

–Marketing 101–

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

In the Real World, it seems just about everyone understands the value of marketing. Businesses advertise—showcasing their products and services *to make us want them!* Politicians and policymakers work diligently to market themselves or their ideas. Before a job interview, we polish our resumes, along with our shoes, to create the very best impression. Even very young children seem to recognize the value of marketing (since they're constantly barraged with it via TV commercials): they want the “best” toys! In the Real World, the most positive attributes—of a product, service, or person—are valued and marketed.

But in Disability World, a person's problems, deficits, and/or other “negatives” are valued and—unfortunately—promoted. This is not news, nor is it unexpected, for in the system of special services for people with disabilities, a person's “deficiencies” are the ticket to services.

A parent, for example, may share a laundry list of her child's problems in order to get as many special ed services as possible. She may also add that she wants her child included in the general ed classroom.” In response, special educators say, “But your child has too many problems for that—a special ed class is the only place for your child.” And what general ed teacher would want a student with “so many problems”?

Similar situations exist in the employment field. A special ed teacher in a small town made calls to local businesses in an attempt to find jobs for high school students with disabilities. She moaned and groaned when her efforts were fruitless. When asked, she described her technique: “I call the businesses and tell them I'm the high school special needs coordinator, and that I'm trying to find summer jobs for our severe needs students...” Well, DUH—why is she surprised when no one responds positively to her inquiries? Why would employers even consider hiring a “severe needs student” when they could choose from a bevy of “good” job applicants who have marketed their strengths and abilities?

It was difficult for the teacher to recognize that her failure was probably caused by her faulty strategy. Like many others, she believed the problem was both in the community (“employers aren't ready”) and in her students (“they don't have marketable skills”). In a way, she's correct: employers are not “ready” to hire employees who are *perceived* to be incompetent. But who made the students look incompetent? She did! First, she did the legwork and called *for* her students, and second, she used a negative descriptor about them—both of which made them look “bad” in the eyes of employers! So, success in the Real World will remain elusive until we change our ways. (Note: at least one of the students later applied to one of these employers—on his own—and was hired!)

Think about what works in the Real World. In your last job interview, you didn't tell a potential employer about all your problems and what you don't do well. In these situations, not only do we frequently shade the truth, but we may also exaggerate and embellish our accomplishments! When parents of children *without* disabilities enroll their children in school or community activities, they generally don't share information about their children's bad habits or other negative characteristics. In these and many other situations, we minimize (or even hide/ignore) any negative attributes and maximize a person's strengths and abilities—*we market out the wazoo!* So to ensure success for people with disabilities in the Real World, we need to adopt these same strategies.

The first step is identifying a person's strengths and abilities. When parents, teachers, service providers, etc. are asked to share the strengths of a child or adult with a disability, many respond with blank stares and silence. They literally cannot think of one positive thing to say about the person—and how incredibly sad that is. *Everyone* has strengths and abilities! In the service system, however, these may be invisible to others or are ignored if they're not part of the functional skill-sets found on assessments.

When my son, Benjamin, was three, he had just started talking. But he could not independently sit up, stand, walk, feed himself, or “perform” a variety of other “normal” skills. The results of formal assessments made him look like a failure. But he had an incredible auditory memory, and he could perfectly mimic Ringo Starr’s narration—British accent and all—from the *Thomas the Tank Engine* videos. But because this extraordinary ability wasn’t included on any assessment tools, it was not valued by professionals! It did, however, charm the director of the inclusive preschool my son attended. And this skill enabled Benjamin to be successful in public school, drama classes, as the creator and star of his award-winning video, and more.

So the first order of business is to identify the strengths, talents, abilities, interests, and other positive characteristics that can be used to successfully market a person with a disability. What does the person do well? What are her interests or hobbies? What are her dreams? What does she want to learn to do? This is how *we* need to begin seeing the person from now on. *Equally important, this is how the person with a disability needs to see herself.* Imagine what powerful changes this can create in our relationship with the person and in the person’s entire life! Then sharing this type of information with others—*marketing*—can open the door to success and inclusion in school, work, or other environments. (And shouldn’t *all* IFSP, IEP, or ISP meetings begin with the person’s strengths?)

Second, we need to ensure our efforts don’t inadvertently undermine our good intentions. For example, speaking on behalf of a person with a disability can make the person look incompetent. Thus, a person needs to speak for himself (and make his own phone calls) when looking for a job and in similar situations. To make this happen, we might need to provide the person with a communication system and/or other assistive devices, and teach the person

how to use the phone, how to interact in an interview, and so on. If the person will still need assistance, our help should be as unobtrusive as possible. Also, many people with disabilities have learned to send in a job application/resume *before* the face-to-face interview. Then, at the interview, the person’s disability is less important than his abilities!

In addition, we must no longer “ask permission” to be included. Parents, for example, should not call a community activity and ask, “Do you take children with disabilities?” The answer is usually “no.” But most places aren’t overtly discriminatory. They may say no simply because they’ve never done it before. Instead of asking permission, we can “presume inclusion”! Just sign your child up for an inclusive preschool or any other community activity, and that leads us to the next step in a successful strategy.

Once we’ve gotten a foot in the door—for a job interview, participation in a community activity, etc.—it’s time to market the person’s strengths, abilities, and/or similarities to others. When I enrolled my son in a neighborhood preschool, the director could see that Benj was somewhat different from the other three-year-olds, but I quickly pointed out how he was similar and also shared his strengths. Once these positive traits have been shared, then (and only then) do we share *relevant* information about the person’s *needs*. We do *not* need to share the person’s diagnosis—that can scare people, plus it’s no one’s business! Instead, only provide information about the person’s *needs*. In the best-case scenario, the person will speak for himself (and the sooner a person can do this, the better). So the conversation would go something like this: He/she/I will need large print, wheelchair access, support from peers, extra time, etc.

What works in the Real World can work for people with disabilities. Put your common sense hat on and/or read a book about sales/marketing, then put those strategies to work to ensure the person with a disability you care about enjoys success in the Real World and achieves his dreams!

Shouldn’t all IFSP, IEP, or ISP meetings begin with the person’s strengths?