



BEST PRACTICES AND PROCEDURES FOR ACCESSIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE

Accessible Customer Service follows four basic principles:

- Dignity
- Independence
- Integration
- Equal Opportunity

What can I do to help people with disabilities access our services?

- Ask how you can help
- Offer a variety of methods of communication
- Understand the nature and scope of the service you offer

1. Talk About Disabilities – Choose The Right Word

Words can influence and reinforce the public's perception of people with disabilities. They can create either a positive view of people with disabilities or an indifferent, negative depiction.

Here are some general tips that can help make your communication and interactions with or about people with all types of disabilities more successful.

- Use *disability* or *disabled*, not *handicap* or *handicapped*.
- Never use terms such as *retarded*, *dumb*, *psycho*, *moron* or *crippled*. These words are very demeaning and disrespectful to people with disabilities.
- Remember to put people first. It is proper to say *person with a disability*, rather than *disabled person*.
- If you don't know someone or if you are not familiar with the disability, it's better to wait until the individual describes his/her situation to you, rather than to make your own assumptions. Many types of disabilities have similar characteristics and your assumptions may be wrong.

2. **How to interact and communicate with people with various types of disabilities**

Interacting and communicating with people with disabilities is a big part of providing accessible customer service. Sometimes the best approach is to ask a person with a disability how you can best communicate with them.

The following are some suggested tips to interact and communicate with people who have various disabilities:

(A) **PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

PHYSICAL disabilities include a range of functional limitations from minor difficulties in moving or coordinating one part of the body, through muscle weakness, tremors, and paralysis. Physical disabilities can be congenital such as Muscular Dystrophy; or acquired, such as tendonitis. It may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

A physical disability may affect an individual's ability to:

- Perform manual tasks such as holding a pen, turning a key or grip a door knob;
- Move around independently;
- Control the speed or coordination of movements;
- Reach, pull or manipulate objects; and
- Have strength or endurance.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities, and not all require a wheelchair. Someone with a spinal cord injury may use crutches while someone with severe arthritis or a heart condition may have difficulty walking longer distances.

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

- Just because a person has one disability doesn't mean they have another. If a customer has a physical disability, don't assume they have an intellectual or developmental disability as well.
- Speak normally and directly to your customer. Don't speak to someone who is with them.
- People with physical disabilities often have their own way of doing things. Ask before you help.

- Don't touch items or equipment, such as canes or wheelchairs, without permission. If you have permission to move a person's wheelchair, don't leave them in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position, such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.
- Provide your customer information about accessible features of the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.).
- Keep ramps and corridors free of clutter.
- If you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter, consider sitting so you can make eye contact at the same level.
- If a counter is too high or wide, step around it to provide service.
- Provide seating for those that cannot stand in line.
- Be Patient. Customers will identify their needs to you.

(B) **HEARING LOSS**

HEARING loss can cause problems in distinguishing certain frequencies, sounds or words. People who have hearing loss may be deaf, oral deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. These terms are used to describe different levels of hearing and/or the way a person's hearing was diminished or lost.

A person who is deaf, deafened or hard-of hearing may be unable to:

- Use a public telephone;
- Understand speech in noisy environments; and
- Pronounce words clearly enough to be understood by strangers.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

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 service customers who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- Attract the customer's attention before speaking - the best way is a gentle touch on the shoulder or gently waving your hand.

- Always ask how you can help. Don't shout. Speak clearly.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions, and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- Face the person and keep your hands and other objects away from your face and mouth.
- Deaf people may use a sign language interpreter to communicate - always direct your attention to the Deaf person - not the interpreter.
- Any personal (e.g. financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.
- Make sure you are in a well-lit area where your customer can see your face and read your lips.
- If the person uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or move to a quieter area.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (for example using a pen and paper).
- Don't touch service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.

(C) **DEAF-BLINDNESS**

DEAF-BLINDNESS is a combination of hearing and vision loss. The result for a person who is deaf-blind is significant difficulty accessing information and performing daily activities.

Deaf-blindness interferes with communication, learning, orientation and mobility. People who are deaf-blind communicate using various sign language systems, Braille, telephone devices, communication boards and any combination thereof.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

Most people who are deaf-blind will be accompanied by an intervener, a professional who helps with communicating. Interveners 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:

- Do not 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, not the Intervener.
- Identify yourself to the intervener when you approach your customer who is deaf-blind.
- Do not touch or address the 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.
- Understand that communication can take some time - be patient.

(D) **VISION**

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 loss can result in:

- Difficulty reading or seeing faces;
- Difficulty maneuvering in unfamiliar places;
- Inability to differentiate colours or distances;
- A narrow field of vision;
- The need for bright light, or contrast; and
- Night blindness.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

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:

- Don't assume the individual can't see you. Many people who have low vision still have some sight.
- 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 is an emergency.
- Offer your elbow to guide them if needed.
- If the person uses a service animal - do not touch or approach the animal - it is working and has to pay attention at all times.
- When providing directions or instructions, be precise and descriptive.
- Ask you customer if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them (for example, a menu or schedule of fees).
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient your customer to the environment around them.

(E) **INTELLECTUAL**

INTELLECTUAL disabilities affect a person's ability to think and reason. It may be caused by genetic factors such as Downs Syndrome, exposure to environmental toxins, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, brain trauma or psychiatric disorders.

A person with an intellectual disorder may have difficulty with:

- Understanding spoken and written information;
- Conceptual information;
- Perception of sensory information; and
- Memory.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

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, communicate, do everyday physical activities and live independently. 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 make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do.
- Remember that the person is an adult and unless you are informed otherwise, can make their own decisions.
- Use clear, simple language.
- Make sure your customer understands what you've said.
- If you can't understand what is 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.

(F) SPEECH

SPEECH disabilities involve the partial or total loss of the ability to speak. Typical disabilities include problems with:

- Pronunciation;
- Pitch and loudness;
- Hoarseness or breathiness; and
- Stuttering or slurring.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

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:

- Don't assume that a person with speech impairment has another disability.
- If you don't understand, ask your customer to repeat the information or write it if necessary.
- Give the person your full attention. Don't interrupt or finish their sentences.
- Whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- If possible, communicate in a quiet environment.
- Patience, respect and willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.

(G) LEARNING

LEARNING disabilities include a range of disorders, such as dyslexia, that effect how a person takes in or retains information. This disability may become apparent when a person has difficulty reading material or understanding the information you are providing.

Learning disabilities can result in:

- Difficulties in reading;
- Problem solving;
- Time management;
- Way finding; and
- Processing information.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

- Be patient, people with learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond.
- Learning disabilities are generally invisible and ability to function varies greatly. Try to provide information in a way that takes into account the customer's disability. For example, some people with learning disabilities find written words difficult to understand while others may have problems with numbers and math.
- Patience and willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- Speak normally and clearly, and directly to your customer.
- Respond to any requests for verbal information and provide assistance with completing forms and so on with courtesy.

(H) **MENTAL HEALTH**

MENTAL HEALTH disabilities include a range of disorders however there are three main types of mental health disability:

- Anxiety;
- Mood
- Behavioral.

Mental health issues can affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. People with mental health disabilities may experience anxiety, hallucinations, mood swings or phobias or panic attacks. They may seem edgy or irritated; act aggressively; be perceived as pushy or abrupt; be unable to make a decision; start laughing or get angry for no apparent reason.

Best practices and procedures for Customer Service:

- Treat each person with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- If a customer asks for services in a blunt or impolite manner, consider that they may be struggling with a mental illness; do not take it personally or become offended; serve them politely and respectfully despite their attitude towards you.

- Be patient. Customers with mental illness may appear distracted and have difficulty concentrating or making decisions. Offer the option of moving to a less busy environment to receive the services.
- Be confident, calm and reassuring. Listen carefully and work with your customer to meet their needs.
- If a customer appears to be in a crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

(I) **SMELL**

SMELL disabilities can involve the inability to sense smells or a hypersensitivity to odors and smells. A person with a smelling disability may have allergies to certain odors, scents or chemicals or may be unable to identify dangerous gases, smoke, fumes and spoiled food.

(J) **TOUCH**

TOUCH disabilities can affect a person's ability to sense texture, temperature, vibration or pressure. Touch sensations may be reduced or heightened resulting in a hypersensitivity to touch, temperature, or the opposite, numbness and the inability to feel touch sensations

(K) **TASTE**

TASTE disabilities can limit the experience of the four primary taste sensations; sweet, bitter, salty and sour. A person with a taste disability may be unable to identify spoiled food or noxious substances.

(L) **OTHER**

OTHER disabilities result from a range of other conditions, accidents, illnesses and diseases including ALS, asthma, diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDs, environmental sensitivities, seizure disorders, heart disease, stroke and joint replacement.

Disabilities are not always visible or easy to distinguish.

3. **What you need to know when dealing with customers with disabilities over the phone**

Here are some 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 are 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.

4. **How to interact with people who use assistive devices**

An assistive device is a tool, technology or other mechanism that enables a person with a disability to do everyday tasks and activities, such as moving, communicating or lifting. Personal assistive devices can include things like wheelchairs, hearing aids, white canes or speech amplification devices.

Here are some tips on how to interact with people who use assistive devices:

- Don't touch or handle any assistive device without permission.
- Don't move assistive devices or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of your customer's reach.
- Let your customer know about accessible features in the immediate environment that are appropriate to their needs (eg. washrooms, etc.).

5. **How to use equipment or assistive devices to help in the provision of goods and services to customers with disabilities**

The Municipality of Thames Centre will ensure that the municipal staff is trained on how to use any equipment or devices that it may offer for customers with disabilities. The appropriate Department Head or designate will be responsible for ensuring such training is provided for assistive devices offered within their department responsibilities.

6. **How to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a guide dog or other service animal**

Service animals provide a variety of services to individuals with disabilities to allow them independence in their tasks of daily living. They may be used as guide animals or hearing alert animals, to alert of oncoming seizures or calm anxiety, or for manual dexterity.

It is the responsibility of the person with a disability to ensure that his or her service animal is kept in control at all times.

Here are some tips on how to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a guide dog or other service animal:

- Remember that a service animal is not a pet. It is a working animal.
- Avoid touching or addressing service animals - they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Avoid making assumptions about the animal. If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or service animal, ask your customer. You may ask the person with a disability for documentation confirming that the animal is required for reasons relating to his or her disability.

7. **How to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a support person**

Some people with disabilities may be accompanied by a support person, such as an intervener. A support person can be a personal support worker, interpreter, volunteer, family member or friend. They may accompany your customer to assist them with communication, mobility, personal care, or medical needs.

Here are some tips on how to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a support person:

- Speak directly to your customer, not to their support person.
- If you are not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting your goods or services, or simply ask.

8. **What to do if a person with a disability is having difficulty accessing your goods or services**

If you notice that your customer is having difficulty accessing your goods or services, a good starting point is to simply ask how you can best help. Remember that your customers are your best source for information about their needs. The solution can be simple and they will likely appreciate your attention and consideration.