



NCTI 2008 Innovators Conference

Session Title	Exploring DisabilityLand
Name of Presenter	Alan Brightman, Senior Policy Director of Special Communities for Yahoo! Inc.
Date	Friday, November 21, 2008

Summary Alan Brightman discussed the different perspectives of disabilities he’s encountered, ways in which businesses have alleviated or added to accessibility issues, and provided examples of how wrong it is to impose limits on someone who wishes to accomplish something (e.g., become a jazz musician).

Alan Brightman, Senior Policy Director, Special Communities, Yahoo!, Inc.
To set the stage, Alan discussed different perspectives and conceptions of disabilities, how people react to disability terminology, and cited several examples to clarify his point:

- The best definition of what it means to be disabled was given to him by a friend with muscular dystrophy 20 years ago: “being handicapped means receiving the handicapped of the year award at an establishment that features narrow restroom stalls and having to go in the broom closet; getting into museums free; having the ability to sit in one place for 9 hours without going mad and after that, sitting in another chair for 7 hours; thinking, ‘the window is open and it’s freezing outside I can’t shut it,’ etc.”
- An artist friend of Alan’s paints with a headset (due to cerebral palsy), and prefers the word “gimp” to pull the condition right into one’s face; and also cited the dictionary meaning of the word as “fighting spirit.” His artist friend paints with fighting spirit, and Alan pointed out the word also means beautiful art (in reference to the artist’s work). Alan is not fond of the word “handicap,” as no person he knows wants to be seen as an object of charity.

Alan then discussed lessons he learned after writing his first children’s book in 1976, when he tried to introduce kids to the word “retarded.” He tried to do it in rhyme, such as, “I wonder if everyone else is like me and I wonder if they’re like you, too.” He noted that he received two interesting reactions from two different groups. For kids, it gave them a way to talk about something that was previously taboo (e.g., they felt free to ask questions). Adults, however, would ask, “why didn’t you use more pictures of kids who looked ‘retarded’ in the pictures [in the book]?” Alan further explained that the book depicted pictures of a face in a moment in time, which didn’t match people’s conception of what retarded people looked like; to them, it meant the pictures were wrong. Pictures capture a different conception of ‘retarded’ than a 10 second video of it would, where differences may appear more obviously.



Furthermore, he noted that adults also use platitudes to describe handicap, while kids don't talk in platitudes and will ask questions like, 'If that girl's blind why does she keep her eyes open?' or 'How does a kid in a wheel chair go to the bathroom?' If they ask teachers in schools, the teacher may redirect the conversation and adults may try to pretend not to notice. Platitudes allow you to retreat into a 'safe place' where people won't challenge you.

Alan then switched gears to discuss accessibility issues, the evolution of different objects, and how this affected their accessibility. For example, Apple II was a real favorite with people with disabilities; one could pop the top off, add synthesizers, and put switches in it, basically tailoring it to one's needs. In 1984, Steve Jobs announced the Macintosh, but 5% of population – the disabled – said, "What about us? There's no top to pop off, there's graphics and windows, no way to add switches, etc." In the Apple office building people would pass by a BMW motorcycle, a grand piano and other shiny objects; the goal being Jobs wanted people to be inspired by style – but the problem was the new 'style' did not adequately address accessibility.

An experiment was later run: 30 engineers were sat down in a room in front of new Macs and then told to type a sentence with a pencil in their mouths. Most chuckled, but one of the VPs in the room told the engineers to start. One engineer said he would do the exercise but it was hard to turn on the computer. Engineers then contributed that it was: hard to insert disk, type 3 keys at once, use the mouse, etc. Overall, 63 different things were noted as difficult for users, and these were all simple things. Almost all of 63 features were simple to fix but what was hard was to understand there might be a problem to begin with.

Alan then referenced speakers from Thursday's sessions who discussed having a vision, and noted that big companies spend enormous amount of time creating mission statements. However, the vision of what could be possible – there's no measure for that, if you have enough vision. He stated that the best mission statement was given by Paul Newman when asked what the purpose of bringing children into the mountains to [Hole in the Wall Camp](#) for a week at a time was: "Bring them up here a week at a time to raise a little hell."

Alan is a fan of the arts and collects a lot of books, as books often say things you wish you'd said and in addition, capture one's thoughts - mostly about dreaming. Van Gogh said, "First I dream my painting, and then I make my dream. Another quote cited was, "To draw you must close your eyes and sing," and, "I begin with an idea and it becomes something else." Alan concluded his remarks by stating that our goal has always been to make sure a child or an adult can paint, and that you're given the opportunity, skills and tools you need; whatever 'painting' is for you, you can do it.