

THE RISE OF THE BODY INCLUSIVE ECONOMY

How brands can tap into the \$1 trillion plus-size industry through authentic connection

.....

Most brands are not only alienating over 100 million Americans, but also blocking themselves from a soon-to-be trillion dollar industry.

Imagine an egg hunt at which all the children are focused on finding only the blue eggs — pink and green are all passed over. Not only that, but the blue eggs are just hardboiled; the other eggs are plastic and have cash inside! There might even be a golden egg somewhere out there. Any parent would of course gently nudge their child and encourage them to sweep up all the eggs left behind and let everyone else fight over the small portion of blue eggs.

So simple when it's a field of colorful eggs — but this exact scenario is playing out in business every day. Most companies are competing for the lower-value blue eggs (the same 33% of the market), while ignoring the higher-value options.

A company willing to take the simple step to pick up a few of these eggs would see both an immediate profit increase and less competition.

This is the opportunity of the body inclusive economy.

It is shocking how little attention is paid to customers in larger bodies, especially considering the following:

- The global plus-size clothing market is estimated to exceed \$1 trillion in buying power by 2032
- 20% of all womenswear spending in 2023 is predicted to be on plus-size garments.
- According to Mary Beth Laughton, CEO of Athleta, their plus-size customers' spending vastly exceeds that of other sizes, to the tune of almost 90% more than other customers (despite Athleta's pricing being the same across sizes).

This market has deep pockets and is ready to buy, yet most brands continue to ignore it.

The good news is, there is plenty of room for authentic growth in this segment of practically every industry, and that journey begins with taking simple steps to understand what your audience is seeing, feeling, experiencing, and sharing.

About the Author

Kara Richardson Whitely



As a leader in the body inclusivity conversation, Kara Richardson Whitely founded [The Gorgeous Agency](#) to help brands grow in the plus-size market.

For her, this mission is both professional and personal.

When Kara was planning her first Kilimanjaro climb nearly two decades ago, plus-size women's apparel was not available. As a size-26 woman, she wore an XXL men's jacket that was tight on her hips and with cuffs that hung several inches below her fingertips. The shoulders and collar were boxy and let the wind inside. All in all, she was cold and uncomfortable in ill-fitting clothes as she inched toward the 19,343-foot summit.

Back then, everything in her gear closet either fit poorly or was retrofitted. Her pants were custom-created by a tailor who took two pairs of TravelSmith trousers and sewed them together to make her size.

When she went into an outdoor shop—even for something unrelated to size, like a pair of boots or a water bottle—she would have to share her long résumé of hiking escapades to feel like the sales staff took her seriously.

That was back in the early 2000s, before many in the outdoor community accepted this fact: Being plus size is average. Today, Richardson Whitely is an influencer, board member, and brand advisor for many outdoor companies and organizations that share the philosophy that every body is an outdoor body.

Now, she is at the helm of change with a global agency, and [Gorge](#), the story of her three Kilimanjaro climbs as a plus-size adventurer, is being made into a movie with *This Is Us* actress Chrissy Metz producing and starring as Kara.

Body Inclusivity is Essential for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In 2023, most brands are well aware that they need an authentic focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion if they hope to survive, especially as Gen Z climbs to the forefront of the buying market. As members of the United States' first minority-majority generation, 62% of Gen Zers see increased diversity as good for society, and they are already clearly showing support for this through the companies from which they purchase. 80% of Gen Zers believe brands should address diversity and inclusion, and over half want to see more diversity in senior leadership.

However, body inclusivity is a glaring omission from most brands' DEI efforts.

While some companies have made progress toward body inclusivity, plus-size consumers still face bias and weight stigma at every turn. Research shows that people in larger bodies consistently experience discrimination on both interpersonal and systemic levels, which can lead to chronic stress, mental health struggles, and trauma.

And yet many brands in all industries fail to make more than a token effort, at best, toward body inclusivity.

This often plays out via an ill-advised marketing campaign and the inevitable backlash from a community that is consistently ignored, excluded, or flat-out ridiculed.

Even companies that have made some progress fall victim to inauthentic marketing.

Torrid, a clothing brand that prides itself on size inclusivity, announced a new collection in September 2022 which did not feature any plus-size models, instantly drawing ire for the hypocrisy. The brand eventually reshot the ads for the new collection, but not before disappointing much of their previously loyal audience.

Most people will be aware of Dove's significant efforts to become associated with body inclusive ideals, which have been received fairly well overall. But in 2017, the company issued a series of six different shapes of body wash meant to show that "beauty comes in all shapes and sizes." While attempting to display body passivity, instead this much maligned campaign turned the neutral situation of buying shower gel into a body-image dilemma. The "pear-shaped" bottle might be difficult to hold in the shower, while the tall, thin ones would fall over easily. Which one do you buy—the one that looks like you, or the one that's easiest to use? The option inadvertently implies that there is a best shape, whether for body or bottle.

Even for brands like Dove that are known for promoting body inclusivity, there is more careful work to be done to ensure the message is authentic—and this requires listening to people in larger bodies.



Images: [Dove](#)

Customer Journey

What many companies don't understand about the plus-size market is that failing to take action on body inclusion also often results in a traumatic customer journey for a segment that has deep pockets and long memories.

Consider a customer who is going shopping because they need something immediately. Maybe she needs a black dress for a funeral, and does not have time to order online. If the store doesn't carry her size, she will either have to get something that doesn't fit well, is not fit for purpose (maybe there is an option in her size but not in black), or she will leave with nothing at all. The next time that customer is going to make a purchase, whether time-sensitive or not, she is less likely to turn to that brand.

Even if a store does offer plus-size clothing, there are three main reasons people still may not be accessing it—all due to weight stigma.

First, they may have had negative experiences with the brand in the past. This could have been a microaggression from a sales person, or being told the shop didn't carry their size and they would have to order online.

Second, they may have heard of other people having negative experiences. Like any community, people in larger bodies share their experiences to help others avoid negative interactions.

If a brand has treated someone poorly because of their size, news will travel; when Southwest Airlines removed Kevin Smith from a flight, citing his weight as a "safety concern," many people in larger bodies swore off flying Southwest forever.

Third, people in larger bodies are used to being the victim of jokes. When a person has consistently experienced microaggressions, they become hyperaware of any situation that could be unsafe in any way.



Failing to accommodate the plus-size market is more than a simple error in judgment—it is a major financial mistake, alienating the majority of the global buying audience.

Inclusivity Benefits Everyone

A common misconception is that designing a user journey, product, space, etc. for people in larger bodies is somehow not helpful for the “average” user. However, we now know there is no “average” user. You may be familiar with the anecdote of the WWII planes that had cockpits designed for the perfectly average pilot, but ended up working for none of the pilots and tragically led to a higher number of deaths—no one is average, so the cockpit suited no one. Instead, the answer lied in creating adjustable cockpits, which are now the standard for any vehicle. This is a case of designing for the extremes, rather than the average. The extremes, unlike the average, do exist. And it has been proven again and again that designing for the extremes, or edge cases, benefits all users.



There is no such thing as an “average” customer.

Consider a restaurant space with very little room between tables. It is potentially both uncomfortable and embarrassing for a person in a larger body to successfully navigate to their seat. Resolving this might mean designing a flow which accommodates bodies of all sizes moving around—but consider who else

this is likely to benefit: parents with a child in a stroller, a person in a wheelchair, a person with a sensory processing disorder, someone with PTSD from an event in a crowded space—and so on.

Examples of this abound—closed captions were made for people who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing, but many people now use captions for other reasons, like new parents who don’t want to wake a sleeping infant.

Curb cuts (where a sidewalk ramps down to the ground) make it easier for wheelchair users to navigate, and also for people wheeling a suitcase or hand truck. Parking lots must have handicapped parking so wheelchair users can exit their vehicles, and these spaces also benefit someone who is temporarily disabled by a broken leg and is using crutches. Websites have alternative text for screen-reading technology, which is just as helpful for someone with low vision as it is for someone with dilated pupils from a visit to the optometrist.

We take accommodations like these for granted today in the U.S., but many of them only exist thanks to the American Disabilities Act of 1990. Shockingly, prior to the ADA, it was legal to tell someone in a wheelchair to leave a venue because they created a fire risk, whereas today the responsibility is rightly on spaces to be accessible to people with different needs. In another 30 years, hopefully it will seem similarly outrageous to look back on the body size discrimination of today.



There is more than a moral case for the industry to embrace body diversity and inclusion—there is a business case as well.

When you start to scratch the surface of just how many potential customers and team members would benefit from simple changes to accommodate body diversity (and how many people are currently not engaging with your company because they do not feel welcome), it becomes obvious how imperative it is to embrace this underserved group of people.

When it comes to clothing, the problem begins at fashion school, where designers are not trained to consider extended sizing (and they don't have dress forms to style on), and it continues through to brands that don't offer these sizes because of the complex mechanics of adapting patterns designed only for smaller bodies.

But failing to accommodate the plus-size market is more than a simple error in judgment—it is a major financial mistake, alienating the majority of the global buying audience.

The plus-size apparel market was valued at \$24 billion in 2020, an increase of \$4.5 billion since 2016. The average women's size is 16, and yet, only one-eighth of clothing options are offered in plus sizes (anything above size 36 for men and 12 for women).

Of course, the same people buying plus-size clothing are also part of every other market. Businesses that are not engaging with the plus-size market, whatever the industry, are leaving literally billions of dollars on the table—and this is even more shocking when we consider how simple, and almost universally beneficial, the changes are that would allow them to tap into this vital market.

Clearly, there is more than a moral case for the industry to embrace body diversity and inclusion in its product offerings and marketing. There is a business case as well.



Stay Ahead of the Plus-Size Market Curve

But where should you begin? Rather than attempt to overhaul your company's branding overnight, start with these four simple questions that allow you to put yourself in your customers' shoes. Evaluating your responses is your first step on the journey to keeping up with the rise of the body inclusive economy:

What is your audience...

0 1 SEEING?

0 2 FEELING?

0 3 EXPERIENCING?

0 4 SHARING?

We'll use this lens to examine a few brands that have made genuine steps toward not just tolerating people in larger bodies, but to actively welcoming them—and how this has served the brand's bottom line.

What is your audience seeing?

When your audience sees your marketing or steps into your office, are they seeing themselves reflected? Alaska Airlines recently showed a plus-size woman in their imagery for first class; it was subtle, but people in larger bodies definitely noticed. This is an area in which J. Jill excels. A dressing room with all its mirrors is often a particularly stressful place—but J. Jill included a life-size image of a woman in a larger body, making it clear that customers of all sizes were welcome in that space; for a woman who is not used to seeing people like herself in any brand's imagery, the sense of safety that provides cannot be overstated.

People of all sizes want to be seen and served—is your brand accomplishing this? Review your brand story and imagery. Are any of your customer personas people in larger bodies? Where could you showcase more body diversity in both your internal and external materials?



Comfort-inducing perks just for you.

Experience exclusive, First Class perks. Check in two free bags, skip ahead with expedited check-in and priority boarding, along with express security screening at select airports. Plus, earn 75% more Mileage Plan™ bonus miles with your First Class ticket purchase.

Image: [Alaska Airlines](#)

Alder Apparel



Image: Founders of Alder Apparel. Photo by [Jemel May](#).

Alder Apparel is an inclusive and sustainable outdoor brand focused on celebrating all bodies in the outdoors. Alder has always offered clothing in extended sizes, and shows the clothing on people with varied body types. If a customer wants to see what an item will look like on their body, they will be able to find an example on the company's website.

"In the fashion industry—from supplier relationships to pricing models to retail setups—everything is based around excluding a certain end of the population, referred to as 'plus-sized,' from being a part of the everyday buying experience," said co-founder Naomi Blackman. "It's a choice that makes no sense."

The company began with a Kickstarter in 2019 for its first product, the Open-Air pant, which exceeded its funding goal by 850%. Four years later, and with a team of five, Alder has reached \$5 million in revenue.

Aerie



Image: Andrew Buda / Getty Images for Aerie

Aerie, a subsidiary of American Eagle, has made body positivity a central tenet of the brand, especially when it comes to what their audience sees.

In an [Aerie fitting room](#), customers are met with handwritten messages of self-love, body positivity, and encouragement. "The fitting room is not supposed to be a room of shame; it's supposed to be a room to celebrate who you are. That's a big part of our store experience and brand experience," says Jennifer Foyle, President and Executive Creative Director at American Eagle and Aerie.

The Aerie REAL campaign took a hard stance against deficit marketing by using body-diverse models and ditching airbrushing. Rather than convincing people to buy their products because it will give them something they lack, Aerie's marketing works by helping customers feel more secure as they are.

As of 2021, American Eagle's stock price was up 29.99%, in no small part due to more consumers seeing themselves reflected in the brand's marketing.

Interestingly, that same year, Victoria's Secret was struggling and finally decided to ditch the exclusive Angels for an attempt at a more inclusive campaign, though they have much more work to do to recover an audience that was actively excluded for decades.

Booking.com

The Booking.com ad featuring [Melissa McCarthy](#) was the most-watched ad of the 2023 Super Bowl. Her body size is irrelevant to the ad itself, yet people in larger bodies watching this see themselves accepted by not only Booking.com, but also in the travel options they offer: "If these are places Melissa McCarthy feels comfortable, then maybe I will, too."

Featuring someone in a larger body aligns with the brand's goal as stated by Arjan Dijk, Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer, "Our mission is to make it easier for everyone to experience the world."

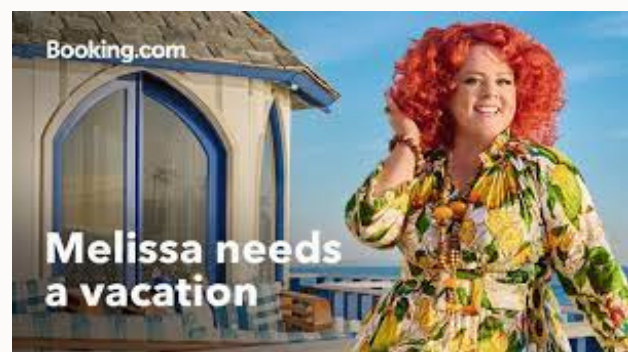


Image: [Booking.com](#)

What is your audience feeling?

When considering how your audience feels in your space, remember that one negative experience can prevent them from returning for years, if ever. Think about the potential embarrassment someone would feel in a lingerie store if they were told their size isn't available in the store, or worse, doesn't exist at all. What are they feeling coming into your space, whether physical or digital, and what are they feeling when they leave?

GCI Outdoor*

"We absolutely are trying to market to a bigger America, and there are a lot of reasons for it," says Jeffrey Polke, one of the founders and co-president of GCI Outdoor. Of course, Polke wants more people to enjoy the outdoors, but gear for larger bodies also sells.

GCI is focused on what their audience is feeling—in 2019, the company introduced its Freestyle Rocker XL, a chair that is four inches wider than the regular size and able to accommodate up to 400 pounds. The XL version now accounts for 50% of rocker sales at Academy Sports + Outdoor stores (a sporting goods chain with more than 250 locations). "It made us realize that we should do XL versions of other things," Polke says. So far, the brand has five other XL chairs. "You don't have to squeeze into something to feel like you fit in."

GCI publishes the weight limits of their chairs, as well. This is not taboo information—people in larger bodies are seeking it out, so making it easily accessible is best practice. People feel safe and seen when their requirements are accounted for. No one wants to buy a chair, only to have it break the first time it's used, or constantly worry if they will be supported. Knowing the size and weight limit is essential to making an informed purchase, and people in larger bodies appreciate being able to find that information; GCI chairs are regularly featured in lists like "[11 Best Camping Chairs for Heavy People](#)".

Freestyle Rocker XL™

★★★★☆ 9 Reviews

\$85.00

Pay in 4 interest-free installments of **\$21.25** with [shop Pay](#) [Learn more](#)

With a broader and tougher frame, this heavy-duty rocking camp chair has a 400 lb capacity and sets up in a snap – ready for a relaxing afternoon.

Colors



Qty

– 1 +

ADD TO CART

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Image: [GCI Outdoor](#)

*This section was previously published on [Backpacker.com](#)



The Outdoors is for Every Body

Image: [L.L.Bean](#)

L.L. Bean*

L.L.Bean has offered inclusive sizing for more than 20 years but in Spring 2022, it upped the ante.

"A lot of it came from listening to our customers," said Alex Intraversato, L.L.Bean's VP of Merchandising, Men's & Women's Apparel, Equipment. "They wanted the same colors and sizes as everyone else."

Intraversato said the mix of middle sizes and extended sizes is highly complex. "We didn't want to add this and take away from the middle sizes. We had to be additive in a smart way."

Bean now offers approximately 300 styles in Women's Petite and Plus and more than 300 Men's styles in up to XXXL.

It is a common practice to price plus-size garments higher than standard-size ones; according to a 2021 report from Statista, the average selling price for plus-size jeans in the U.S. was three dollars more than jeans in standard sizes.

*Richardson Whitley works as an influencer for L.L. Bean. This section was previously published in Outside Business Journal.

But Bean instituted a one-price policy, meaning that customers pay the same whether XS or 3XL.

Bean also regularly shows diverse body types across all of its channels, from e-commerce to catalogs to social media.

"Offering inclusive sizes not only makes good business sense, it's the right thing to do. Our purpose is to inspire and enable people to experience the restorative power of being outside, and that is true for all people and all body types," says Intraversato.

The result: sales of L.L. Bean's Inclusive Sizing range grew 15% in 2022 compared with 2021, and Bean is just getting started. In 2023, it will add Inclusive Fit Gear, including camping chairs, sleeping bags, and backpacks. They will also be increasing their Inclusive Sizing offering in retail stores, adding Women's 2X and Men's XXXL to the assortment in all 47 U.S. retail stores.

“

Offering inclusive sizes not only makes good business sense, it's the right thing to do.

What is your audience experiencing?

When traveling, the main concern for 90% of people in larger bodies is not expense, or navigating a new place—it is airplane seats. Will I fit? Will it be comfortable? Will the people in the neighboring seats be rude? Will the entire flight be painful and awkward?

Consider what your audience experiences throughout their journey with your brand. If you offer activities, are there options for people at all levels of accessibility, and can prospective participants easily find out if they meet any weight requirements? Is your team trained to take the customer's lead on their own ability level rather than make assumptions based on how they look?

Dia & Co

Nadia Boujarwah co-founded Dia in 2015 to address the shortage of fashionable items for people in larger bodies. Now, after acquiring businesses like 11 Honoré, Dia & Co is one of the most comprehensive sources for plus-size products, outranked only by behemoths like Walmart, Shein, and Amazon. Acquiring luxury-focused 11 Honoré set Dia & Co even further apart, and as of 2022, the company's average order value had grown 70% since the acquisition, despite the recession.

And the company's commitment to inclusivity extends beyond the clothes. When Dia & Co ventured into brick & mortar spaces by working with Madewell, it trained store associates on inclusive

customer service practices, because as Boujarwah says, "It's important to provide your shopper with a thoughtful shopping experience from start to finish that goes beyond simply offering them clothes in their sizes."

According to Modern Retail, approximately 1 million women have shopped at Dia.com, and their 2022 gross marketplace value was up 225% over 2021.

rue21

Catherine Morisano, Chief Merchandising Officer at rue 21 said, "We care about our customers and believe that our brand plays a key role in their life when it comes to promoting body positivity and inclusivity—this is part of rue21's DNA".

Accordingly, the brand has consistently invested in its plus-size offerings; as of 2021, the retailer's full size range was available in 444 stores, over 65% of its locations.

Like Dia & Co, rue21 store associates also receive training on plus-size fit and how to promote an inclusive shopping experience.

Candace Kearney, who led the brand's plus and dress line, said "For us, it's more than reaching our goal of having an inclusive shopping experience in every store, but about giving all girls the opportunity to decide what story they want to tell—and be able to shop for the same on-trend fashion together."

What is your audience sharing?

From clothing to travel to outdoor supplies, people are searching out information about products and experiences that accommodate their body size—and they are sharing it, too. From influencers to casual social media users, people are sharing their experiences with brands every day, whether positive or negative.

Kara Richardson Whitely's article for [Backpacker](#) about being fat shamed on the Long Trail had the most conversions from readers to sales in the platform's history; Backpacker then worked with The Gorgeous Agency to create more relatable content in order to change the image of an outdoorsy person from a lanky white man to anyone who wants to get outside.

Influencer marketing is especially powerful in the extended sizes market. This audience has had many negative experiences with different brands, and having trustworthy opinions is priceless. What your audience is sharing has the potential to make or break your brand, so it pays to know what they're saying and to whom—and doing whatever it takes to make sure it is positive.



Image: REI, courtesy of Fat Girls Hiking

REI and Smartwool*

A few seasons before the pandemic, REI approached Smartwool saying there was a need for base layers in the plus-size space. Denise Anderson, head of global marketing at Smartwool said they were glad to take on the challenge and were grateful for a larger partner such as REI to make it happen.

Smartwool's fit patterns and colors were thought out and tested carefully because a base layer fits so close to the skin and is the cornerstone to comfort in the outdoors.

Making it wasn't the only challenge. Smartwool had to bring in a whole new set of customers, who weren't used to finding their sizes on REI shelves (or in other outdoor retailers). Anderson said they needed to take a grassroots approach to rewrite that narrative.

Smartwool enlisted Fat Girls Hiking (a body positive hiking community), sent product kits to 200 plus-size influencers, and hosted a leadership retreat with members to engage in conversation and get feedback.

Smartwool now has 11 styles (64 colors/sizes) in extended sizes and, as of 2022, had sold more than 15,000 units to 140 accounts including Eastern Mountain Sports, Dick's Sporting Goods, and Scheels. REI is carrying the extended sizes products in all stores and on their drop ship/digital platform.

*This section was previously published in Outside Business Journal, now on [OutsideOnline.com](#).

Southwest Airlines

Southwest Airlines is an example of a dramatic turnaround in brand perception for the body inclusive community. Several years ago, the brand's reputation took a major blow after a captain removed [Kevin Smith](#) from a flight because of his size. Word spread via Twitter and other platforms, which caused many people in larger bodies to swear off the brand completely. However, Southwest's brand perception among this community is now recovering, in large part due to influencers sharing their more recent positive experiences with the Customer of Size policy.



Image: [Chubby and Away](#).

Southwest made significant progress by being the first domestic airline to institute a Customer of Size policy. With this policy, a person can book two seats next to each other and be refunded the cost of the extra seat. It also takes into account the potential for embarrassment, and provides the person with a simple "Reserved" sign to place on the seat next to them to prevent unwanted interactions.

The fact that Southwest not only has this policy, but that it is also easily findable on their website, was a significant move for connecting with this market. People in larger bodies are highly aware of the

discomfort and challenges they are likely to face during travel, and they are actively looking for information that will improve their experience—both from the companies themselves and from trusted influencers.

A quick Google search of "body inclusive airline" brings up not only the policy on their website, but also numerous review, blog posts, and videos made by and for people in larger bodies, sharing their recommendations and positive experiences on Southwest. The company's authentic efforts to create a better customer experience for people in larger bodies is clearly paying off.

This turnaround should be heartening for other brands—after such a public gaffe, Southwest has been able to not only repair its relationship with this market, but to become a leader in it.



This turnaround should be heartening for other brands—Southwest has been able to not only repair its relationship with this market, but to become a leader in it.

Summary

Creating an authentic connection with the plus-size audience takes more than a clever marketing campaign. People in larger bodies have experienced negative treatment from countless brands, so they are acutely aware of disingenuous efforts at inclusion. It requires an empathic understanding of the trauma they have experienced in the past, and making changes to the structure of your company's marketing and products.

The next step in this journey for many brands can be a full company audit that explores these four pillars—seeing, feeling, experiencing, and sharing—in greater detail in the context of your company. With this deep understanding of your audience, you will then be able to create an action plan that allows you to form genuine connections and design a welcoming customer experience in which everything your audience sees, feels, experiences, and shares is positive.

The plus-size and body-inclusive economy is only growing more influential, and companies that do not adapt both internally and externally will continue to miss out on the majority of potential customers and team members. By putting yourself in your customers' place and evaluating their full experience with your brand, your company will not only create a more diverse, inclusive environment, but will also be able to authentically connect with this lucrative yet vastly underserved market.



The Gorgeous Agency helps brands attain growth and profitability in the plus-size market. Through data, PR, and influencer and disruptor strategy know-how, the agency advises brands to connect without pitfalls, patronizing, or prejudice, and to emerge as a leader and champion with authentic growth in this new market.

[Click here to learn more about
The Gorgeous Agency.](#)