

Introduction to the Symposium:
Advertising and People with Disabilities
Olan Farnall, Ph.D.
California State University, Fullerton

It has been almost two decades since consumer product advertisers first began to include portrayals of people with disabilities in their product advertising. Ten years have passed since Easter Seals' Equality, Dignity and Independence (EDI) Awards expanded its categories to include print and broadcast advertising featuring portrayals of people with disabilities. Yet in all that time there have been fewer than a dozen published studies addressing basic issues such as the quantity and quality of those advertising portrayals. That fact alone makes it quite appropriate to take a look at "where we are" with regard to advertising's role in promoting positive images of people with disabilities.

The symposium editors selected the Haller and Ralph article as the lead piece for this symposium because the manuscript does an outstanding job of presenting the history of disability and the media in the context of a comparison between the US and UK. Three studies addressing the tiny percentage of print and TV ads that include a person with a disability follow the Haller and Ralph study. One study of particular significance focused on children's publications. Another looked at the possible impact of ability-integrated ads on consumer attitude toward the company and the product(s) being advertised. The third study also illustrated how difficult it is to correctly portray people with disabilities in positive roles. Thompson and Wassmuth present an interesting variation to the disability content analysis studies when they focus on the issue of banner advertising. They address the failure of web designers to use alternative text in image tags thus missing an opportunity to reach potential consumers who are blind. Finally Thomas employs a semiotic methodology to investigate the representation of the "disabled body" in advertisements for rehabilitation goods utilizing two major Canadian disability-oriented magazines.

The editors of this special symposium wish to thank Disability Studies Quarterly for the opportunity to expand the knowledge base in this area. Findings from the studies included in this symposium dramatically demonstrate that there is much left to do if advertising is to play even a small role in the drive toward fair and honest portrayals of this important minority identified as "people with disabilities."

Olan Farnall Ph.D. and Beth Haller Ph.D. are editors of this symposium on Advertising and People with Disabilities.