines both terms as follows:

- **Diversity (noun; f):**
when people with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds are present.
- **Inclusion (noun; f)**
when everyone has equal rights and obligations, and can fully participate

Accessibility

[ak-ses-uh-bil-uh-tee] • **noun**

Designing products, services, environments, and media in such a way that they are usable by as many people as possible, including those with disabilities.

Cultural appropriation

[kuhl-cher-uhl uh-proh-pree-ey-shuhn] • **noun**

Adopting elements from another culture without understanding or respecting that culture. This can include clothing, hairstyles, music, rituals, or traditions.

Often, it is privileged groups who adopt elements from minorities, completely reshaping them for profit, which results in a stereotypical portrayal. Think of fashion brands that incorporate ethnic attire or symbols into their collections.

Discrimination

[dih-skrim-uh-ney-shuhn] • **noun**

Treating someone unfairly based on personal (inherent) characteristics such as ethnicity, appearance, age, sexual orientation, or religion.

Equality

[ih-kwol-i-tee] • **noun**

Striving for equal treatment without discrimination based on personal characteristics.

Equity

[ek-wi-tee] • **noun**

Acknowledging that everyone lives in different circumstances, and creating a level playing field for each individual.

Gender Cisgender/transgender Non-binary

[ak-ses-uh-bil-uh-tee] • **noun**

A spectrum that extends beyond the binary system of male and female, based on social, cultural, and psychological characteristics.

- *If your gender identity aligns with your physical characteristics, you are cisgender.*
- *Transgender is the umbrella term for individuals whose sex and gender identity differ.*
- *Non-binary individuals do not exclusively identify as male or female.*

The Çavaria vzw, which advocates for the rights and well-being of LGBTI+ individuals, describes it as follows: "Gender is how you personally experience your identity. [It] is a social construct that helps determine a person's position within a society. [...] Certain expectations and roles are linked to it."

Heteronormative thinking

[het-er-uh-nawr-muh-tiv thing-king] • **adjective**

When heterosexuality is viewed as the standard or norm, often leading to the neglect of other sexual orientations. In heteronormative marketing campaigns, only heterosexual relationships are depicted.

Intersectional thinking

[in-ter-sek-shuh-nl thing-king] • **adjective**

Being aware that different characteristics, experiences, and social indicators intersect and collectively shape the identity of a person or group.

Microaggression

[mahy-kroh-uh-gresh-uhn] • **noun**

Subtle remarks, behaviours, or actions that are often unintentionally discriminatory or condescending. Examples include sexist jokes or constantly drawing attention to a person's disability.

Minority

[mahy-nawr-i-tee] • **noun**

People who make up only a small portion of the population or a specific group. They differ from the dominant majority in terms of personal, social, or cultural characteristics – such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical or mental ability. Often, they have unequal rights and limited access to resources.

Orientation

[awr-ee-uhn-tey-shuhn] • **noun**

Can be romantic or sexual. A person can, for example, be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual.

Privilege

[priv-uh-lij] • **noun**

Advantages, rights, or favours that certain people automatically enjoy due to their position within a particular social structure. For example, white men often have more professional opportunities than women.

Representation

[rep-ri-zen-tey-shuhn] • **noun**

The way different groups are portrayed in media, art, politics, and other social contexts. It concerns how people, along with their stories and ideas, are presented – and how these representations influence perceptions, behaviour, and social norms. It's crucial that all groups in society are not only visible but also accurately depicted.

Sex

[seks] • **noun**

The biological characteristics with which a person is born. These can be male or female sex characteristics, or both in the case of an intersex person.

Social norms

[soh-shuhl nawrms] • **noun**

Shared expectations and rules within a society or group that dictate what is considered appropriate and what is not, and that thereby shape part of cultural identity. Social norms can range from how you address someone to clothing styles and table manners. Understanding these nuances well helps build trust.

Super-diversity

[soo-per dih-vur-si-tee] • **noun**

The diversity within diversity. Within communities and groups, there are many differences, such as age, educational level, political preference, and economic status.

Unconscious bias

[uhn-kon-shuhs bahy-uhs] • **noun**

Unconscious associations and preferences that shape our perception of certain groups.

Underrepresented groups

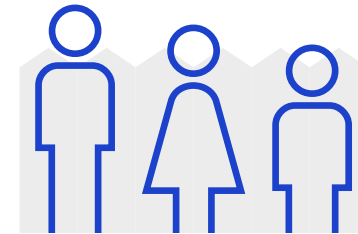
[uhn-duh-reh-pruh-zen-tuhd groups] • **noun**

Segments of the population that are inadequately represented in the media. This lack of representation contributes to unequal opportunities, limited access to resources, systemic inequalities, and discrimination.

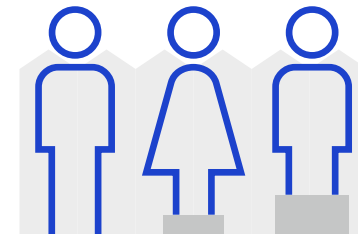
Validism (ableism)

[val-uh-dism] • **noun**

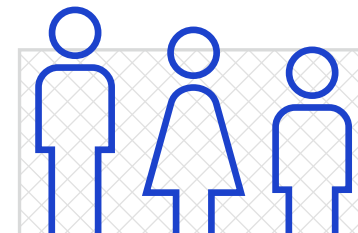
A form of discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities. They are often depicted as vulnerable individuals who are dependent on someone else's care. Ableism stems from the belief that people without disabilities are superior.



Equality



Equity



Inclusion

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Questions?

Inclusion is a long-term commitment, and at Onlyhumans, we believe in long-term marketing. Need some help in the strategic phase? Got a great idea for your next campaign but haven't found the right partner to bring it to life? Give us a call. We excel in content, creative campaigns, and performance. Plus, we have some interesting connections who can undoubtedly assist you.

Since 1999, Onlyhumans has been on a mission to help brands make a meaningful impact through authentic storytelling. While marketing used to be simple – a blitz on TV, radio, or in print would usually do – the landscape has changed. The increase in touchpoints and technologies makes for a fragmented and distracted audience, and requires a different approach. One where you embrace complexity. Where you tell the same story across all platforms. Where you rely on digital metrics. Where you don't occasionally shout how great you are, but show it, day after day. That's why, at Onlyhumans, we make every day count. We specialise in creative content: everyday stories that conquer hearts and minds, with a lasting, measurable impact.

Questions?

Are you curious about our approach? Are you struggling with a strategic issue and would like a second opinion? Do you have a spectacular idea but haven't yet found the right partner to make it a reality? [Call us](#). We excel in content, creative campaigns and performance. Moreover, we have [interesting family members](#), who can undoubtedly help you as well.

Onlyhumans has been helping brands make an impact and strike the right chord with their target audience since 1999. By focusing on what really matters to people and by telling authentic stories. These stories require research, but most of all: a vision. Our strategies form the basis for a wide range of content formats that spread a consistent message across all touch points. Because a brand not only needs personality, it also needs to stay true to itself.