

Inclusive Communications

Communication is the fundamental way for organizations to illustrate their values and commitment. Inclusive communications ensure that messages, visuals, and language respect the diversity of the communities an organization works with. This includes accessible formats, balanced representation, and non-stigmatizing language.

Organizations such as UN Women emphasize that gender-responsive communication should actively challenge harmful norms while promoting diverse identities and roles. UN Women's Guidelines for the use of language as a driver of equality and inclusivity and the Washington Group on Disability Statistics both prioritize that languages and communication must represent communities authentically and provide information in various formats.

Representation matters too. Guidelines by UN Women and others show that stereotyped or under-representative imagery reinforces exclusion even when the accompanying text is inclusive. Communications that show only certain types of people, or that consistently portray women, people with disabilities, or ethnic minorities in narrow or stereotyped roles, communicate an implicit message about who belongs and who does not. Indeed, communication workflows help prevent harm and ensure that content aligns with ethical and inclusive standards.

The WCAG standard for digital accessibility has become a globally recognized benchmark, requiring that online content be perceivable (can be seen or heard), operable (can be navigated), understandable (written in clear language), and robust (works across assistive technologies). While WCAG was developed for websites, its core principles translate directly to all communication - print materials, social media, presentations, and verbal communications.







This section supports more intentional, respectful messaging across channels and materials.

Cited from [UN Women \(2025\), Gender mainstreaming guidance: Guidelines for the use of language as a driver of equality and inclusivity](#); [United Nations Statistical Commission \(2022\), The Washington Group on Disability Statistics: Data collection tools and their recommended use](#).

Areas that are covered in this section

- Accessible messaging
- Balanced imagery and visual assets
- Content writing practices
- Authentic and intersectional storytelling
- Addressing mistakes
- Social Media Practices







Practical Considerations

Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Avoid tokenistic or stereotyped imagery.
	LGBTQIA+	Use inclusive language; avoid stigmatizing references.
	Disability	Provide alt-text, captions, and accessible layout.
	Neuro divergence	Use plain language and lower cognitive load.
	Ethnic minorities	Represent cultural groups accurately.
	Rural or Remote	Ensure messaging is relevant for non-urban contexts.

Accessible Messaging

Respectful, accurate, and accessible communication ensures that information reaches everyone—regardless of language, ability, connectivity, or background. How an organization communicates signals who it considers part of its audience.

Practical Considerations







Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Apply flexible scheduling recognizing care responsibilities.
	LGBTQIA+	Protect confidentiality around names, pronouns, and identity.
	Disability	Ensure accessibility is budgeted and integrated routinely.
	Neuro divergence	Offer predictable workflows and clear instructions.
	Ethnic minorities	Adapt communications and meeting norms to cultural contexts.
	Rural or Remote	Provide hybrid or low-bandwidth participation options.

Key practices

- Use plain language - write clearly and simply, avoiding jargon, acronyms, or overly technical terms that may exclude readers with lower literacy levels or those reading in a second language.
- Offer multiple formats for all key communications - written, audio, video, and visual - so information reaches people regardless of how they best receive it.
- Apply accessible structure to all documents and digital content - including clear headings, sufficient color contrast, alt text for images, and logical reading order.

- Conduct regular representation reviews of communications materials to ensure the people shown and the stories told reflect the diversity of your audience.
- Share materials in advance to allow extra processing time for those who need it.
- Embed accessibility into the design of communications from the start - retrofitting is always more costly and less effective than building it in.

Identity-specific considerations

Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Avoid gendered language in all communications; use gender-neutral terms where possible and ensure visual representation reflects women in leadership and non-stereotypical roles
	LGBTQIA+	Use affirming and up-to-date terminology; avoid assumptions about gender or family structure in communications; include pronoun options in email signatures and registration forms
	Disability	Ensure all documents are screen reader compatible; provide alt text for all images; use sufficient font size and color contrast
	Neuro divergence	Use clear layout with consistent formatting; break information into short sections with clear headings; avoid busy or cluttered visual design
	Ethnic minorities	Provide translation of key materials where possible; use culturally relevant examples and avoid language that reflects only one cultural context
	Rural or Remote	Develop low-data versions of digital content - such as text-only emails or downloadable offline materials - for participants with limited or unstable internet connectivity

Adapted from global accessible communications standards, including: W3C (2023), [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.2](#); [PRCA \(2023\)](#), [Accessible Communications Guidelines](#); [UN Women \(n.d.\)](#), [Guidelines for Gender-Inclusive Language](#).

Representation







Balanced Imagery and Visual Assets

Images communicate who belongs and who does not. Tokenistic or stereotyped visual representation, for example, including a person with a disability only to signal diversity, or showing women exclusively in supporting roles can reinforce the very exclusion organizations are working to address. Balanced imagery goes beyond visible diversity to reflect how people live, participate, and interact in real situations. It ensures that no group is overrepresented, underrepresented, or shown in a stereotypical way.

Key practices

- Be clear about why you are using an image and what message it communicates before selecting it.
- Use photos of actual participants, teams, or community members where possible to reflect real experiences.
- Do not include individuals solely to represent their identity group; consider whether their presence reflects genuine participation.
- Engage diverse participants early in program design – not only when you need images.
- Always ask permission and explain clearly how visuals will be used, where they will appear, and for how long.
- Avoid editing images in ways that change meaning, remove context, or misrepresent reality.
- Have a diverse team review visual content before publication; consult community members when unsure.
- Regularly review materials to ensure they remain accurate, current, and respectful.

Identity-specific considerations

Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Avoid tokenistic or stereotyped imagery; show women in leadership, technical, and decision-making roles
	LGBTQIA+	Avoid imagery that exclusively assumes heterosexual or gender-normative relationships and family structures
	Disability	Show people with disabilities as active participants, not passive recipients
	Neurodivergence	Avoid imagery that relies on visual metaphors that may not translate across cognitive styles
	Ethnic minorities	Represent cultural groups accurately; avoid imagery that flattens or exoticizes cultural identity
	Rural or Remote	Ensure imagery reflects non-urban realities, not only urban or institutional settings

Adapted from [Odgers Berndtson \(2024\), 4 Ways to Make Your Imagery More Inclusive](#); [Inclusive Employers \(2023\), Avoiding a Tokenistic Approach to Inclusion and Diversity](#); [University of Wisconsin–Madison. \(n.d.\) Inclusive Communications Guide](#).





Content Writing Practices



Language shapes how communities are perceived. Words and framing that seem neutral often carry assumptions about who is “normal,” who needs help, and whose experiences count. Inclusive content writing actively challenges these assumptions.

Key practices

- Avoid words or phrases that stereotype, stigmatize, or reduce people to a single identity – for example, “the disabled” or “the poor”.
- Emphasize actions, contributions, and strengths; mention identity only when it is directly relevant to the content.
- Ask people how they identify and respect their preferences before writing about them or on their behalf.
- Refer to inclusive language and diversity style guides regularly; what was acceptable previously may no longer be appropriate.
- Share content with the people featured before publishing and be open to corrections.
- Highlight perspectives from people across different backgrounds, experiences, and seniority levels.

Identity-specific considerations

Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Use gender-neutral terms; avoid language that assumes professional or domestic roles based on gender.
	LGBTQIA+	Use inclusive and current terminology; avoid language that assumes binary gender or heterosexual norms.
	Disability	Use the language the individual or community prefers; be aware that both person-first (“person with a disability”) and identity-first (“disabled person”) language are used and respected in different contexts.
	Neuro divergence	Avoid deficit framing; describe neurodivergent traits in neutral or strengths-based terms where appropriate.

Group		Key Considerations
	Ethnic minorities	Avoid generalizations; use specific, accurate terms for communities rather than broad or regional categories.
	Rural or Remote	Ensure examples and case studies reflect non-urban contexts and do not assume urban infrastructure or norms.

Adapted from [SALTO Inclusion \(2023\), Inclusive Communication Manual](#); University of Wisconsin–Madison (2024), [Inclusive Communications Guide](#).

Authentic and Intersectional Story Telling

Authentic stories in inclusive communication reflect real lived experiences by recognizing that people's identities shape how they experience opportunities, barriers, and power. Intersectional representation recognizes that people hold multiple, overlapping identities that shape their experiences in different ways. Together, these approaches help organizations move beyond surface-level diversity toward communications that are genuinely honest and respectful. It is important to include these as a communication strategy to

- Avoid oversimplified or unrealistic storytelling
- Build trust and credibility with audiences
- Ensure programs reflect real needs, not assumptions

Before publishing any story, use the following checklist:

Question	What to look for
Is the story realistic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows both challenges and progress in a balanced way • Avoids "perfect or flawless success" narratives
Does it reflect real context?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes factors like location, access, culture, or resources • Avoids general or generic storytelling, which may mislead
Are multiple experiences recognized?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids "one story fits all." • Reflects different pathways and outcomes
Is the voice authentic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses direct quotes or real perspectives where possible • Does not speak for communities without input
Is it free from bias or stereotypes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids "victim" or "hero" framing • Does not exaggerate or simplify experiences
Does it reflect intersecting identities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows people as complex individuals shaped by more than one aspect of their identity
Who is visible – and who is missing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures representation is not limited to a single demographic or experience type
Are visuals and language consistent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirms that images and text together communicate an inclusive and accurate message

Adapted from [Sustainability Directory \(2025\), Inclusive Storytelling](#); [Black Ops Consultancy \(2024\), Inclusive Storytelling: Sharing Narratives that Embrace Differences](#); [Prosper Strategies \(2023\), How to Respectfully Engage Your Stakeholders in Nonprofit Storytelling](#).

If a Mistake Happens

Mistakes in inclusive communications, particularly those that cause harm to marginalized groups, require a prompt, accountable, and non-defensive response. How an organization responds to a mistake often matters as much as the mistake itself.

- Identify what went wrong and what harm may have been caused, particularly to which group or community
- Acknowledge the feedback and thank the person who raised the issue; do not dismiss or minimize their concern
- Apologize clearly and directly; avoid vague, defensive, or conditional statements such as "if anyone was offended."
- Research the issue yourself rather than asking the affected community to educate you
- Take concrete steps to prevent it from happening again: update processes, review materials, retrain staff if needed
- Address the issue quickly and visibly to demonstrate accountability
- Ensure someone is clearly responsible for responding to and resolving the issue
- Shift sensitive conversations offline to support better understanding and resolution

Adapted from Odgers Berndtson (2024), *4 Ways to Make Your Imagery More Inclusive*; University of Wisconsin–Madison (2024), *Inclusive Communications Guide*, Strategic Communication Department.

Social Media Practices







Social media trends change quickly. Before managing organizational social media accounts, build sufficient understanding of current trends, platform norms, and community-specific language, particularly for communities your organization works with or represents.

Key practices

- Do not use terms, phrases, symbols, memes, GIFs, or emojis that originate from or represent specific communities without clear understanding of their meaning and context.
- Be aware that trending hashtags may carry meanings rooted in specific community experiences.

- Avoid humor, irony, or casual language that may land differently across cultural, linguistic, or identity groups.
- Form a diverse review team before posting, including people from the communities represented in the content where possible.
- Work collaboratively with visual designers to ensure images reflect real, diverse, and non-stereotyped representation.
- Ensure captions match the photo, provide clear information, and do not contradict or oversimplify the story being told.

Identity-specific considerations

Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Avoid casual or dismissive framing of gender-based issues; be aware of how algorithmic trends may amplify or suppress women’s voices
	LGBTQIA+	Use current, affirming terminology; be aware of platform-specific risks of content suppression for LGBTQIA+ creators
	Disability	Avoid inspiration-framing (“despite their disability”) and ensure content about disability is developed with disabled contributors
	Neuro divergence	Use plain language and avoid overwhelming post formats; limit use of emojis and flashing visuals
	Ethnic minorities	Be alert to cultural appropriation risks in trend participation; consult community members before using culturally specific content
	Rural or Remote	Consider whether content assumes digital access, urban context, or connectivity that may not be available to all audiences

Adapted from University of Wisconsin–Madison (2024), Inclusive Communications Guide; SALTO Inclusion (2023), Inclusive Communication Manual.

Accessibility of Social Media Content

Accessible social media content ensures that everyone including people with disabilities, neurodivergent individuals, those with lower digital literacy, and those using devices in challenging environments can access, understand, and engage with what you share. Accessibility is not an add-on; it should be built into every post from the start.

Images and Graphics

- Add descriptive alt text to every image; describe what is happening, not just what objects are present
- Never leave alt text blank – screen readers will announce it as “image,” which excludes blind and visually impaired users
- Avoid embedding important text inside images; if text must appear in an image, repeat it in the caption or alt text
- Ensure sufficient color contrast between text and background in all graphics
- Do not use flashing, strobing, or rapidly changing visuals, which can trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy

Videos and Audio

- Add captions to all videos; never rely on auto-generated captions alone – always review and correct before posting
- Include audio or visual descriptions in the caption for any important content not described in the spoken audio
- Provide transcripts for audio-only content such as podcasts or voice messages
- Avoid videos that play automatically; users should be able to choose when to start content

Text and Language

- Write in plain language; avoid jargon, acronyms, and complex sentence structures
- Use CamelCase for hashtags so screen readers can identify individual words – for example, #InclusiveLeadership, not #inclusiveleadership
- Limit emoji use; screen readers read every emoji aloud – place emojis at the end of sentences, not in the middle
- Avoid special Unicode fonts or decorative text, which screen readers cannot process correctly

Adapted from [Disability:IN \(n.d.\), Creating Accessible Social Media Content](#); [Access Living \(2024\), Guide: Basic Accessibility on Social Media](#); [Hootsuite \(2024\), Social Media Accessibility: Inclusive Design Tips](#).

Platform-Specific Considerations

The following practices apply across all platforms:

- Research hashtags and trending content before using; misuse can cause harm to specific communities
- Maintain a clear comment moderation policy and apply it consistently
- Never tag or identify individuals without their explicit consent

Platform	Best Used For	Unique Inclusion Risk	Unique Accessibility Feature
Facebook	Community groups, program updates, events	Weak hate speech moderation	SRT caption upload; auto-captions for Live
Instagram	Visual storytelling, program imagery	Algorithm suppression of disability and minority content	Caption sticker for Reels and Stories
LinkedIn	Professional networking, thought leadership	Gendered professional language norms; narrow definitions of success	Custom alt text for images
X or Twitter	Hashtags, real-time updates	High harassment risk; fast-moving trend misuse	SRT caption upload
Youtube	Training videos, testimonials	Inaccessible thumbnails; no audio descriptions by default	Closed captions; transcripts; audio descriptions
TikTok	Short-form video, youth engagement	Cultural appropriation risk; algorithm suppression of minority content	Auto-captions with manual editing
WhatsApp or Telegram	Direct messaging, program coordination	Privacy and identity exposure risk in group chats	Text summaries for voice messages

Adapted from Disability:IN (n.d.), *Creating Accessible Social Media Content*; GLAAD (2024), *Social Media Safety Index*; Hootsuite (2024), *Social Media Accessibility: Inclusive Design Tips*.




Handling Comments Practices


Marginalized groups are more likely to experience harassment, discrimination, and silencing in online spaces, and organizations have a responsibility to create safer environments. Therefore, this session provides an organization with practices for responding to comments, especially negative ones.

Key practices

- Respond within 24 hours where possible, using a friendly and respectful tone.
- Be open and non-judgmental, especially with negative feedback; try to understand concerns and turn them into constructive conversations.
- Do not tolerate hate speech, discriminatory language, or targeted harassment; maintain a clear moderation policy and apply it consistently.
- Hide or remove content that involves personal identity or is off-topic, harmful, or inappropriate.
- Acknowledge mistakes, apologize clearly, and commit to concrete improvement.
- Moderate fairly and consistently across all posts and identity groups.

Identity-specific considerations

Group		Key Considerations
	Women & Gender	Take misogynistic or gender-based harassment seriously; do not minimize it as banter or opinion
	LGBTQIA+	Apply consistent moderation to homophobic or transphobic content; do not treat identity-based harassment as "debate"
	Disability	Be alert to ableist language in comments and apply moderation policy consistently

Group		Key Considerations
	Ethnic minorities	Address racial slurs and discriminatory generalizations promptly and visibly

Adapted from GLAAD (2024), Social Media Safety Index; University of Wisconsin–Madison (2024), Inclusive Communications Guide, Strategic Communication Department.

Inclusive Social Media Metrics and Evaluation

Measuring whether social media content is genuinely reaching and resonating with diverse audiences is an important part of inclusive communication. Without evaluation, organizations risk assuming their content is inclusive without evidence.

What to track:

- Reach and engagement across different content, are posts featuring diverse communities performing differently from others?
- Audit key insights from the dashboard with a focus on gender ratio, demographics, age range, and many more.
- Actively invite feedback from community members on whether the content feels representative, respectful, and relevant
- Comment monitoring: track whether certain posts attract discriminatory or harmful responses that require moderation

How to improve:

- Use feedback and data to make concrete changes to content strategy, not just to report on it
- Build representation reviews into regular communications planning cycles
- If certain groups are consistently absent from your content, identify why; is it a gap in outreach, content, or visual assets?

Adapted from SALTO Inclusion (2023), Inclusive Communication Manual; University of Wisconsin–Madison (2024), Inclusive Communications Guide, Strategic Communication Department.

Community Engagement and Co-Creation

Genuinely inclusive social media communication goes beyond avoiding harm; it actively involves the communities being represented in creating and shaping content. Speaking about communities rather than with them reinforces the power imbalances that inclusion work seeks to address.

- Involve community members in content creation from the start, not only to review content after it has been drafted
- Amplify existing voices from the communities you work with; share, repost, and credit community-led content where possible
- Compensate community members fairly for their time and contribution to content creation
- Be transparent about how community input will be used and review content before it is published
- Do not engage communities only during awareness days or campaigns; build ongoing relationships
- Be honest about the limits of your organization's knowledge; and seek guidance when you do not have the lived experience to represent a community accurately

Adapted from SALTO Inclusion (2023), *Inclusive Communication Manual*; [Inclusive Employers \(2023\), *Avoiding a Tokenistic Approach to Inclusion and Diversity*](#).