

Communicating With and About People with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act, other laws and the efforts of many disability organizations have made strides in improving accessibility in buildings, increasing access to education, opening employment opportunities and developing realistic portrayals of persons with disabilities in television programming and motion pictures. Where progress is still needed is in communication and interaction with people with disabilities. Individuals are sometimes concerned that they will say the wrong thing, so they say nothing at all—thus further segregating people with disabilities. Listed here are some suggestions on how to relate to and communicate with and about people with disabilities.

Words

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as "the blind," "the retarded" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. Further, words like "normal person" imply that the person with a disability isn't normal, whereas "person without a disability" is descriptive but not negative. The accompanying chart shows examples of positive and negative phrases.

Affirmative Phrases	Negative Phrases
person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability	retarded; mentally defective
person who is blind, person who is visually impaired	the blind
person with a disability	the disabled; handicapped
person who is deaf	the deaf; deaf and dumb
person who is hard of hearing	suffers a hearing loss
person who has multiple sclerosis	afflicted by MS
person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder	epileptic
person who uses a wheelchair	confined or restricted to a wheelchair

person who has muscular dystrophy	stricken by MD
person with a physical disability, physically disabled	crippled; lame; deformed
unable to speak, uses synthetic speech	dumb; mute
person with psychiatric disability	crazy; nuts
person who is successful, productive	has overcome his/her disability; is courageous (when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability)

Actions

Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Outlined below are tips to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities.

General Tips for Communicating with People with Disabilities

- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- Vision loss can restrict someone's ability to read, locate landmarks or see hazards. Some customers may use a guide dog or a white cane, while others may not.

- Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to them.
- State clearly who you are; speak naturally at a normal pace and tone of voice.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person to whom you are speaking.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the owner.
- Tell the individual when you are leaving.
- Do not attempt to lead the individual without first asking; allow the person to hold your arm and control her or his own movements. Offer your elbow to guide them if needed.
- Be descriptive when giving directions; verbally give the person information that is visually obvious to individuals who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the individual's hand on the back or arm of the chair so that the person can locate the seat.
- Don't assume the individual can't see you. Many people who have low vision still have some sight.
- Don't leave without saying goodbye.
- Ask your customer if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Gain the person's attention before starting a conversation (i.e., tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Look directly at the individual, face the light, speak clearly, in a normal tone of voice, and keep your hands away from your face. Use short, simple sentences. Avoid smoking or chewing gum.
- If the individual uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Speak naturally, with normal expression and at a normal pace.
- In group settings, talk one at a time.
- If your customer 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).
- When writing back and forth, keep sentences short.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Deaf-Blind

- A person who is deaf-blind may have some degree of both hearing and vision loss. Many people who are deaf-blind will be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional support person who helps with communication.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to the intervenor.
- A customer who is deaf-blind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them, perhaps with an assistance card or a note.
- Do not try to communicate from across the room or table.
- Do not leave without saying goodbye.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Physical Disabilities

- If possible, put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level.
- Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device.
- Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Do not assume the individual wants to be pushed —ask first.
- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening a door.
- There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities. Only some people with physical disabilities use 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.
- 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.
- Ask before you help. Offer assistance by don't insist.
- Speak directly to the person.
- If a countertop is too high or wide to interact comfortably with a customer, step from behind it to provide service.
- 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.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Speech Impairments

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the individual is saying.
- Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish her or his sentences.
- If you are having difficulty understanding the individual, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the individual if this is acceptable.
- People with speech or language impairments
- Cerebral palsy, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult for a person to pronounce words or may cause slurring. Some people who have severe difficulties may use a communication board or other assistive devices.
- Don't assume that a person with speech impairment has another disability.
- Talk to people with speech impairments as you would talk to anyone else and speak in your regular tone of voice.
- Tell the person if you do not understand what they are trying to say. Ask the person to repeat the message, tell you in a different way, or write it down.
- If a customer is difficult to understand, concentrate on content not voice.
- Whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no".
- Be patient. Don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Developmental/Intellectual Disabilities

- If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.

- Be prepared to repeat and rephrase your sentences orally or in writing.
- Offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.
- Developmental or intellectual disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, can limit a person's ability to learn, communicate, do everyday physical activities and live independently. You may not know that someone has this disability unless you are told.
- Don't make assumptions about what a person can do.
- Use plain language.
- Keep sentences short.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Use concrete examples.
- Maintain a polite attitude.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals 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.
- Don't touch or handle any assistive device without permission.
- Allow customers to keep and use their assistive devices as needed.
- 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 (e.g., public phones with TTY service, accessible washrooms, etc.).
- Mental health issues can affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. For example, some customers may experience anxiety due to hallucinations, mood swings, phobias or panic disorder.
- Treat a person with mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else. Talk to the person as you would talk

to anyone else in your regular tone of voice, using plain language avoiding complex ideas and jargon.

- Be confident, calm and reassuring.
- Accept the customer, do not judge or “talk down” to them.
- Pay attention to non verbal cues.
- If a customer appears to be in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals who have Learning Disabilities

- The term “learning disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders, such as dyslexia, that affect 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.
- Be patient – people with some learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond.
- Ask your customer how to best accommodate their needs.
- Minimize distractions so that full attention is on communication.
- Keep sentences short and clear, avoid complex words or jargon.
- 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.

Remember

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

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And

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