



Inclusive Language for Marketers: A Pocket Guide

Weaving Diversity & Inclusion into Your Brand's Identity and Messaging



Inclusivity has been elevated as an important business priority; and, although it can feel ambiguous at times with fluid guidelines, it's imperative to apply best practices to manage your brand's reputation, ensuring long term success.

This pocket guide is designed to provide marketers with a clear, practical, and actionable framework for inclusive language so they can take the lead and drive their organizations in the right direction. Let's get started.

What Is Inclusive Language?

At LinkedIn, we define inclusive language as that which does not exclude or stereotype people based on race, sexual orientation, age, gender identity, ability, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristic.

In other words, it's about **making your brand feel welcoming and accessible to all.**

Why Inclusive Language Matters

What you say as a brand reflects who you are as a brand. Research suggests that conveying inclusive values is increasingly important for the long-term health of a business. These are a few factors to consider in establishing the case for inclusive language in marketing:



Over the last 15 years, 92% of population growth in the United States came from communities of color. These underrepresented groups are looking to see themselves and their worldviews in your branding.



Demographic shifts are bringing values to the forefront of purchasing decisions. [Per McKinsey & Company](#), three out of four Gen Z consumers say they'll boycott companies that discriminate against race



Inclusivity affects your bottom line and brand reputation. As the “social” aspect of Environment, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) criteria gains prominence, the manner in which companies conduct and portray themselves is being closely scrutinized through this lens by customers, investors, media, activists, and employees.



Creating a transparently inclusive culture is critical for employee engagement, retention, and acquisition. Rising generations of workers care greatly about this matter. [Deloitte](#) found that 83% of millennials are actively engaged when they believe their organization fosters an inclusive culture, while only 60% are actively engaged when their organization does not.

Different Forms of Inclusive Language

Inclusive language exists on a spectrum, which spans from the more overt visible forms to the more subtle invisible forms. Here are a few examples that you should avoid:



Visible + **Offensive/outdated terms**, e.g., “man up” or “blacklisted”

Gendered language, e.g., “you guys” or “salesman”

Stereotypes and stigmas, e.g., “take a break from mom time” or “that’s insane”

Assumptions, e.g., ascribing pronouns (“he” or “she” vs. “they”) without knowing how someone identifies

Culturally-specific words, e.g., “hit a home run”

Complex language, e.g., “low-hanging fruit” or “pot calling the kettle black”

Invisible — **Hidden meanings**, e.g., “grandfathered in”

6 Tips

to Guide Your Journey Toward Inclusive Language



Embedding these practices can help your organization and its marketing avoid **offensive** language and move towards **aware** and **proactive** language.

1. Don't assume you know your audience

It's likely your audience includes a wide range of cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual traits and backgrounds. Avoid broadly characterizing or pigeonholing the people you're communicating with or talking about, even if you market to a very specific cohort.

2. Embrace differences instead of ignoring them

Inclusivity is not about ignoring the things that make us different. It's about preventing these identity traits and characteristics from becoming barriers in the way we communicate and connect as human beings.

3. Highlight narratives, not singular traits

Representation should be authentic and contextual. Avoid tokenizing someone by highlighting their race, gender, or identity if it's not relevant to the story you're telling.

4. Check for stereotypes

They are deeply ingrained and pervasive in language. Even seemingly positive associations (i.e., "Women are so organized!") can be problematic because they put people in boxes and carry preconceived biases.

5. Use person-first and gender-neutral language

No one wants to be defined by their traits. When we say something like, "A disabled person," we're doing just that, even if unintentionally. Adopting person-first language — "a person who is disabled" — is a small but meaningful adjustment. You can also use neutral pronouns (they, them) if you don't know someone's preference.

6. Learn from and fix mistakes (perfection is not the goal)

Perfection is not the goal. When mistakes happen, learn from them. Be transparent with your audience. Honest contrition and continual growth are the key signs of genuine commitment.


Common Exclusionary Language & Inclusive Alternatives

There are no definitive rules or static guidelines around inclusive language. Specific recommendations are fluid — subject to evolve along with our understanding of language and how it impacts different audiences. With that said, these are some common examples of non-inclusive language, and corresponding situational alternatives you might consider.

Instead of this...


Consider...

 Salesman, Chairman, Mankind

 Salesperson, Chair, Humankind

 Males, Females

 Men, Women, People

 Both genders

 All genders

 You guys


 Everyone, Folks, Y'all

 Blacks, Mexicans, Asians


 Person who is Black/Mexican/Asian

 Blacklist, Whitelist

 Deny list, Allow list

 Grandfathering, Grandfather clause

 Legacy


 Differently abled,
Disabled, Handicapped

 Person with a disability

 Crazy, Insane, Nuts

 Wild, Unbelievable, Strange

 Turn a blind eye, Tone-deaf


 Ignore, Insensitive

 Addict, Alcoholic

 Person with an addiction/alcoholism

 The elderly

 Older adults

 Differently abled,
Disabled, Handicapped

 Person with a disability



Harmful language is not dictated by any list or set of rules, but by the people affected by it and their perceptions. To continually move toward a more inclusive work culture and marketing lexicon, we recommend ongoing open conversations with your coworkers, customers, and communities.

Marketers are trend-setters with platforms and influence. **By leading the charge with the way we thoughtfully communicate on behalf of brands, we can help speak a more inclusive future into existence.**