

# CHAMPIONING DISABILITY INCLUSION

The continuing pursuit of diversity, equity and inclusion is incomplete without factoring in people with disabilities. These pages highlight a recent virtual event focused on how comms — and in turn brands and broader society — can better understand, appreciate and embrace this powerful demographic and the myriad benefits that come from doing so.

**THE MARKETING POWER OF DISABILITY**

6.1.2021

# MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS



**ANGELA F. WILLIAMS**  
President and CEO,  
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**A**ny chance Easterseals gets to foster a thoughtful dialogue with leaders and influencers around the importance of inclusion is a win. At our June 1 event, The Marketing Power of Disability, which was co-hosted with PRWeek, we took it a step further.

This was a day to better understand the true buying power of disability, how to include people with disabilities more effectively in campaigns, bolster hiring, workplace and DE&I efforts and expand access to enrich the consumer experience. What's more, we celebrated tangible examples of how disability inclusion has proven to be smart and good for business.

A highlight of the day was my one-on-one conversation with Academy Award-winning actress Marlee Matlin. Talk about a meaningful conversation. One of America's most iconic disability advocates, Matlin spoke about her career, her struggles as a Deaf actress in Hollywood, progress in representation and what the future holds for people with disabilities in entertainment and beyond.

Of course, we also spoke about her role in the highly anticipated and acclaimed film [CODA](#).

Matlin was not the only incredible leader to join our event. Special thanks go to Microsoft's Bryan Stromer, Amazon's Megan Smith, Voya Financial's Paul Gennaro, Unilever's Kathryn Swallow and the PR Council's Kim Sample. Each shared their invaluable insights. Their specific examples and tangible actions prove that advancing equity, inclusion and access for all isn't just talk anymore.

When we get creative and courageous, we really can change the way everyone defines and views disability.

On the following pages, you get a taste of the inspiration and education that was in abundance during our sessions. For the full conversations, I welcome and encourage you to watch — or re-watch — the entire event by [clicking here](#).

I'll leave you with one more thought. Some 61 million people identify as having a disability — making this community the largest minority group, spanning all ages and every race, class and creed. And while progress is being made, deeply rooted stigmas about disability still permeate society, including in workplaces, as well as advertising, marketing and communications campaigns.

Looking ahead, if we don't honestly address these outdated, ill-informed misperceptions, we'll all be held back. However, if we think differently, are inclusive, authentically represent people with disabilities and make our products, content and services more accessible, markets thrive and we all win.

I applaud the talented professionals who are making the "D" in diversity stand for disability. Please continue to find innovative ways to include disability in all aspects of your life and work. And if you need support or would like a partner — reach out. Visit our ["All In for Disability Equity"](#) online hub to find a number of helpful resources.

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# THE ULTIMATE ADVOCATE

Even Marlee Matlin faces barriers due to inaccessibility. As highlighted in our event's featured session, the Oscar-winning actress takes great pride in being the mentor and supportive figure to others that many were — and still are — to her as she champions equity, inclusion and access for people with disabilities.

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

**A**pparently, The Fonz (aka Henry Winkler, the actor who played him in the classic American sitcom *Happy Days*) is just as cool in real life as he is on TV. Just ask Marlee Matlin, the Academy-Award winning actress and activist who lost all hearing in her right ear and 80% in her left ear at the age of 18 months old.

In her fireside chat with Easterseals president and CEO Angela F. Williams, Matlin speaks about the importance of inclusion in the workplace and of her experience breaking many barriers in the entertainment industry. And she is quick to credit Winkler and her family for helping her remain resilient.

"My parents were extremely supportive in whatever journey I was on," she says. They helped her discover her career when they enrolled her in Center On Deafness, which had Deaf and hearing children performing plays together.

After Winkler visited the organization and saw her perform, he became an invaluable mentor.

"He encouraged me and became my advocate. He understood my dreams and supported me through my journey," recalls Matlin. "It's very important to have mentors, especially for individuals who have disabilities. Whether it's a teacher, good friend or professional, you need someone to believe in you, help you explore and help you up again when you fall down. That was Henry, for me."

## SUPPORT YOURSELF

Matlin's career is full of incredible accomplishments, including her 1987 Best Actress Academy Award for her role in *Children of a Lesser God*. However, it is her latest film, *CODA*, which debuted at this year's Sundance Film Festival and features a hearing teenage girl who is a child of Deaf adults, that she deems "one of the proudest moments in my career."

And she knows that being a strong advocate for herself is what has allowed her to thrive and grow — professionally and personally.

"I never accepted the answer 'no,'" asserts Matlin. "I learned along the way that there were different barriers. I learned how to break down or walk around those barriers."

She has also learned through experience how to ensure that her working conditions meet her needs.

"I ask for an interpreter that's compatible with the way I communicate and can express my voice the way I would like to be expressed," Matlin explains. "I have to fly with an interpreter, be in a hotel with the interpreter, so that I have full 100% accessibility. It used to be a problem, but I made sure it's part of my contract. It's not about entitlement. It's about accessibility."



CODA/Courtesy of Sundance Institute

**“ I ask for an interpreter that’s compatible with the way I communicate and can express my voice the way I would like to be expressed. It’s not about entitlement. It’s about accessibility. ”**

**MARLEE MATLIN**

Academy Award-winning actress and activist

### REMAINING BARRIERS

Despite her savviness and esteemed position, barriers still remain. Matlin recently had an offer for a role rescinded. The part, as a Deaf judge, would have broken new ground, but the need for an interpreter proved to be a dealbreaker for the production.

“It still happens,” she concedes, “and it shouldn’t.”

Matlin believes that authentic portrayals of people with disabilities in storylines should include roles that aren’t necessarily tied to their disabilities.

“That’s what happens in real life,” she notes. “Disability is not a costume. People with disabilities represent 20% to 25% of the population. Stories don’t have to dwell on being Deaf or being disabled. They have to reflect reality. That’s something I’m hoping people will see in all forms of marketing and communication, as well as in entertainment.”

### THE KEY IS COMMUNICATING

Communication, says Matlin, is a critical component for education and creating connections.

“It’s hard not to judge people,” she admits. “As humans, we just naturally do that. You can’t blame those who are judging those of us with disabilities when they’ve never had exposure or an experience with someone who is disabled. All it takes is the opportunity to sit down, communicate and have a discussion and ask questions. We all want to live in a world where we have mutual respect.”

Teaching this to people is among Matlin’s biggest passions, one enabled by her willingness to push the boundaries of her comfort zone.

“I’m always the one to break the ice,” she says. “If you’re in a situation where you’re being judged, break the ice. Say hello. Start a conversation. Don’t let that opportunity to make a connection pass you by. People will always judge. In the end, we can have an honest conversation to eliminate those barriers.”



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**MARLEE MATLIN**

Academy Award-winning actress and activist



# POWERFUL PERSPECTIVES

In the June 1 event's opening session, inspiration meets education as a pair of leaders, both with disabilities, tap into their personal and professional expertise to offer counsel on fighting fears and suppressing stigmas.

Words **Gideon Fidelzeit**

**A**s Easterseals president and CEO Angela F. Williams referenced in the introduction to this eBook, there are 61 million people in the U.S. with a disability, visible or invisible (according to recent CDC research). It's the largest minority group in the country.

Many are potential work colleagues. All are potential consumers. It's a group that demands strong consideration.

However, the myriad preconceived notions that many have about people with disabilities remain major obstacles. These barriers hinder full accessibility on so many fronts. And good counsel can be hard to find ... unless you have true leaders with unique knowledge from whom to learn.

This session, titled "Fighting Fears, Suppressing Stigmas," features such leaders: Bryan Stromer, product marketing manager and founder and co-lead of the Disability in Marketing Group at Microsoft, and Megan Smith, head of people accessibility at Amazon.

## SIMPLE AND STRONG

Obvious as it might sound, it starts "when you realize that people with disabilities are people," counsels Smith, who is blind. Equally important is to "start from an assumption of ability," not disability.

"You must recognize that, for the most part, people with disabilities have the tools and training to be effective," she adds. "They just do things differently."

Smith also champions proactivity. "Don't wait until someone discloses a disability or asks for help to start demonstrating inclusive and accessible behaviors," she advises.

Inclusiveness is not only the ultimate goal, but also an attitude to help brands achieve it, notes Stromer, who has cerebral palsy.

"Accessible products are not enough," he asserts. "We need accessible communications, marketing and hiring. Our voices must be

part of the process and everyone needs to develop a 'nothing-about-us-without-us' attitude."

## EMBRACING DIFFERENCES

Professionals with disabilities bring unique talents and traits to mar-comms that benefit brands across the board. Resilience, for one.

"We interact with and navigate a world that wasn't designed for us," says Smith. "We have a resiliency and awareness that only comes from that."

Of course, those qualities need to be recognized — and it starts in the hiring process.

"Companies must think beyond providing accommodation," notes Stromer. "When you interview people with disabilities, focus on the strength they bring."

"A foundational thing any employer can do is really look at every aspect of the hiring process," adds Smith. "Ensure every step along the way is fully accessible and reinforces how much you value diversity and disability. The application process. The interview process. Training about diversity and inclusion specific to disability."

The session concludes by focusing on the "language of disability" and uncertainty many have about how to — and not to — address colleagues with disabilities.

"Listen to the cues of the person you're talking with," counsels Stromer. "Let them lead the way. Utilize the language they're using. Disability is something we should be proud of. It's not a dirty word. Let's own that."

"I used to say I'm 'visually impaired.' Now I get cringy about that," adds Smith. The language people with disabilities use varies, so it's not a one-size-fits-all answer. But "don't leave disability out of the conversation just because you don't know exactly the right words. Use it as an opportunity to learn."



**“ We interact with and navigate a world that wasn't designed for us. We have a resiliency and awareness that only comes from that. ”**

**MEGAN SMITH**  
Amazon

# INCLUSIVENESS: THE NEXT LEVEL

From specifically designed products to content that everyone can access comfortably, this session underscores a holistic approach to embracing people with disabilities.

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

“One in four Americans has a disability, yet our industry has not designed products with [those consumers] in mind,” says Kathryn Swallow, global brand VP for Unilever’s Rexona deodorant brand, in highlighting a major gap brands must overcome.

Unilever took a major step in developing Degree Inclusive, a deodorant designed for people with disabilities. It worked with disabled consumers, accessible designers and New York University occupational therapists to evolve the size of the deodorant rollerball to best suit specific needs. In beta testing at the time of publishing, the company is partnering with The Chicago Light-house and Muscular Dystrophy Association to have 600 people test the prototype and provide feedback for further iteration.

This is a great example of a major brand not only creating a product for people with disabilities, but ensuring those consumers are integral to every part of the creative process.

Further teachings in this session were offered by PR Council president Kim Sample, who stresses the “moral and ethical imperative that we make our communications accessible to all audiences.”

In partnership with the PRCA in the U.K., the PR Council recently presented [Accessible Communications Guidelines](#). Created thanks to research by Current Global, Magna and IPG Media Lab, these offer very specific, adoptable tactics to develop content that is truly accessible to all.

“For example, PDFs can be hard for some people to navigate, so it’s important to include a Word document,” offers Sample.

And this commitment goes beyond content. “If your organization is committed to inclusion, you must have people with disabilities on your staff and consider their lens, voice and perspective,” she adds. “Be prepared to fail and pivot. Make sure your efforts are holistic.”

Unilever epitomizes this authenticity. Its Equity Inclusion Strategy has set a goal to have people with disabilities make up 5% of its workforce by 2025. Swallow believes such efforts allow Unilever to appreciate the needs of different populations and serve them effectively.

# A WORKPLACE THAT WORKS FOR EVERYONE

A company’s external reputation is informed by the way it operates internally. This session spotlights a crucial part of that equation — the steps necessary to have a fully inclusive, accessible workplace and culture.

Words **Barbara White-Sax**

In 2015, Voya Financial CEO Rodney Martin decided to make disability inclusion a priority. Accolades followed, but were not the impetus.

“This is a population anyone can join at any time,” explains Paul Gennaro, Voya’s SVP of brand and corporate comms and chief brand and comms officer. “It crosses all ethnicities. We should be focused on it as a society, a business community and in [marcomms].”

In fact, Gennaro believes part of a comms lead’s role is to be the curator of corporate character.

Internally, the company strives to make difficult conversations part of its open culture. Voya used the [Disability Equality Index](#) to analyze workplace inclusivity, generate feedback and create a roadmap for how to be more inclusive.

The result: A company for which all employees are proud to work and are disinclined to leave.

While job loss has disproportionately affected people with disabilities and their caregivers during the pandemic, Gennaro calls the movement to remote and hybrid workplaces an “aha moment.”

“If the commute was the barrier, we know we no longer need all people in the office,” he says. “There is an incredible workforce of smart, talented people who just need a few adjustments made.” Voya is also working with No Barriers USA to focus on the pandemic’s impact on caregivers.

Voya walks the walk externally, too. The Voya Cares program helps people with special needs and disabilities plan for their financial future. And its Invest in Something Special campaign urged Special Olympic athletes to share their aspirations and pledged a \$1 donation (up to \$500,000) to Special Olympics for every like, share or comment posted. It was recognized with ESPN’s Humanitarian Award.

A recent broadcast ad, focused on a special needs family, is outperforming benchmarks, increasing interest in doing business with Voya.

“It’s the right thing to do, but good for the brand, too,” adds Gennaro. “That focus is increasingly being cited as a differentiator for why people choose Voya.”

# DIGITAL DIVIDE

An earlier piece in this eBook touched on the struggles people with disabilities have navigating social and tech platforms as compared to others. Those limits on access also exist in healthcare, employment, and education, among other areas. Below are some statistics, courtesy of a recent study, [COVID-19's Impact on People with Disabilities](#), conducted by Easterseals in partnership with Accenture, that highlight the chasm.

## DISAPPOINTING NUMBERS

The following percentages represent unemployment rates of the past two years:

	GENERAL POPULATION	PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
2019	3.5%	7.3%
2020	7.9%	12.6%
YEAR-ON-YEAR CHANGE	4.4%	5.3%

The following percentages represent rates of employment in the past two years:

	GENERAL POPULATION	PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES	DIFFERENCE
2019	66.3%	19.3%	47%
2020	61.8%	17.9%	43.9%

People with disabilities are misunderstood by healthcare workers, which causes reduced quality of care. The data below underscores this.

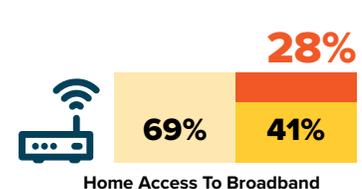
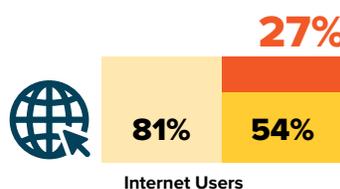
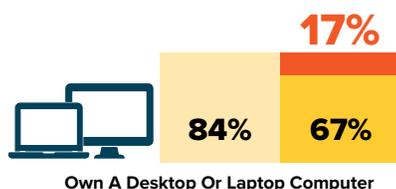
- **80%** of U.S. medical students receive no clinical training for treating people with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- **56%** of U.S. medical students report they are not competent to treat people with disabilities
- People with disabilities are **3X** more likely to be denied healthcare
- People with disabilities are **4X** more likely to be treated poorly while receiving care

## LACK OF ACCESS

People with disabilities have comparatively less access than others to the Internet and devices overall.

The following percentages show the gap.

 GENERAL POPULATION  PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES  DIFFERENCE



## OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS IN EDUCATION

The divide touches children, too. A key to their education is the ability to consistently reach developmental milestones. The following indicates the percentage of children who are not achieving critical milestones early in life as a result of the pandemic.



# Ultimate problem solvers. Unlimited potential.



Today, 1 in 4 people identify as having a disability. Your business can no longer afford to overlook this important, influential group with real buying power, tremendous talents, strong work ethic and valuable perspectives – plus, a distinct motivation to meaningfully contribute to a thriving economy.

- Make sure your company's diversity, equity, inclusion and access efforts include disability.
- Bring authentic disability representation into your branding, communications and culture at large.
- Embrace disability as the "D" in diversity.

Let's go "All In for Disability Equity" with Easterseals. Join us.  
[www.easterseals.com/AllIn](http://www.easterseals.com/AllIn)

