
Welcoming Disabled Customers



**Business
Disability
Forum**

Building
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Contents

Introduction	2
Did you know?	5
The law	6
Good customer service	8
Confident communication	10
Welcoming customers	12
who are blind or have sight problems	14
who are deaf or hard of hearing	16
who use wheelchairs and scooters	19
who use sticks, crutches or walking frames	20
with speech difficulties	21
with reading and writing difficulties	22
with learning disabilities	24
who have a mental health problem	28
with facial disfigurement	31
Talking to disabled customers on the telephone	32
Providing services to disabled customers at home	35
Appointments with disabled customers	36
Finally... relax!	38
Business Disability Forum partners	inside back cover
Quiz answers	inside back cover

Business Disability Forum is a not-for-profit member organisation that makes it easier and more rewarding to do business with and employ disabled people. We build disability-smart organisations to improve business performance by increasing confidence, accessibility, productivity and profitability.

Visit our website to find out more:
www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Introduction





Introduction

Successful organisations respond effectively to the different needs and expectations of every customer. Getting it right for disabled customers is a must for every UK business.

Ten million adults in the UK are disabled, which means that more than 16% of your local community are likely to have a disability – and that includes their family, friends and neighbours.

Designing products, services and premises in partnership with disabled people helps to ensure that everyone – including older people and parents with children – can access them more easily.

Disabled people want the products and services that are available to all consumers, therefore creating an accessible and welcoming service will help ensure you are the provider of choice.

With more than two million copies of ‘welcoming disabled customers’ already in circulation this guide is recognised as delivering an important message.

In the words of one of our members: “The vital message of an individual, non-judgemental and personal approach to disabled customers gets through without the reader actually realising that they are, in fact, being ‘trained’ in disability awareness.”

Did you know?

Everyday activities like shopping or travelling can often be difficult for disabled people.

Sometimes this is due to lack of facilities. More often it comes from people's attitudes and lack of understanding.

Facts

- At least 1 in 3 customers in the UK is disabled or close to someone who has a disability.
- Disability is not always visible. Many impairments such as epilepsy, dyslexia and diabetes are non-visible.
- Disabled people have an annual spending power of around £80 billion.
- If your goods and services are easy for disabled customers to find and use they will be more accessible for all your customers.

The law

The expectations of your disabled customers are rising.

As service providers you have to ensure disabled people can access the goods and services you provide however you provide them; on your premises, online or by other means.

In practice this may mean changing the way you normally deliver your service and do your job.

For example:

- A 'no dogs' policy would mean refusing your service to people who use assistance animals such as guide dogs. This would be unlawful under disability legislation. You should change your policy and allow people to enter your premises with an assistance dog.
- For customers who have hearing difficulties think about other ways which might help you communicate. For example, using an induction loop or providing important written information in leaflet form.

For customers with sight problems provide written information in an alternative format such as electronic, large print or Braille.

Ensure aisles are kept free from obstacles and ensure fixtures do not restrict access for people with mobility impairments or sight problems. If the layout of your store can be improved to allow easier movement for disabled people you should ensure these changes are made.

Ensure that your website is both accessible and useable for disabled people so they can access information about you, as well as your goods and services, remotely in the same way as non-disabled people.

Remember

Your organisation will look to you and your colleagues to help them provide the best customer service to all your customers.

Some things that make it easier to serve customers with disabilities:

- Large print
- Clear signage
- Induction loops
- Lower counters
- Seating
- Automatic doors
- Quiet area

Good customer service

Making it easier for disabled people means making it easier for everybody. For example, clear signage benefits every customer.

A doorway or ramp that makes it easy for someone with a mobility impairment will also be useful for a parent with a pram or buggy.

- Disabled customers should be treated with the same courtesy and respect as non-disabled people.
- Providing good customer service to disabled customers will sometimes mean doing things differently.
- Think flexibly and creatively about the way you serve disabled customers in order to meet their needs.
- Try to ensure that disabled customers can access your service in the same way or as close as possible to the same way as customers without a disability.

However, sometimes you may not be able to provide a disabled customer with exactly the same service, so be prepared to offer them a reasonable alternative. This may mean providing the service by a different method.

- Treat a disabled person in the same manner and with the same respect and courtesy you would anyone else.

-
- **Do not make assumptions about the existence or absence of a disability; many people have disabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent.**
 - **A disabled individual/customer may not introduce a personal assistant or an interpreter. Take your lead from the person using the services.**
 - **People who use assistance dogs may have a visual, hearing or mobility impairment, or they might have epilepsy. These dogs are working dogs and should not be treated as pets.**
 - **Know where accessible (and other) toilets, lifts, exits, drinking fountains and water coolers are located.**
 - **Advertise that your services are fully accessible and provide relevant detail, otherwise disabled people will shop somewhere else that does.**

Confidence

Don't worry if you ever feel embarrassed because you aren't sure what to do. We can all feel anxious about doing the wrong thing on occasions, and this may be the first time you have met anyone with your customer's particular disability.

Ways to help

Have confidence, relax and ask your customer how you can help.

Time

Some disabled people need a little more time than usual for everyday tasks such as reading a bill, filling in a form or understanding the answer to an enquiry.

Ways to help

Always be patient and give extra help if it's needed.

Confident communication

There aren't many situations in a customer service environment where you will have to directly refer to a person's disability. In situations where you need to, it will be useful to bear these principles in mind:

- **Certain words and phrases may give offence. Although there are no concrete rules, it is helpful to understand why some terms are preferred to others.**
- **People are increasingly sensitive to the way in which the 'language of disability' can inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes.**
- **Avoid using language that suggests disabled people are always frail or dependent on others or which could make disabled people objects of pity, such as 'sufferers from' or 'a victim of'.**
- **Don't let language be a barrier to addressing disability. Take your lead from the customer themselves.**

What not to say

- **Don't talk about 'the disabled' as though they are a group apart.**
- **Don't describe a disabled person in terms of a condition, like 'Mary is an epileptic'.**
- **Don't use the word 'handicap' because it can prompt negative images.**
- **Don't say 'Peter is wheelchair bound' or 'confined to a wheelchair'.**

What to say

- **Say 'disabled people' or 'people with disabilities'.**
- **Keep it simple. Just say what the person has. 'Mary has epilepsy'. 'John has MS'.**
- **Don't worry about using common expressions like 'see you later' or 'I'll be running along', which may relate to a person's impairment.**
- **Wheelchairs give their users freedom, so just say 'he uses a wheelchair'.**



Welcoming customers



Customers who are blind or have sight problems

Some blind people can see nothing at all. Most have some sight, but it may be blurred, distorted or limited.

Ways to help

- Always speak to a blind customer when you approach them.
- Say clearly who you are (but don't shout).
- Ask how you may help. If the person asks for assistance, ask, "May I offer you an arm?" rather than taking their arm.
- Mention steps in advance, saying if they're up or down.
- If you offer a seat, put the customer's hand on the back or arm of the chair and let them sit
- Don't leave the customer talking to an empty space. Tell them before you move away.

- Don't move any of the person's belongings without asking.
- The customer may have a guide dog. Remember these are working dogs and should not be treated as a pet. Speak to the customer rather than making a fuss of the dog.
- Provide written communication in a suitable alternative format such as electronic, large print, audio or Braille.

When you take money:

- Check the customer's payment before you go to the till.
- Count change out aloud, coin by coin, as you place it in the customer's hand.
- Check customers have picked up all their possessions.



Question 1

How should you approach a blind person?

- A. To avoid surprising them, shout loudly to them from a distance.**
- B. Start speaking to them as you approach them and introduce yourself.**
- C. Approach the customer quietly and take their arm.**

Customers who are deaf or hard of hearing

There are many different degrees and types of deafness and different ways for deaf people, or those who are hard of hearing, to communicate.

- Many people have faint or distorted hearing.
- Some people use British Sign Language (BSL).
- Some people use Sign Supported English (SSE).
- SSE is a combination of sign from BSL used with English grammar.
- Some cannot use hearing aids.
- Many people can join in conversations by using a hearing aid, or by lip-reading.

Ways to help

- Make sure your customer is looking at you before you begin to speak.
- If necessary, attract the customer's attention by moving into their line of vision or with a light touch on the shoulder.
- Don't guess how much the customer can hear, or how they prefer to communicate. Always ask how you can best help.
- Don't shout. If the customer can't hear what you say, write it down.
- If they're using a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the customer, not to the interpreter.
- Induction loops and infrared induction systems can help communication. They enable hard of hearing people to tune-in their hearing aids directly to speakers and minimise background noise.
- You can use hand gestures to help convey what you mean but don't over-exaggerate them.
- Check regularly that you have been understood.

- **Keep background noise as low as possible.**
- **Sometimes you may have to speak loudly to allow the customer to hear. Always respect the customer's privacy and suggest moving to a quiet corner or a private office when discussing sensitive information.**

Ways to help customers who lip-read

- **Look directly at the person you are speaking to.**
- **Do not speak with your back to a light source as this will put your lips in shadow.**
- **Make sure you are in good lighting when talking.**
- **Speak clearly and at an even pace, but do not distort or exaggerate your lip movements.**
- **If you must turn away from the customer, stop talking.**
- **Do not use exaggerated gestures.**
- **Do not block your mouth when talking.**

Question 2

A customer who is deaf wants to enter your shop with an assistance dog, should you:

-
- A. Tell the customer that your store has a no dogs policy and prohibit entry for the dog.**
-
- B. Ask the customer if they would like you to chain the dog up outside your store.**
-
- C. Allow the customer and their dog entry.**



Customers who use wheelchairs and scooters

Wherever reasonably possible, buildings which offer a service to the public should be fully accessible for people who use a wheelchair or scooter.

When a person using a wheelchair or scooter can't enter your premises think about other ways you could provide the same standard of service. For example, you could offer to meet the customer at an accessible venue nearby or visit the customer at their home.

Heavy doors or deep-pile carpets are just some of the hazards to watch out for. Do not assume ramps solve everything.

Keep aisles and floor space free from obstacles in order to aid navigation for people who use wheelchairs or scooters and people who have difficulty walking.

Ways to help

- **Speak directly to the wheelchair user.**
- **Try to put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye-level to avoid stiff necks.**
- **Come round to their side of reception desks or high counters.**
- **Offer help with heavy doors.**
- **A person's wheelchair is an extension of a person's personal space and should not be leant on.**
- **Don't hang items on a person's wheelchair.**
- **Tables or counters may be the wrong height for wheelchair users. If they have to write, offer a low level counter, clipboard or other firm surface to press on.**

Customers who use sticks, crutches or walking frames

Many environments can cause problems for people with different disabilities.

People who use walking aids may find it hard to use their hands when standing up, for example to count out money, or to fill in a form.

Some people like to sit down. Others prefer to stand because of pain or difficulty in getting up and down

Ways to help

- Always offer a seat, and ensure that a variety are available—some with arms and some without, and at different heights.
- Offer help with coats, bags or other belongings.
- Offer to open doors.
- Offer a wheelchair or powered scooter if they are available. If a customer has difficulty walking then be prepared to offer a more personalised service. Find a place for the customer to sit down and bring goods directly to them.

- Never touch or move crutches, canes or walking frames, or push a wheelchair without the user's consent.

Question 3

There is a long queue developing for the till and there is a person on crutches who is waiting. Should you:

-
- A. Let the customer wait like everybody else.
 - B. Ask the person if they would like to sit down while you process payment for their items when it is their turn.
 - C. Shout to the customer that they will need to come back at a quieter time.

Customers with speech difficulties

Many different disabilities can cause speech and language problems. Don't assume that the person has a learning difficulty.

Don't worry about the cause; concentrate on communicating.

If you do not understand what someone has said, apologise and ask the customer to say it again. Never pretend to understand when you do not.

Repeat what you believe has been said and ask the person if this is correct.

Ways to help

- **Be attentive, encouraging and patient, but not patronising.**
- **Concentrate on listening to 'what' your customer is saying, rather than 'how' it is said.**
- **Refrain from correcting or speaking for the person.**
- **Wait quietly while the person speaks and resist the temptation to finish sentences for them.**
- **If you need more information, break down your questions to deal with individual points that require short answers.**
- **Speak in a relaxed manner and at a measured pace.**

Customers with reading and writing difficulties

Customers who have difficulties with reading and writing may include customers whose first language is not English and people with a range of disabilities.

These could include people with dyslexia, motor co-ordination difficulties, sight problems or people whose first language is British Sign Language.

Offer forms or other literature in an alternative format. Accessible formats include large print, audio and Braille.

Offer extra time to read and explain written forms to customers with reading or writing difficulties even if other customers are waiting to be served.

Some people may prefer to take forms home overnight and return them at a later stage, but don't assume this, ask the customer what they prefer.

Be prepared to help a customer complete a form. For example, having a magnifying glass will help certain customers with sight problems.

Some people who have problems writing may use a signature stamp to sign forms and cheques.

Question 4

A customer would like to use a signature stamp to sign his name to a credit card slip. Should you:

- **A. Offer to sign the customer's name on his behalf.**

- B. Decline the use of a signature stamp and ask the customer to come back with a friend who could purchase the items for them.**

- C. Let the customer stamp the slip and accept it.**

Customers with learning disabilities

Many people with learning disabilities lead independent lives.

These customers have a range of skills and abilities which should be respected.

Many people dislike the phrase 'mental handicap' which is both negative and stigmatising.

Ways to help

- **Begin by assuming the person will understand you.**
- **Speak to the person as you would anyone else.**
- **Do not assume you can predict from your initial impression what the person will or will not understand.**
- **Be patient and encouraging.**
- **Keep all communication simple. Avoid jargon.**
- **Consider putting information in writing, including your name and phone number.**
- **Provide straightforward summaries of written information.**
- **Perhaps offer the person an appropriate record of the conversation (for example, audio, an electronic version, or easy read notes) so they can consider it again later and keep a record.**

- **Be prepared to offer extra assistance for customers unfamiliar with technology like chip and PIN. Accept written signatures or signature stamps as an alternative.**
- **A person may require an advocate to help access information, or attend meetings or appointments.**

Remember

If the customer is unsure, seems worried or confused, never insist on a signature or request a payment.

Question 5

A customer seems confused about the financial implications of signing a contract. Should you:

- A. **Get the customer to sign quickly to ensure they don't change their mind.**
- B. **Ask the customer if they would like more time and ask if the information you have given is clear.**
- C. **Assume the customer is unable to make an informed decision and close down negotiations.**

Did you know?

**33% of people
aged 50 to 65
have a
disability**



Customers who have a mental health problem

Having a mental health problem is not the same as having a learning disability.

One in four of us at some time in our lives will experience a mental health problem and most of us will make a full recovery.

Do not assume that someone who uses mental health services lacks the capacity to make decisions on what is best for them.

The major barriers people with mental health problems face are attitudinal rather than physical.

In many instances you will not know someone has a mental health problem.

Ways to help

- **Be patient and non judgemental.**
- **Give the person time to make a decision.**
- **Remove any sources of stress and confusion, for example, overly loud music or flashing lights.**
- **A person may require an advocate to help access information, or attend meetings or appointments.**

Remember

Ask your customer if there are any adjustments or support you can provide for them



Question 6

A customer begins to laugh and point at another customer with a facial disfigurement. Do you:

-
- A. Quietly approach the customer who is being ridiculed and ask them if they would like to leave.**

 - B. Ignore them and get on with serving customers.**

 - C. Explain that this is unacceptable behaviour and that they will be asked to leave if they don't stop.**

Customers with facial disfigurement

Some people are born with a disfigurement and others acquire it through accident or illness. Largely as a result of social attitudes, living with a disfigurement can be a major challenge for a person and their family.

People who have disfigurements can experience serious problems in social situations, leading to high levels of social anxiety, lowered self-esteem and confidence.

If you focus on the individual person, their personality and what they are saying, you will find that you soon overcome any feelings of awkwardness.

Ways to help

- **Don't be put off by someone's different appearance. Don't turn away in the hope that someone else will help the customer.**
- **Make contact as you would with any other customer but be careful not to stare.**
- **If you feel uncomfortable, try not to let this make your customer feel uncomfortable too.**
- **Remember that a person's 'looks' may be different, but that doesn't mean they are different in any other way.**
- **Concentrate on what they are saying and respond.**

Talking to disabled customers on the telephone

You should not change the way you speak when you think you may be talking to a disabled customer on the telephone.

The principles of providing a good level of customer service over the phone remain the same for both disabled and non-disabled customers.

- **Speak clearly and directly into the microphone.**
- **Concentrate on the content, not the voice.**
- **Always be ready to repeat or rephrase.**
- **Give the person time to explain themselves fully; don't interrupt.**
- **If you can't understand, ask the person to repeat what has been said.**
- **A telephone with outgoing amplification can be most helpful when speaking to hard of hearing customers.**
- **If the person has a stammer, don't finish their words or guess the end of the sentence.**
- **Be aware that some customers may contact you by telephone using a Textphone.**

If you continue to have problems understanding or the customer is not able to understand you, apologise and suggest an alternative means of communicating.

For example, offer them the opportunity to speak to someone else, or use email or a Textphone.

Never pretend to understand a customer when you haven't.

To develop accessible contact methods for your customers please see:

<http://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/our-offer/advice/publications/your-call-important-to-us>

This document provides clear, best practice guidance for organisations which deliver products and services via contact centres.



Question 7

You are having trouble understanding a customer with a speech impairment over the phone. Do you:

- A. Terminate the call hoping a family member or friend will call back on their behalf.**
- B. Take a risk and try to guess what the person has said and act on this assumption.**
- C. Allow longer for the call to make sure you understand what the person wants before giving any information.**

A woman with dark hair, wearing a patterned top, is seated in a wheelchair. She is looking out of a window, with her profile visible. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor scene. The entire image has a blue tint.

Question 8

You need to make a delivery to a customer. When you ring the doorbell the customer won't open the door until you give them a password, which you don't know. Do you:

-
- A. Ring your store and ask for the password which would have been prearranged with the customer.**
-
- B. Leave the goods outside the customer's house.**
-
- C. Try to pass an identity card under the door.**

Providing services to disabled customers at home

- Try not to arrive unexpectedly.
- If the customer wishes, arrange your visit for when a carer or relative is there.
- Give the customer plenty of time to open the door.
- Say who you are and why you are calling. Remember that customers who can't see your identity card may have a password. Check before you visit.
- Confirm details of the job before you start.
- Keep the customer up to date with what you're doing.
- If the job can't be completed, explain what will happen next and who they should contact if there are problems.
- If installing equipment, check it's at a height and position that's easiest for the customer.

Moving things

- Furniture and equipment in a disabled person's home is probably arranged to suit them.
- Ask them before moving anything.
- Make sure anything that's moved is put back in exactly the same place.

Appointments with disabled customers

Ways to help

- Ask in advance if the customer has any particular requirements in connection with the appointment.
- Only ask questions about your customer's disability if it is strictly relevant.
- Before you ask a question about someone's life, ask yourself whether you would ask this question of any other customer or client.
- Don't assume that your customer can't do certain tasks. A disabled person may be able to achieve the same result by a different method.
- Form your own judgements from discussions with the disabled person, as you would with anyone else.
- Don't rely on third parties.
- Try to minimise the amount of handwritten information you require. Some disabled people will need to use a computer, audio, Textphone or have another person help them.
- Provide written communication in an accessible format, such as large print, electronic or Braille.



Finally... relax!

Don't be daunted by the long list of rights and wrongs.

Whatever the situation, even if you're not sure what to do, be confident and ask your customer how you can help them.

- Always 'listen' to the customer.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations with calmness and courtesy.
- Offer assistance, but don't impose it.
- Ask your customer to tell you the best way to help.

Remember

**Smile, this relaxes
everyone.**

'Welcoming Disabled Customers' is the result of careful research and front-line field testing. This guide has been circulated to millions of customer-facing employees in the UK and beyond.

Together with our other best sellers the 'Disability Communication Guide' and our series of line manager guides, our publications provide practical advice to help organisations recruit and retain disabled people and serve disabled customers. All our guidance can be licenced as a toolkit or customised to your needs.

For further details contact us on 020 7403 3020 or publications@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk.

We are committed to ensuring that all our products and services are as accessible as possible to everyone, including disabled people. If you wish to discuss anything with regard to accessibility please contact us.



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*Correct at the time of publication, visit our website for the current list.