

# Providing the Tools to Let Your Business Community Take the Lead

Merritt T. Carey, Esq.



# You must sell the concept of employing people with disabilities to the business community.

The business community will take the lead in employing people with disabilities when it understands that doing so makes good business sense. As a MIG recipient, you need first and foremost to accept that you are selling the concept of employing people with disabilities to the business community. From this starting point, you need to create a marketing plan that identifies your target audience, determine what the content, look and feel of your message should be and what is the best way to reach your target audience. In short, you need to behave like a start-up company with a product to sell.

Creating a business-friendly message must underlie all marketing and outreach efforts to businesses. When considering how to best market the employment of people with disabilities to the business community, you need to talk and think like business, not a service provider, a non-profit or a government agency. This is where a business consultant and/or marketing professional can be integral to your overall strategy. Retaining a business consultant to help you refine your message to employers and businesses will bridge the gap between public and private sector perspectives.

There is, in most states, a communication gulf between the private and public sectors. As a result, there can be misunderstandings. Sometimes, those misunderstandings are as basic language (the acronyms used by providers can be overwhelming and confusing), and other times, as complicated as different goals (private sector is bottom-line driven, public sector is client driven). This dynamic makes collaboration difficult. Yet without collaboration between the public and private sector, there will be no progress in employment of people with disabilities.

At the outset, gaining an understanding of the dynamics between the public and private sector in your state creates a bench mark and a starting place for communication.

Given that the goal is to employ people with disabilities as independently as possible, the business community must play a vital role in finding solutions that work for people with disabilities and employers. Without input from, and engagement with, the business community, employment of people with disabilities will remain limited. In the long run, the business community needs to find a viable and meaningful way to employ people with disabilities that fits with the for-profit model. Business has an inherently different set of goals and objectives than the public sector, but these goals and objectives are not mutually exclusive from the goals and objectives of the public sector. The trick is finding a message that is meaningful to businesses and does not undermine or compromise the population the MIGs are intended to serve.

# Maine's marketing & communi- cation strategy



In Maine, we recognized almost immediately the disconnect between the public and private sector. It was clear from the outset that we needed a more engaging message for businesses than information about accommodations, tax credits and technical assistance.

Our first goal was to find businesses that had a reputation for employing people with disabilities and talk to them with the idea of building a business to business network. The idea behind this network was to create a forum where business could communicate with one another about employing people with disabilities.

We created an entity called Working Together: Expanding Maine's Workforce. We then created a brand, a message, a website ([www.ExpandingMainesWorkforce.com](http://www.ExpandingMainesWorkforce.com)) and collateral materials—all of which were designed to look distinctly non-governmental. Building on the idea of business-to-business communication we kept the network open only to businesses. We continue to grow our business membership and expand our business to business message. Towards that end we created a video which features four employers that employ people with disabilities.

Through our website we offer information and resources. We asked those businesses that joined our network to take a pledge stating they support the employment of people with disabilities. We were very careful not to create a pledge that would require any specific action, we simply wanted businesses to make a commitment to the idea of employing people with disabilities and engage in a dialog. In return, they became one of our business partners, with their company logo part of a slide show on our home page.

All the while, we worked on refining our message. We looked for hooks that were meaningful and engaging to business—the aging workforce and impending workforce shortage, consumer preference for socially responsible businesses, the market share of people with disabilities and their spending power—among others.



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So, what are the tools that will let the business community get engaged and take the lead? Primarily, they are tools that will further business interests. While all businesses have distinct goals, they are all concerned about consumers, market share and having qualified employees.

From these basic assumptions, there's a framework to sell the concept of employing people with disabilities to the business community.

#### **1. social responsibility**

From the consumer perspective, businesses know that consumers overwhelmingly prefer businesses that are socially responsible. Employment of people with disabilities is a socially responsible initiative which is beneficial to businesses from a public relations standpoint. The concept of cause-related marketing is gaining tremendous momentum and is something virtually all businesses know and care about. Cause related marketing connects a cause (employing people with disabilities) to a brand (Sun Trust Bank). This can be a powerful combination for companies looking to enhance their public image.

#### **2. aging workforce / workforce shortage**

Virtually all businesses are aware of problems they may face when baby boomers retire. As a marketing tool, this concept has three components: first, as the work force ages there will inevitably be more workers with age-related disabilities; second, employers who employ people with disabilities now will be better prepared when the workforce ages and the rate of disabilities increase in the workforce. Finally, with the impending workforce shortage, employers that are prepared to tap into a more diverse pool of employees (i.e. employees with disabilities) will be better situated to fill vacant positions.

#### **3. returning veterans**

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are front and center on everyone's mind. For those businesses that are not necessarily as attuned to the 'corporate social responsibility' message, which tends to resonate more with progressive and 'liberal' businesses, employment of returning veterans with disabilities is a very effective and meaningful message.

#### **4. disability as diversity**

Most employers want a more diverse workforce. Diversity in the workplace can decrease the chance of a discrimination lawsuit and can enhance workplace creativity and productivity. Typically employers do not think of employees with disabilities as employees that will diversify their workforce. But disability is diversity, and can be beneficial to employers on many fronts.

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Just as important as the content of your message is the look and feel of your message. The more professional, sophisticated and business-like your presentation, the more comfortable and engaged the business community will be with the message. There is a reason “branding” is a multi-billion dollar industry.

This is one of the elements where you can really break through the stereotypical perceptions about employing people with disabilities. The presentation of your message will vastly affect how the content of that message is received. Given that decades after the ADA was enacted the problem of employing people with disabilities is still significant, it's safe to say that despite break throughs and successes, there's still room for improvement.

In repackaging the concept of employing people with disabilities, the look and feel of your materials should be distinctly non-governmental. There's no point in having a great message if the presentation isn't eye catching. By all means, hire a designer to ensure the materials you create will stand out and project your message.



## conclusion

Before your business community will take the lead, they must first become engaged and invested in employing people with disabilities. Engaging the business community can only be effective if you're communicating in a business-friendly way. Make sure your communication strategy will resonate with businesses. Ensure the look and feel of your message is professional and sophisticated. Always remember you're selling a product (whether you like it or not) and keep that concept as your guiding principal.

If you can engage your business community through effective marketing and communication, the business community will see that employing people with disabilities makes good business sense and will ultimately take the lead. Transitioning from a MIG-lead initiative to a business-lead initiative will be a long process, but the first step is meaningful engagement with the business community.

## CONTACT

Merritt T. Carey | GraffamSolutions  
207.828.4882 | [www.graffamsolutions.com](http://www.graffamsolutions.com)



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