

## The Seal of Approval™: Developing a Certification Mark for Adaptive Apparel

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**Introduction.** One in four people in the United States has a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 15, 2023), and they contribute more than \$490 billion in disposable income to the marketplace (Yin et al., 2018). However, despite the population’s significance and spending power, people with disabilities (PWDs) often find it difficult to identify adaptive products that they can trust. Adaptive products use unique design features that directly benefit PWDs by assisting them in performing activities of daily living such as dressing, eating, personal hygiene, ambulating, etc. (UDS Foundation, May 4, 2021). For most adaptive products, those developing the products do not identify as disabled, and often, the products are not evaluated by PWDs. Certification marks help consumers identify products/services that meet certain standards, such as quality and performance, that specifically meet their needs (United States Patent and Trademark Office, n.d.). However, for adaptive products, such a certification mark does not exist. Despite the connection between consumer trust and the increased purchasing strength of the PWD consumer, there remains a gap in the literature exploring how best to build brand trust among the PWD consumer. Therefore, this study explored how corporate social responsibility impacted the development of an adaptive product certification mark.

**Theoretical Framework.** The Business for Social Responsibility (2000) defines corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the “manner in which a business meets or exceeds ethical, legal, commercial and public expectations that society has of business.” CSR can serve as an initiative to provide a first-mover advantage if the focus aligns with the firm’s mission, provides the firm with specific benefits, and is visible to external audiences (Tetrault & Lamertz, 2008). Okafor et al. (2021) posited that CSR could positively affect consumer spending when considering socially responsible causes.

**Method.** The case study method was employed to get an in-depth and holistic understanding within its socially relevant context (Yin, 2009), in this case, GAMUT Seal of Approval™. Semi-structured interviews with 8 participants who work closely with this case were conducted from June to October 2023. All data was imported into MAXQDA, a widely used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Using thematic analysis (TA), the researchers conducted a descriptive and systematic analysis of the data to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, researchers reviewed all data using a theoretical approach rooted in social responsibility theory. Codes were then developed using an open-coding method. Next, underlying themes were identified – *Trust, Authenticity, and Promise*. All transcripts and codes were cross-referenced to ensure the data fit the research question.

**The Seal of Approval™ Development.** The GAMUT Seal of Approval™ (The Seal) is a certification mark to “reassure customers who purchase adaptive products that a stringent set of requirements developed by experts in the disability space have been met” (GAMUT accreditation, n.d.). Through an industry-sponsored grant project, the researcher worked with GAMUT to develop a certification mark for adaptive products. The early stages of The Seal development included developing standard criteria and categories for brands to earn The Seal. The standard criteria and categories were based on the team's expert knowledge, including PWDs and their request for The Seal. A survey was deployed to over 750 PWDs within the GAMUT network, with 84 respondents. When respondents were asked if they would trust a symbol on a product that signified that PWDs reviewed the product, 100% of the respondents strongly or strongly agreed they would (Personal Communication, June 26, 2023). After standard criteria and categories were developed, The Seal team developed evaluation criteria and processes for those evaluating the brands. The process was iterative and took two years to complete. While developing the standard and evaluation criteria, The Seal team began to recruit evaluators who would conduct The Seal certification (Personal Communication, June 26, 2023). Evaluators were considered based on expertise within the disability community and the development and assessment of adaptive products. Evaluators were vetted beginning in early August 2022. Evaluators also included PWDs and their caregivers to ensure the user was directly involved in evaluating adaptive products. The evaluation team gathered occupational and physical therapists, disability advocates, PWDs, UX researchers and developers, academic researchers, and adaptive apparel product developers (Personal Communication, June 26, 2023).

**Findings.** For GAMUT, The Seal of Approval was a way to validate PWDs as vital consumers. The Seal is an “identifier that PWDs can feel the *trust* and authenticity that this [adaptive] product...elevates the population. Why wouldn't they have a seal of approval? Why would the disability population be any different?” GAMUT also stated that The Seal allows PWDs to know that something was made with them in mind – “[The Seal] is a showcase for brands to say, look at everything we did to [engage] with PWDs; representing PWDs in media, representing the needs and wants of PWDs.” *Authenticity* is related to the concept that PWDs are often unaware that products exist in the marketplace to accommodate their needs and wants. For GAMUT, the question when developing The Seal was, “How could brands communicate that they have this amazing product that is adaptive, and they authentically went through a process to make sure that they were developing the product with and for PWDs.” *Promise* was directly connected to GAMUT's relationship with brands seeking The Seal but also passing to the PWD consumer. “The seal provides that it is your safety net that we are with you, PWDs are with you from the beginning, and we will ensure you do not mess up [when creating an adaptive product].”

**Conclusion.** Developing The Seal of Approval™ within the GAMUT Management organization represents the basis for CSR. As Tetrault and Lamertz (2008) posited, activities developed through a firm's CSR initiatives should align with the firm's mission, provide the firm with specific benefits, and be visible to external audiences. Further, CSR initiatives can give firms a first-mover advantage in the marketplace. For GAMUT, the development of The Seal was a “no-brainer” to ensure the PWD consumer had a source they could trust and was creating products that addressed their unique needs and wants. The data revealed that most PWD consumers

surveyed would trust a product developed for them with a certification mark, demonstrating that PWDs were involved in the design process. Future research should explore how the products which have received The Seal of Approval™ have profited in the marketplace and how influential The Seal was when purchasing the adaptive products. Additionally, exploring how brands have engaged in The Seal evaluation to earn the certification mark could help identify the benefits and challenges to brands seeking certification marks in the apparel industry.

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