

Statistics

Looking for a new market? Consider one of the largest minorities in the United States – People with dis-ABILITIES.

According to a Wall Street Journal article *People With Disabilities are the Next Consumer Niche* by Joshua Harris Prager (12/15/1999) in 1995 “there were about 48.5 million people 15 and older with disabilities in the U.S, with annual discretionary Income totaling \$175 billion.” With the aging population and adding obesity as a disability, I would guess those numbers are increasing rapidly.

In a 2003 study by the Wicomico County Board of Education, there were over 600 students, age 13-21, with disabilities in our public school system. Fourteen categories of disabilities were listed however about half of this total were listed under one category, Specific Learning Disabilities. The remaining 300+ were spread across the remaining 13 categories.

Let's think about those local numbers for a minute. That's over 600 people, or in economic terms, consumers. The total number of students with disabilities in the public school system, infants to age 21 totaled 1,728 people. That's about equivalent to the town of Hurlock! If I were a business owner and had the purchasing power of those students, plus their families, shopping at my store, I would have a pretty substantial customer base. Remember, these numbers are just for people in Wicomico County. We have not even addressed neighboring counties or the lower shore region.

One challenge to marketing to this group is that they are very diverse. There are many categories of disability as well as demographic differences. Another challenge is that it is difficult to market to people with disabilities because they usually do not want to be defined as such. Many times, they do not see themselves as “disabled”. They are a person with a condition that they have to live with that may or may not require the use of assistive devices (such as a cane or wheelchair). The assistive device reduces the limitation of the disability and in some cases removes it. Examples are medication for Attention Deficit Disorder or corrective lenses for vision disabilities. According to highlights from a 1994 report from the National Center for Health Statistics titled Trends and Differential Use of Assistive Technology Devices, “the use of assistive devices has increased dramatically over the past decade, in part due to the aging of the population but also due to technological advances, public policy initiatives, and changes in the delivery and financing of health care.” Because of these devices, more and more people are able to work and shop in their/our communities, and rightly so.

As previously noted, over 1,700 people with disabilities have been identified in 2003 under the age of 22 in the public school system in Wicomico County alone.

Now imagine the number of people still alive in the past century in our lower shore region that have a disability. Is your business marketing to them? Is your business "Dis-ABILITY Friendly"?

Next month: How to be a Dis-ABILITY Friendly business.