

#MSv's'ble

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Introduction

“Come on, mom! Let’s go!” I yell from the kitchen. I am excited and ready to go, my bag packed and jacket is on. After waiting for a minute, I become impatient, set my bag down and sigh and run up the double staircase and down the hall to my parent’s bedroom. My mom sits on the edge of the bed, dressed to leave, but the look on her face suggests the contrary.

“Honey, I’m feeling really tired. I don’t think I can go today.”

“Oh,” I respond, trying to conceal my feeling of rejection , “Um, it’s okay, are you feeling alright?”

“Yes, just wiped. I just need to rest a bit.”

“But, you just woke up!” I exclaim, trying to get my day back to its regular schedule.

“I know sweetheart. I’m sorry.” My mom’s down-turned gaze is fixed on the floor. Embarrassed and sorry that she cannot keep up with her teenage daughter.

“It’s okay,” I respond, and hug her tightly, “We can go some other time when you feel up for it.”

This scene repeats itself at least once a week throughout my childhood. I was an eager daughter always excited to explore and to get out of the house. However, I relied on a mother who was unable to keep up, not because she did not want to, but because her disease set her pace.

There are currently 400,000 people in the United States living with multiple sclerosis (MS), and my mom is one of them. Throughout my childhood, I saw firsthand the tremendously detrimental impact this disease had on my mom’s health and daily life. However, many of my peers who were not personally touched by the disease fail to fully understand what it means to have MS.

As a disease has previously portrayed like living inside a horror movie, I wanted to destigmatize MS and open the conversation surround its invisible symptoms. The #MSvisible campaign was designed to spread awareness about MS to a broad audience, using simple and friendly icons.

Through my research and conversations with people living with MS, I discovered how best to capture the disease with icons. Using design language, I remove the veil of mystery surrounding the disease, engaging users to begin open and honest conversations about MS. As MS remains unseen to a majority of society, I am using the #MSvisible set to spread awareness of the disease, taking us one step closer to finding the cause and cure for MS.

Contextual background

What is multiple sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis is a neurological disease that affects the communication between the brain to the rest of the body. As Melissa Stauffer explains in her book *Understanding Multiple Sclerosis*, "MS is a disease in which the immune system damages the insulation around nerve cells. Loss of this insulation causes nerve impulses to slow down and eventually stop. Because the effects of MS do not become evident until substantial damage has occurred, people in the early stages of MS often look complete healthy" (Stauffer, 17). With crumbling nerve protection, the central nervous system (CNS) becomes weak. The CNS is responsible for communication between the brain and the rest of the body, but with damaged nerve insulation, this communication is grows fraught. MS can expose itself through symptoms that are invisible to others: numbness, pain, extreme fatigue, vision problems and bladder dysfunction. Other symptoms like loss of balance and foot-dragging are often mistaken for clumsiness or inebriation. Symptoms are difficult to predict; the severity of symptoms varies by the day. Some report no symptoms for years, others feel something new and painful every day because the symptoms vary from person to person, it is extremely difficult for doctors to diagnose multiple sclerosis efficiently and accurately. The biggest challenge with this disease is that it is unknown and unpredictable. Not only do researchers and doctors lack the known cause of the disease, but there is no available cure.

MS in the media

As there is a small proportion of our world living with MS, many lack firsthand experience. Non-profits have produced public service announcements to spread awareness of the symptoms in which MS can expose itself. These advertisements attempt to draw in its audience through scare tactics, contributing to ideas that life with MS is horrific. Cummins & Partners of Melbourne created an advertisement that utilized terrorizing methods to capture attention.

By juxtaposing a naked woman in a seemingly cold, concrete and dark landscape, it mimics a crime scene. The woman is skinny. Her ribs are pronounced as she clings to herself. Her body language tells us she is afraid. Her gaze refuses to look at the camera, giving the viewer a sense of vulnerability, while allowing us to place ourselves within the blank canvas of her body. As we look closer to identify the black markings on her body, we realize they mimic food expiration stamps. *Use By* is imprinted on each body part implying that slowly each will deteriorate. The lack of specific dates on the stampings suggests the mystery of MS's symptoms; unlike food products, we cannot know when each of the organs will fail. Along the bottom of the image, it reads: *When you have multiple sclerosis you never know what will expire next.*



Cummins & Partners for Multiple Sclerosis, Australia
Use By Dates utilizes extreme horror and scare tactics to raise awareness of the silent symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

Cummins & Partners attracted an audience through horror, conveying one of the great mysteries of MS. However, by associating negative images in context with MS, the advertisement discouraged open and honest conversation, hindering curiosity about MS. Rather, *Use By* merely suggests that MS will slowly and unpredictably kill all organ function in those living with it.

In my work, I want to provoke conversation around MS, sparking curiosity about the mystery of living with the disease. To accomplish this, I will craft my messaging in a way contrary to Cummins & Partners. By designing a visual language of icons that represent the signs and symptoms of MS, I aim to spread a more provocative energy towards the disease.



There is No Warning Sign by Dag & David Agency
An eerie broken doll leg and encapsulating back background evoke horror elements, scaring audience into noticing the campaign.

Dag & David Agency mimic Cummins & Partners' tactics of awe, horror and terror to gather an audience. While these methods can create a lasting impression on an audience, they are only successful within a niche market. With an enveloping sea of black, Dag & David Agency create an empty hole for their subject to lie in. By integrating a doll to mimic what might happen to the victim of a horror movie, Dag & David Agency shed light on the unexpected and unpredictable symptoms of MS.

As the symptoms of MS are invisible to society, it is fundamental that we illuminate them. Through #MSvisible, I raise awareness of these symptoms in a friendly and approachable tone.



Is It MS? by Hydrogen Advertising

A campaign series to highlight common symptoms of MS that asks the audience to question whether any of these symptoms could be linked to MS.

Hydrogen Advertising continues the theme of using horror to spread awareness. The campaign depicts a figure gazing away from the camera. Avoiding eye contact allows the audience to place themselves within the body outline. From the audience's perspective, the woman looks healthy, her skin appears to be smooth and tan and she looks to have a healthy weight. However, the image sheds light on the symptoms that society often may not see. *Is It MS?* the campaign asks. We may experience symptoms, while others see us as looking disease-free.

This ad encourages inner reflection, to diagnose symptoms properly and not overlook those that are invisible. By embedding images and questions that relate to symptoms of MS, *Is It MS* became successful in spreading awareness of the disease. Yet, the campaign still fails to provoke conversations that create a deeper understanding of the disease.

Engaging the millennial generation

Today, the millennial generation has a major influence on the world of advertising. Millennials are a unique group due to the simultaneous growth of technology. Author Mindy Weinstein defines millennials as "...individuals born between 1980 and 2000 and have been referred to as the 'always connected' generation due to their close relationship with technology. Research has shown that their values have been influenced from such historic events such as the Great Recession, 9/11, and the election of the first African-American president: Barack Obama." (Weinstein, 2015)

In consumer culture, this generation strives to partner with companies; they do not like being told what to do and when, but rather they want to engage and influence the marketing and branding of a large corporation on a personal level. Millennials enjoy customization, rewards for purchases, and the ability to see how their influences are making a difference, while also wanting to engage in a way that is easy and convenient for them. They seek the instant and impulsive: buying what they want from the convenience of a phone application.

Even though millennials want to have instant payment and communication ability, they long for a continuous relationship with companies they frequent. Millennials are looking for more than just a one-time interaction, but rather a continuous partnership so that they can align themselves with the brand's image and outlook. Debra Kaye, a writer for *Entrepreneur*, explains what millennials want from a brand, "Establishing a social media presence across a variety of channels is the way to reach millennials...a company's engaging with the millennials means adding value to their experience of the brand through loyalty programs, recognition events and special access to sales and other promotional events...it means creating the impression that each consumer is special." (Kaye, 2014) Allowing each consumer to feel special has been a challenge for companies attracting millennials. As brands seek to find a large customer base, the personalities and backgrounds of their customers grow. The companies that find success are those that allow each individual consumer to create their own role within the company, choosing to engage and participate however they see fit.



One Day Without Shoes by TOMS
TOMS visualizes how your purchase can make a positive impact.

TOMS, a shoe company that prides itself on the slogan, *every pair of shoes sold, another pair is donated* has found great success within the millennial generation. Mindy Weinstein explains the structure of TOMS, "The company has created a culture where philanthropy and profit can co-exist and has encouraged customer interaction. Customers can share their stories, experiences, and photos as a way to raise awareness." (Weinstein, 2015) TOMS empowers the consumer to create a meaningful impact with their purchase. The company shares narratives of the people whose lives they have changed through print and digital advertisements. Through this, TOMS has allowed the consumer to trace their impact, seeing updates with each purchase, creating a continuous bond and shared interest in a cause.

In #MSvisible, I make information about MS accessible, in whichever media is most comfortable and convenient for my millennial audience: digitally, on paper and even through transferrable labels and stickers.

Coca-Cola's *Share A Coke* campaign collected major attention from millennials. The updated labeling of Coke, juxtaposing popular first names where the traditional Coca-Cola logo would sit ushered in a new wave of customizable marketing to the industry. Weinstein addresses the rising sales due to the campaign, "Coca-Cola's soft-drinks sales in the U.S. went up 2% after launching this campaign. The campaign put 250 of the most popular names among teens and Millennials on 20-ounce bottles." (Weinstein, 2015) Through this small design change, Coke drew in the consumer through customization, allowing the audience to feel special as they discovered that their name was featured on one of the bottles. On top of selling personalized Coke bottles in stores, the campaign opened up further engagement through digital platforms. Inviting consumers to make customized labels for gifts and for themselves, Coca-Cola furthered sales and encouraged digital shares to embrace the domino effect on social media platforms.

With a variety of icons to represent the signs and symptoms of MS, I allow my users to choose one to which they feel most connected.

Share a
Coke. with...

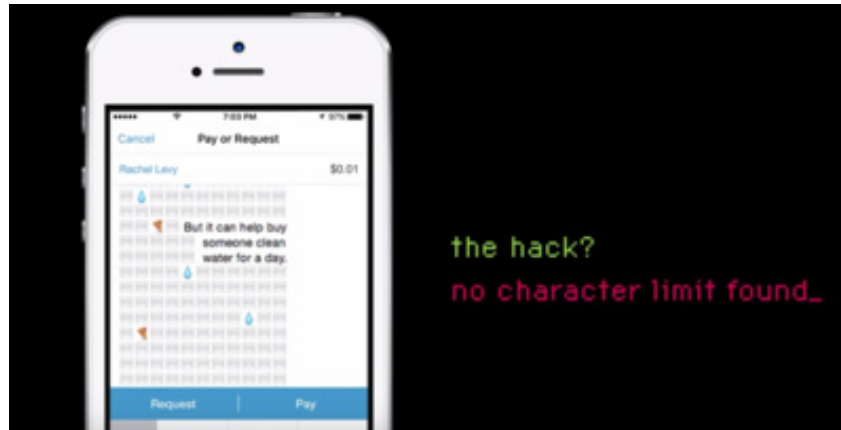


Share A Coke by Coca-Cola

The Share a Coke campaign juxtaposed popular first names on Coke bottles, creating a unique way that consumers could impose their own identity within the Coke brand.

To be successful in the ever-evolving, ever-connected, upcoming generation, marketers must go where others have not gone before. They must be bold, different and disruptive to catch an attentive audience. Nicole Fallon Taylor, a reporter for Business News Daily writes, "Today's consumers, especially tech-savvy Gen Yers, are inundated with advertisements on a daily basis. They see them on billboards and buildings, in public transit stations, on their web browsers and mobile devices, and on their TVs. In an environment where there's an ad everywhere you turn, you have to get really creative to stand out." (Taylor, 2014) Advertisements not only have to reach consumers in innovative ways, but they must be convenient for the user to access. Campaigns that have utilized Facebook, Twitter, lifestyle and gaming applications have found success in separating themselves from the bombarding magazine, TV and billboard ads. Yet, the innovative media resources that are available to us are not enough to sell a cause or product. As TOMS and Coca-Cola evolved to sell to the millennial generation and explore new media, they incorporated storylines, customizations and ultimately formed a relationship with the consumer. To involve an audience like TOMS and Coke did, the campaign must excite the audience and provide opportunities for further involvement, making each engagement personal and meaningful.

The millennial generation aligns with causes



Water Is Life, Venmo Hack

Water Is Life entered an application where no advertising has been allowed before; creating awe, surprise and drawing a great deal of attention to their campaign.

Using new technology, companies seek to utilize social media platforms to engage with millennials in a way that is fun and convenient for them. Water Is Life partnered with advertising agency, Deutsch to hack Venmo. Venmo is an application that allows users to share payments seamlessly, acting as a digital wallet. Venmo is a unique platform, as no advertising has been allowed on to it before. Erik Oster explains the steps of the hack, “ [Water Is Life] sent micropayments of a cent each to users and, since Venmo doesn’t limit character count on payment descriptions, included a full targeted ad of up to 2,000 characters, ending with a call to action and link to make a donation” (Oster, 2016). By activating a new space, Water Is Life created a mass audience of intrigued users, with even more press and media coverage to follow.

As MS has never previously been seen as a conversational topic, I break that stigma by creating fun icons that cannot be ignored.

Another campaign promoting breast cancer early detection self checks utilized the vast audience of Facebook users. DDB of Berlin partnered with Pink Ribbon to challenge Facebook censorship rules of not showing any nudity. As DDB invited women around Europe to participate, the movement to expose one’s breasts in regards to breast cancer spread to the entire world. The campaign raised awareness to *Check It Before It’s Removed*, referring to both the image posted on Facebook, and the breast for cancer. The campaign reached millennials by using the common communication platform, Facebook, and spread awareness through mass posts and shares. *Check It Before It’s Removed* attracted press by breaking rules in a way that has never been done before.

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As I create a new visual language for multiple sclerosis, I find new ways to talk about the disease, changing the historical pattern of horror and scare tactics.



Check It Before It's Removed by Pink Ribbon
Check It Before It's Removed challenged Facebook's censorship rules of exposing a naked body part on their site. The campaign had a domino affect, although only live on Facebook for a short period of time, the press and attention that the campaign received was massive.

Using other media, The ALS Bucket Challenge found great success on YouTube. The challenge was framed as fun and competitive, a dare to dump a bucket of ice water on your head, while anyone who surrendered was asked to donate money to ALS research. The challenge spiraled through mass tags on videos and sharings on Facebook and Twitter that further challenged friends and family members to keep the movement traveling. Celebrities and people around the world participated, gathering attention from news sources that followed the funds raised and posted amusing videos of celebrities dumping ice water on their heads.

Water Is Life, Pink Ribbon and the ALS Foundation all engage with the millennial generation by utilizing applications and media platforms that are already in use and growing. The campaigns use popular trends to create a fun way for their audience to engage with their company, their story and their cause. The campaigns push the boundaries of how advertisements have interacted with their audience before. The causes promote shares and conversations, driving for a domino effect that travels around the virtual world. The campaigns that find success allow their users to participate in their own way, finding a connection to the brand and further sharing how they contributed with their friends, family and social media followers.

Thinking about these campaigns as precedents for the #MSvisible campaign, I look to incorporate their successes and learn from their failures. My goal of creating the #MSvisible campaign is to spread awareness of the signs and symptoms of MS in a new and approachable way that has never been attempted before.

Methodology

In researching previous advertisements that spoke about multiple sclerosis and campaigns that successfully reached the millennial generation, I have realized which tactics are most effective. Through my research, I have picked what aspects are most important to share about the disease and the most successful media and method with which to do so.

After reading about MS, I investigated how it manifests itself through conversations with specialists, people living with MS, the National MS Society and attending the Center for Independent Living MS Support Group. Interviewing people who live with multiple sclerosis, I was able to bring the medical research, articles and publishings that I read to life. Reviewing studies about the development of myelin sheath and the symptoms with which it exposes itself seemed too scientific to be a human issue. However, through speaking and meeting people who live with this disease, I was able to get a glimpse of how it affects their daily activities and relationships with friends and family. Ultimately, this allowed me to create a campaign that could give a voice to the many who cannot speak up for themselves.

While, attempting to understand how these symptoms feel, uncovering the way “fatigue” or “cognitive dysfunction” feels, I have spent a great deal of time with people who have MS to understand their daily lives. I have had people use examples, stories and metaphors to allow us (those who live without MS) to comprehend what it really is like. For instance, I learned that the fatigue experienced by people with MS is vastly different than the fatigue a college student experiences after an all-nighter. This fatigue makes it feel as though one’s pinky weighs one-hundred pounds, that they are wearing ankle weights, or their entire body is coated in wet cement.

This deck was my jumping off point, juxtaposing the visual symptoms in one set helped me see what was reading correctly as an icon and what lacked understanding. By creating a cohesive set, I focused on design choices of line, weight and pattern in repetition to enhance a feeling of cohesion. I was able to create a visual language for myself, repeating design choices of lines, weight and patterns to create a feeling of cohesion throughout.



Visual progress from initial iterations to final version of Silent Disease icon.

Challenging myself, I continued the editing and refining process. One icon, representing the silent disease of MS consisted of a long refining process. Attempting to portray the lack of warning that MS gives those who live with it, I played with recognizable gestures that are used to denote silence. Realizing that the hand and finger were not reading as intended, I continued developing. I worked to integrate subtle color and repeating lines so that the silent disease icon could not only read on its own, but also in context with the rest of the set.

Not only was the design language influential in the development of the icons, but also was the feedback from my peers, people with MS from the MS Support Group in Ann Arbor, leaders at the National MS Society and my personal inspiration, my mom. Being able to see people's reactions as my project progressed was an extremely inspiring influential experience. Murmurs of "YES, that's it" or even confused looks of "what's this?" were crucial in driving the direction of how the icons evolved.

Creative work

In our society, icons are used to express an emotion or an idea in a simple visual. In creating icons, I wanted the set to be friendly, approachable and relatively fun to open the discussion of this autoimmune disease. Applying my icons to digital media, I used each icon to signify a part of the disease. Each icon could serve as a communication tool to help those living with MS convey their current symptoms to those without. It was my hope that this also sparks a conversation between two people who are curious to learn more about MS. These icons could also be used in a more professional setting, allowing a doctor to understand how the patient is experiencing symptoms. They are easy to use and integrate within everyday conversation, making the harsh, and previously terrorizing topic of MS easy to discuss within all groups.

The icons can be easily integrated into a variety of media to meet the needs of the user. The icons have been transferred onto business cards, books, stickers and a website for the purpose of my exhibit, however the boundaries of media can be pushed further. I have designed my icons to be matched with quotes from people who live with MS to provide a deeper, more human explanation to the otherwise digitally stark icons. The voice of those living with MS provides a lens of how the symptom truly feels. For example, one person with MS describes, "With MS, vision problems feel like I have double kaleidoscope vision." Alongside this quote you would see my icon for vision problems, making the connection between the symptom, the explanation and the visual tool.

This media can be used in a variety of situations and environments. For example, to spread awareness on college campuses, the stickers could be applied to phone sticker wallets, water bottles or even keychains. The icons could be made into car, laptop or window stickers, temporary tattoos and even can be placed on pens, erasers and thumb drives as give-aways.

In conversations with people who have MS, I have seen where they could apply these icons for everyday use. Communicating with a stranger that they are too tired and cannot stand up, or in conversation with friends and family that they will be unable to make it to a dinner that night, they could even use the icons to track their progression of symptoms. For those who live with MS, these grant them a new visual language through which to communicate and clues those who are not familiar with the disease a lens into how the disease exposes itself.



Gallery exhibit display.



Conclusion

The #MSvisible campaign was meant to travel. There are no boundaries to the media and context to which it can be applied. It can be used for people who live with MS to communicate to their loved ones, to engage millennials to acquire interest in the mysteries of the disease or can be applied to professional settings in a doctor's office or MS clinic. It can be transferred onto stickers, water bottles and phone cases to spread awareness of MS. #MSvisible is a new visual language to begin the conversation surrounding MS.

From designing, creating and implementing this campaign, I have learned how powerfully research and communication work with my creative process. The people I have met and worked with on this project inspired me and continued to help push my work when I was down. The ability to see in others the success of your work and hearing directly what a difference it can make on their lives has completely changed the project for me. Solving problems through design is always what I intended to do with my life, however, seeing the direct effect that your designs can have on a person, or group of people allows me to be more than just a designer, but rather someone who is empowered and passionate to make a difference in this world.

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