

Design for belonging

For years, consumer goods (CPG) brands have set standards for what ‘normal’ means in product offerings and stuck to them. But at a time when equality, diversity and inclusion have moved centerstage, the pressure is on to evolve beyond one size fits all. Powered by inclusive design, CPG businesses have an opportunity to reimagine their products and services, experiences and propositions to be inclusive to all.

What’s going on

Concerns about inequality grew significantly in recent times – driven as much by the renewed global energy sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States as by the unequal impact of COVID-19 felt around the world.¹ Inclusion and diversity (I&D) continues its rise up the business agenda.

Yet despite this, shopping for products if you do not fit the standards imposed by different industries and societies can still become a journey of exclusion.



Imagine a person of color buying beauty products designed by a Eurocentric brand that offers nothing but options for people of white skin and blond thin hair. Or a person with any sort of disability browsing for items such as shoes, home furniture or even video games – none of which has been designed with accessibility in mind.

Or, perhaps, a person who just does not fit the 'S, M, L' options of many clothing brands. Though such consumers exist and are willing to shop and connect with brands, they all too often feel brands and stores ignore their needs.

For years, consumer goods companies have set standards of what 'normal' means when it comes to product offerings. One-size-fits-all products and stereotypes have become common across many different industries and heavily reinforced through marketing and communication. Today, the idea of companies telling consumers what they should buy, eat, look and behave like is no longer acceptable – especially when a certain product category makes a particular consumer group feel left out.

Previously ignored and underserved markets of consumers are finally able to tell their stories on social media to show that there are significant numbers of consumers out there whose needs are currently unmet. Accountability and callout culture are pushing businesses to rethink the inadvertent exclusion around their culture and offerings. Further, COVID-19 has made us all more aware of the importance of mental health and social responsibility which, in turn, has impacted how we view companies.

Excluding people is bad business for brands. Consumers are more likely to consider and purchase from companies they consider inclusive – especially for product categories that once made them feel excluded.²

They are more likely to see brands that include them as relevant – a key business driver. Relevant brands grew 5% more than their counterparts, according to BrandZ's analysis of the top 100 most valuable global brands which showed from a value perspective, relevance was the most differentiating feature.³





Further, inclusive ads affect consumer behavior. In a joint study from Google, Ipsos and Female Quotient, for example, 69% of black consumers say they are more likely to purchase from a brand with advertising that positively reflects their ethnicity.⁴

At a time when brands are paying more and more attention to responsible business drivers and investing in areas such as self-care, wellbeing and positive thinking, now is the time to eradicate exclusion in CPG.

CPG companies need to embrace I&D beyond human resources to expand their product portfolio by making it more inclusive and accelerating towards equality.

They need an approach to I&D that goes beyond Employee Experience. And they need to embed it in portfolio creation and management, provoking impactful disruption in product development process – shelves rearranged to meet all colors, sizes, diets, mindsets and individual tailored needs, for example.

To achieve this, they must see Inclusive Design as an integral part of business.

What's next

I&D will go beyond Employee Experience to become ingrained in portfolio creation and management. Companies will use Inclusive Design, Universal Design and Accessibility throughout the entire R&D process to achieve better results while including new consumer groups.

Designers will partner scientists, engineers and communication teams to bring new voices into the product creation process. This can happen through co-creation workshops involving consumers, listening hubs or inclusion-focused qualitative research. Companies will also have to reassess their culture to find purpose while doing this, ensuring I&D is built into their DNA and spread across the organization.

Portfolio, packaging and shelves will be rearranged to meet all colors, sizes, diets, mindsets and individual tailored demands. Further, retail brands will have to reassess their service ecosystem to make sure all consumer-facing channels are hardwired

for equity. From eliminating bias from artificial intelligence to the use of inclusive language and addressing racial profiling, there is a long roadmap ahead for the years to come.

Reimagining the experience around consumer goods includes breaking industry boundaries and responding to previously ignored consumer needs. This shift can lead to new users interacting and connecting with brands and expanding products built on purpose.

CPG companies' main focus should be giving consumers choice where once there was none. For many markets, this will mean offering products that free consumers from being dependent on niche brands or specialist stores.

As more products are designed to be inclusive, build confidence and a sense of belonging in consumers from all walks of life, industries will be redefined.



Opportunities for reimagination

1. Portfolio expansion

Creating new products and product lines or reassessing those currently available is one way to reimagine the experience in order to connect with a broader range of consumers. New York-based apparel brand Universal Standard, for one, has built an entire business on offering sleek, minimalist items to a full range of consumers – its jeans come in sizes ranging from 00 to 40.⁵

The beauty industry – mainstream hair brands, especially – are under particular pressure to expand their products and cater to people of different skin tones and hair types.⁶ The success of the Fenty brand – which from day one positioned itself as a diverse brand for diverse people using social media to connect to people in unfiltered and organic ways – is a powerful example of this.⁷

Portfolio expansion, however, offers opportunities for any CPG business.

Consider Band-Aid, which recently expanded its lines with bandages in a wider array of tones to better accommodate a more diverse range of

skin colors.⁸ Crayola, meanwhile, has launched a 24-shade range of skin tone coloring crayons.⁹

CPG leaders can also take inspiration from a number of other initiatives that have already come to market.

Online retailer Zappos' Adaptive range allows consumers to buy only one shoe or two shoes in different sizes and widths to create a pair through partnerships with shoe brands including UGG and RSVP.¹⁰ Gillette, meanwhile, recently introduced a new razor designed to help caregivers safely groom their loved ones and patients.¹¹

In contrast, others have developed new ideas that make pre-existing products more adaptive.

Logitech's Adaptive Gaming Kit is a customizable collection of buttons and switches designed with occupational therapists to plug into the Xbox Adaptive Controllable to meet any user's needs.¹² IKEA's ThisAbles project makes its products more usable by people with disabilities.¹³

Consumer goods companies will need to carefully evaluate which aspects of their products could be adapted, enhanced or spun into new products in order to



be more inclusive, then match this to their local market need to understand the opportunity. Continue to ask what consumers want, then consider what they are willing to pay for and if such an offering fits into a profitable portfolio.



2. Packaging design

Product packaging and the experience around it is core to value creation and needs to be designed to be inclusive. For CPG brands, this is likely to mean redesigning packaging to ensure old stereotypes are avoided and accessibility is a main design pillar.

The packaging of products by 'good beauty' brand The Ordinary¹⁴ and skincare brands Aesop¹⁵ and Ursa Major¹⁶ are great examples of unisex, gender-neutral packaging – a growing trend in the beauty sector.¹⁷

Significant opportunity – and creative potential – also lies in designing packaging to meet accessibility needs for users with visual, physical or cognitive impairments.

Kellogg's, in partnership with the UK's Royal National Institute for the Blind, developed Coco Pops boxes designed for the partially sighted and blind, featuring technology that allows a smartphone to detect a unique on-pack code, playback labelling and allergen information to the user.¹⁸

GSK's Voltaren, a pain relief gel, comes in a pack with a special easy to open cap designed to be best-in-class inclusive packaging for users suffering joint pain.¹⁹

"Touch is so important, and it would be really great if more products had tactile differentiators because it would just make life using beauty products so much easier," blind beauty influencer Molly Burke says.²⁰

3. Brand repositioning and inclusive marketing

Bold inclusive product design is an important advance but it needs to be accompanied by a more inclusive approach to brand communications.

What brands say, how they say it and the images they choose to use in their marketing can all have an impact on the experience and whether a consumer feels included or excluded.

One powerful demonstration of this was Unilever's recent announcement that it would eliminate the word 'normal' from all of its beauty and personal care brands' advertising and packaging.²¹ The move followed a pledge by the company just a few months earlier to stop using the terms 'fair/fairness', 'white/whitening' and 'light/lightening'.²²



CPG brands will also have to pay closer attention to where they stand on social issues and be open to take bold actions against exclusion and prejudice. Such actions must be carefully considered and cannot be empty marketing stunts.

Brand actions against exclusion and prejudice that are credible and authentic are meaningful and add value – such as when a company does something that involves giving back to a particular community. To find meaning, companies need to listen to what consumers are saying more often and learn how to connect with them.

Once a brand owner knows its consumers better, there is also an opportunity to offer segmented communication tailored to specific consumer groups. Recently, ecommerce company Zalando's 'Here To Stay' campaign celebrated those who stay true to their beliefs and take a stand for lasting progress.²³ Its aim was to foster dialogue on core values such as I&D and women's empowerment.

Dove²⁴ and Nike²⁵ are other examples of brands who have addressed exclusion and prejudice in their campaigns in a smart way.



What CPG leaders can do next

1. Adopt an applied empathy approach

Invest in new and different ways of thinking. An 'applied empathy' approach is one that starts with understanding everyone who is going to be interacting with whatever you are creating then takes that understanding and applies it to every aspect of what you do.

Cognitive, demographic and experiential diversity can bring new perspectives to your business. Reach out to design teams and search for new lenses. Forget what you think you know about your consumer and learn from underserved markets of consumers.

Listen, more than anything. Hire for diversity. And make sure voices are heard equally throughout the design process. Make sure to have all the difficult conversations that had been hiding under the mat.

2. Do an I&D experience audit

Interrogate your current portfolio and how you go to market, to find any blind spots.

Search for barriers and points of exclusion in your consumer journey and get rid of biased communication and offerings. Assess your digital and customer support channels looking for accessibility gaps. If they are not accessible, make sure they are accessible from now on.

Carve new opportunity areas and plan to build new products with Design For Belonging in mind.

3. Define bold metrics

Define criteria and measure the work around inclusive product design.

Go one step further from your current KPIs and NPS statistics and start paying attention to Experience Indicators. Instead of simply measuring sales numbers, why not measure inclusion points in your consumer journey?



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