

Accessibility

Serving Clients with Disabilities



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Did you know that just over 15.5% of Ontarians have a disability? That's 1 in every 7 Ontarians and as the population ages that number will grow.

People with disabilities travel, shop and do business in your community with their friends and families, just like everyone else. By providing service that welcomes people with disabilities, you can offer better service to everyone. Treating all your customers with individual respect and courtesy is at the heart of excellent customer service.

You can broaden your customer base by welcoming everyone to your store, restaurant or services, including customers with disabilities. By learning how to serve people with disabilities, you can attract more customers and improve your service to everyone.

Here are some ways you can provide better service to your customers with disabilities

- Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Patience, optimism, and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- Smile, relax, and keep in mind that people with disabilities are just people.
- Don't make assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities a person has.
- Some disabilities are not visible. Take the time to get to know your customers' needs.
- Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer, "May I help you?"
- If you can't understand what someone is saying, just politely ask again.
- Ask before you offer to help — don't just jump in. Your cus-

tomers with disabilities know if they need help and how you can provide it.

- Find a good way to communicate. A good start is to listen carefully.
- Look at your customer, but don't stare. Speak directly to a person with a disability, not to their interpreter or someone who is with them.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- Don't touch or address service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Ask permission before touching a wheelchair or a piece of equipment.
- Every business should have emergency procedures for customers with disabilities. Make sure you know what they are.

What you need to know about customers with Vision Disabilities

Vision disabilities reduce one's ability to see clearly. Very few people are totally blind. Many have limited vision such as tunnel vision, where a person has a loss of peripheral or side vision, or a lack of central vision, which means they cannot see straight ahead. Some can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light.

Vision disabilities can restrict your customers' abilities to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. In some cases, it may be difficult to tell if a person has a vision disability. Others may use a guide dog or white cane.

Here are some tips on serving customers who have vision disabilities:

- Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to them.
- Speak normally and clearly.
- Never touch your customer without asking permission, unless it's an emergency.

- If you offer assistance, wait until you receive permission.
- Offer your arm (the elbow) to guide the person and walk slowly.
- Don't touch or address service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- If you're giving directions or verbal information, be precise and clear. For example, if you're approaching a door or an obstacle, say so.
- Don't just assume the individual can't see you.
- Don't leave your customer in the middle of a room. Show them to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient your customer to the environment around them.
- Don't walk away without saying good-bye.
- Be patient. Things may take a little longer.

What you need to know about customer who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

People who have hearing loss may be deaf or hard of hearing. Like other disabilities, hearing loss has a wide variety of degrees. Remember, customers who are deaf or hard of hearing may require assistive devices when communicating.

Here are some tips on serving customers who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- Always ask how you can help. Don't shout.
- Attract the customer's attention before speaking. The best way is a gentle touch on the shoulder or gently waving your hand.
- Make sure you are in a well-lighted area where your customer can see your face.
- Look at and speak directly to your customer. Address your customer, not their interpreter.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would

be easier, for example a pen and paper.

- Don't put your hands in front of your face when speaking.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions, and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- Don't touch or address service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Any personal (e.g., financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.
- Be patient. Communication for people who are deaf may be different because their first language may not be English. It may be American Sign Language (ASL).
- If the person uses a hearing aid, try to speak in an area with few competing sounds.

What you need to know about customers who are Deaf-Blind

A person who is deaf-blind cannot see or hear to some extent. This results in greater difficulties in accessing information and managing daily activities. Most people who are deaf-blind will be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional who helps with communicating.

Intervenors are trained in special sign language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet or finger spelling, and may guide and interpret for their client.

Here are some tips on serving customers who are deaf-blind:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- A customer who is deaf-blind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with them.
- Speak directly to your customer as you normally would, not

to the intervenor.

- Identify yourself to the intervenor when you approach your customer who is deaf-blind.
- Don't touch or address service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Never touch a person who is deaf-blind suddenly or without permission unless it's an emergency.

What you need to know about customers with Physical Disabilities

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities, and not all require a wheelchair. People who have arthritis, heart or lung conditions or amputations may also have difficulty with moving, standing or sitting. It may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

Here are some tips on serving customers who have physical disabilities:

- Speak normally and directly to your customer. Don't speak to someone who is with them.
- People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things. Ask before you help.
- Be patient. Customers will identify their needs to you.
- Don't touch assistive devices, including wheelchairs, unnecessarily unless it's an emergency.
- Provide your customer information about accessible features of the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.).
- Remove obstacles and rearrange furniture to ensure clear passage.

What you need to know about customers with Speech or Language Impairments

Some people have problems communicating. It could be the result of cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or another condition that makes it difficult to pronounce words, causes slurring or stuttering, or not being able to express oneself or understand written or spoken language. Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards or other assistive devices.

Here are some tips on serving customers with speech or language impairments:

- Just because a person has one disability doesn't mean they have another. For example, if a customer has difficulty speaking; don't assume they have an intellectual or developmental disability as well.
- If you don't understand, ask your customer to repeat the information.
- If you are able, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- Be patient and polite, and give your customer whatever time he/she needs to get his/her point across.
- Don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences. Wait for them to finish.
- Patience, respect and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.

What you need to know about customers with Mental Health Disabilities

People with mental health disabilities look like anyone else. You won't know that your customer has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it. And usually it will not affect your

customer service at all.

But if someone is experiencing difficulty in controlling their symptoms or is in a crisis, you may need to help out. Be calm and professional and let your customer tell you how you can best help.

Here are some tips on serving customers who have mental health disabilities:

- Treat a person with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be confident and reassuring. Listen carefully and work with your customer to meet their needs.
- If someone appears to be in a crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

What you need to know about customers with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

People with intellectual or developmental disabilities may have difficulty doing many things most of us take for granted. These disabilities can mildly or profoundly limit one's ability to learn. You may not be able to know that someone has this disability unless you are told, or you notice the way people act, ask questions or use body language.

As much as possible, treat your customers with an intellectual or developmental disability like anyone else. They may understand more than you think, and they will appreciate you treating them with respect.

Here are some tips on serving customers who have an intellectual or developmental disability:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- Make sure your customer understands what you've said.

- If you can't understand what's being said, don't pretend. Just ask again.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Be supportive and patient.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their companion or attendant.

What you need to know about customers who have Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities can result in a host of different communications difficulties for people. They can be subtle, as in having difficulty reading, or more pronounced, but they can interfere with your customer's ability to receive, express or process information. You may not be able to know that someone has one of these disabilities unless you are told, or you notice the way people act, ask questions or use body language.

Here are some tips on serving customers with learning disabilities:

- Patience and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- When you know that someone with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can best help.
- Speak normally and clearly, and directly to your customer.
- Take some time — people with some kinds of learning disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Try to find ways to provide information in a way that works best for them. For example, have a paper and pen handy.
- If you're dealing with a child, be patient, encouraging and supportive.
- Be courteous and patient and your customer will let you know how to best provide service in a way that works for them.

What you need to know when visiting or delivering to your customers with disabilities at home

Here are some tips on serving customers with disabilities at home:

- Don't arrive unexpectedly, and confirm the details before you arrive.
- Be patient. You may need to wait a few moments for your customer to open the door.
- Introduce yourself clearly. Some customers may not be able to read identity cards and may instead have a password. Check before you visit.
- Keep your customer up to date on what you're doing.
- If you need to move some of your customer's possessions, make sure that you leave their house exactly as when you arrived. For example, you don't want someone with a vision disability to trip because you moved the sofa.
- If you can't complete the job, clearly explain what will happen next. Make another appointment, and leave a contact number in case there are problems.

Tips on serving customers with disabilities on the phone:

- Speak normally, clearly and directly.
- Don't worry about how their voice sounds. Concentrate on what's being said.
- Be patient, don't interrupt and don't finish your customer's sentences. Give your customer time to explain him/herself.
- Don't try to guess what your customer is saying. If you don't understand, don't pretend. Just ask again.
- If you're not certain what was said, just repeat or rephrase what you've heard.
- If a telephone customer is using an interpreter or a TTY line, just speak normally to the customer, not to the interpreter.
- If your customer has great difficulty communicating, make

arrangements to call back when it's convenient to speak with someone else.