

Guiding the Sighted by the Heartstrings (or, Another Bad CNIB Ad)



by Thelma Fayle, June 2021

Editor's note: One more CNIB TV ad in bad taste. Will these sorts of ads depicting blind people as helpless charity cases for the sake of fundraising ever end? And another thing: CNIB has stepped into the arena where guide dog schools already exist. This is one more aspect of CNIB's monopolization of blindness services in Canada.

GRRRRR... can we sighted Canadians please stop falling for the demeaning and highly offensive CNIB television ads? We sighteds have been well trained over the last hundred years with millions of targeted marketing dollars that have been designed to elicit one response:

“Oh no... poor blind people! Wouldn't it be terrible to be blind? Better give some money to the CNIB. Better yet, let's leave lots of money to CNIB in our wills! Wow... and now they are supporting PUPPIES and look at that handsome young Mulroney playing with all those cute pups!!!”

The shameless use of celebs and puppies may be highly offensive to many blind Canadians, but the marketing strategy is guaranteed to work on well-trained sighted ones.

Just watched a 60-second TV commercial on a prime time spot for a high-end Canadian program. In the first 20 seconds, there are several insults to blind Canadians as ominous music plays (think *Jaws* soundtrack) while the camera moves from a black-gloved hand tentatively trying to find a street signal button, to the face of a woman about to cross. We see a close-up of her fearful expression, eyes darting back and forth. The pan continues from her face – full of trepidation at the thought of crossing the street without a guide dog – to the menacing wheels of a moving car and back to the blind pedestrian's fearful demeanour.

If you haven't picked up the visual clues yet, Mulroney's voiceover implores: For Canadians waiting for a guide dog, life is at a standstill. Ahhhhhh, the poor gal is standing still at the crosswalk.

With his highly recognizable warm and friendly television smile, Ben tells us: "Right now, here in Canada we are facing the most severe shortage of guide dogs in our country's history. Make no mistake. This is a crisis. Become a guide dog sponsor for only 66 cents a day.... And you will know in your hearts that you are providing a lifeline..." Blah, blah, blah.

I checked and as far as several blind friends are concerned (people who are on the executive of the Canadian Federation of the Blind): There is no crisis. Repeat, there is no crisis. Covid may be restricting access to dogs from highly reputable guide dog agencies in the States, but Canada has guide dog schools, too. And even if you donate to CNIB for puppies today, the trained guide dog will not be available to the blind person for up to two years – and the pandemic will, hopefully, be long over by then.

If you want to break the hypnosis of your conditioned response to these patently insulting CNIB ads, I urge you to play the ad a few times. First listen to the background music as it moves from ominous to playful, as Ben and the pups roll around on the floor smooching.

And then turn the sound off and just watch the images. There isn't a hint of a strong, resilient blind person who is full of life and *joie de vie*. There isn't a hint of anyone like the accomplished blind people I know from my volunteer work with the Canadian Federation of the Blind (CFB) or its American sister organization, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). None of the people I know are pathetically fearful as the ones normally featured in the CNIB ads.

Who needs role models in ads featuring strong independent blind Canadians, anyway?

Many people I know choose to use white canes and are highly efficient and effective with them. Others choose guide dogs as their preferred guiding tool. Don't get me wrong, there are many great organizations – with long established histories – that train and offer highly competent guide dogs. But that is not the point.

It is CNIB's negative stereotyping that I object to. The constant staging, the hinting at incompetence, the fearful tones – they are standard tactics with CNIB marketing. Over the decades CNIB has mastered an art to making blind people look pathetic. The more they do it, the more money sighted Canadians donate to them. It is that simple.

What really made me growl about the current ad was the use of the empty harness being held by a blind person. The idea being that without your help, the harness is empty, dogless, and the person is standing still. The blind person is unable to move around without a guide dog. Hurry. Hurry. Get out your cheque book. Poor blind people are immobile without your donations.

Those empty harnesses were a gag-gift twenty years ago. A person would walk down the street with one and onlookers would do a double take and realize there was no dog, just a gimmicky stiffened leash and harness.

Shame on you CNIB.

And for those who are quick to jump to the defense of the Canadian sacred cow, please hear me out. I have two points to respectfully ask you to consider:

1. Ask ten working-age blind people what they think of the CNIB advertising or the organization for that matter. You will usually find that sighted Canadians tend to revere the CNIB, while most working-age blind Canadians revile the CNIB. I have been told by many blind people that they feel the Canadian “charity model” is insulting and an outdated, patriarchal-style of addressing the needs of the blind in Canada. Education and training for blind Canadians should be a government public education responsibility paid by taxpayer dollars, not charity donations. The disdain for CNIB has nothing to do with the CNIB staff or volunteers – there have been thousands of good ones over the last century. According to many working-age blind Canadians, the problem is the efficacy of the CNIB organization that has recently decided (among other things) that the guide dog biz is extremely lucrative as a fundraiser. Because it is.

2. Fifteen years ago, like most Canadians, I saw the CNIB as one of our grand Canadian institutions – until a working-age blind family friend helped me move past my dense, unconscious bias as a sighted person. Moving away from my conditioned allegiance to an agency I have venerated all of my life was a hard transition. After researching the evidence, I cannot go along with the sacred-cow facade any longer. As I look back, I realize, I simply did not want to believe the CNIB is a charity agency that should be abolished. According to 2020 Charity Intelligence ratings, at least 44% of the donations received go to CNIB ‘overhead’; and yet still, the CNIB brand is entrenched in the hearts of Canadians. (You might want to check out the financial records of the CNIB for yourself.)

The fear of blindness in sighted Canadians continues to be exploited by the wily CNIB marketing. And this guide dog ad campaign in particular is disgraceful.

Thank goodness we have civilized discourse in Canada where it is OK to question a sacred cow.

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