

Accessibility Standard for Customer Service:

Employee Tips

**It has been said that it is not our differences that are the problem;
it is our responses to differences.**

Manitoba's new accessibility standard under *The Accessibility for Manitobans Act* means great customer service for everybody.

The following tips will help you remove barriers your customers may face. You will learn how to:

1. provide service by removing attitudinal and communication barriers for customers with disabilities;
2. help persons with service animals;
3. help customers who use assistive devices, like wheelchairs or communications boards
4. help customers who are accompanied by a support person

Your customers are your best source for information about their needs. A solution can be simple, and the customers will likely appreciate your attention and consideration.

If you notice that a customer is having difficulty accessing your services, a good starting point is to simply ask: How can I help you?

1. How to provide service by removing attitudinal and communication barriers for customers with disabilities

Attitudes: One of the biggest barriers faced by persons with disabilities is attitude. It is important not to make assumptions based on a person's disability.

Communication: There are many communication barriers that may prevent people from understanding information. Open communication and flexibility are the key elements to excellent customer service.

General Disability Etiquette Tips:

- Do not make assumptions about someone's abilities or limitations; every person's disability is different. Ask questions if you are not sure what someone needs.
- Focus on removing the barrier, not identifying the disability. Do not ask "what is your disability?"
- Describe and address people with disabilities appropriately. Use respectful language that emphasizes the person rather than the disability. (Example: "person who has epilepsy" rather than "epileptic")
- Speak to your customer, not the person accompanying him or her. Having a disability does not prevent people from making their own decisions about what to buy or how a service may affect them.
- Be patient – people with disabilities may need more time to express themselves or to move about.

Mobility barriers affect people with amputations, paralysis, cerebral palsy, stroke, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, arthritis, and spinal cord injury, and other disabilities or health conditions. A wheelchair is only one device people with mobility disabilities use. Depending on the disability, some people may use crutches, canes, scooters or walkers. Some may use no support at all.

TIPS:

- Do not touch wheelchairs, crutches or other technical aids without permission.
- When asked to help by pushing someone in a wheelchair, don't leave the person in an awkward place such as facing a wall, or in the path of opening doors or crowded corridors.
- Do not move mobility devices out of a customer's reach.
- Organize the space so that there is room for wheelchairs, scooters and walkers.
- For longer conversations, consider inviting everyone to sit.

People with dexterity disabilities may have decreased range of motion in their arms, fingers, wrists, back or neck, and decreased muscle control, spasms, paralysis, tingling or numbness. A simple door knob could be a barrier. Dexterity disabilities may result from Multiple Sclerosis, Cerebral Palsy, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, Tendonitis, arthritis, sciatica, amputations or degenerative disc disease.

TIPS:

- Do not assume that a person with dexterity disabilities needs assistance.
- Ask your customer if they need help before helping him/her.
- Have seating available.
- Install door levers rather than door knobs.

Communication barriers affecting persons who are blind or have a visual impairment result when customers are expected to read signs, forms, and general information, understand physical gestures, locate landmarks or see hazards. There are many things you can do or say to remove barriers for people who are blind or have a visual impairment and may or may not use a cane (often white) or be accompanied by a service animal.

TIPS:

- If you realize someone has a visual impairment, assume they can see you.
- Identify yourself as you approach and speak directly to the customer.
- Ask if you can offer any assistance, such as reading printed material out loud.
- Be precise and descriptive when providing directions or instructions.
- Offer your elbow or shoulder to guide them if needed. Relax and walk at a normal pace.
- Let the customer know when approaching a narrow opening or stairs.
- Always give customers the opportunity to tell you what they need.
- See also Tips on Service Animals.

Communication barriers affecting people who are hard of hearing, deafened or Deaf result when there are no alternatives to spoken communication. Hard of hearing or deafened people may have difficulty in hearing, but can still talk. Deaf people often communicate through (ASL) American Sign Language. You can help remove barriers by following these tips.

TIPS:

- Once a customer has identified themselves as having a hearing loss, make sure you are facing them and speak clearly at a normal pace. Do not shout. If necessary, move to a well lit area away from a window, or to a quieter area.

- If they appear unsure, ask if another form of communication would be helpful, such as using a pad of paper and pen.
- If customers identify themselves as Deaf, in order to discuss an issue or product, they require an interpreter to translate speech into their first language, ASL. If no ASL interpreter is available, ask them if they want to set up an appointment for a different time with interpretation.
- If communicating with customers and clients using a public address system, offer them an alternative, for instance, a public display screen that shows printed information.
- If needed, attract a person's attention before speaking. For example, use a gentle touch or a wave.
- Use closed captioning on video presentations.

Communication barriers affecting persons who are Deaf-Blind: A person who is deaf and blind may have some degree of both hearing and vision. Others do not. Your customer may have been born Deaf-Blind or has become Deaf-Blind over time. Some individuals who are Deaf-Blind may be accompanied by a professional support person.

TIPS:

- A customer who is Deaf-Blind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them. For example, a white board and a black marker can be used to communicate for those customers with some vision.
- Put signs at eye level and, if requested, turn on a screen for them to read.
- Some customers may ask you to “show them” or “guide them” to something specific.
- Some customers who are Deaf-Blind cannot read and communicate at the same time. Be patient.

- Some may ask for “Print on Palm.” This simply means using your finger to write large block letters for a word or a number on the palm of their hand.
- In an emergency, draw a large X with your finger, covering the person’s entire back. This should alert the person, who will then follow you.
- When you approach a person who is Deaf-Blind, let them know – by a simple touch on the shoulder or arm – that you are there. Reassure them of your continued presence in the same manner.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to the support worker.

Communication barriers affecting persons with speech or language impairments such as cerebral palsy, hearing loss, stroke or other conditions may make it difficult to pronounce words or cause slurring. Some people may use a communication board, computer voice synthesizer or other assistive devices.

TIPS:

- Do not assume that a person with a speech impairment also has another disability.
- If someone is slurring, do not assume he or she has consumed alcohol or other substances.
- Ask the person to show or tell you how they communicate.
- Be patient. Find a quiet place. Don’t interrupt or finish your customer’s sentences. Whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”.
- If you cannot understand a person communicating with you by phone, let them know you are having difficulty understanding and ask if there may be another way to communicate.

Barriers to understanding may result when a person is affected by intellectual, developmental and learning disabilities, including autism, fetal alcohol syndrome, Down syndrome and ADHA. Knowing about the disability is not necessary in order to offer respectful service and clear communication.

TIPS:

- Always address the person directly.
- Don't make assumptions about what a person can understand or do.
- Use plain language, and provide one piece of information at a time.
- If you are in a busy area with many distractions, consider moving to a quieter location.
- Provide information in a way that takes into account the customer's disability. Whenever possible, use pictures and keep words to a minimum.
- Be patient, some people with learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond.

Barriers created by mental health issues include a lack of patience and stereotyping. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, can affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. People with brain injuries may face similar barriers.

TIPS:

- Treat everyone with the same respect and consideration.
- If a customer appears to be in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.
- Be confident, calm and reassuring.

2. How to help persons with service animals

People with disabilities may use service animals for many different forms of assistance depending on their disability. A service animal can be identified by the harness it is wearing. According to *The Human Rights Code* (Manitoba) a service animal is defined as “an animal that has been trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability...” The disability may be visible (blindness) or invisible (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD).

TIPS:

- Service animals are welcome in places available to the public.
- Do not pet, feed, or distract service animals. They are working animals, not pets.
- If you are not sure if the animal is a service animal, ask if it is trained to assist the person with a disability related need. Do not ask the person with a service animal what their disability is.
- Do not apply “pet policies” to service animals.
- Do not charge extra for the presence of a service animal.

3. How to help customers who use assistive devices, like wheelchairs or communication boards

Assistive devices enable people with disabilities to do everyday tasks and activities to overcome many barriers. Assistive devices include wheelchairs, walkers, hearing aids, white canes and sometimes computers.

TIPS:

- Ask permission before touching or handling any assistive device.
- Assistive devices should not be moved out of the customer’s reach.

- Let customers know what assistive devices you offer. Some organizations, for example, offer wheelchairs.
- Always notify customers if an accessibility feature, such as an elevator or accessible washroom, is temporarily out of service. Offer an alternative accommodation when possible.

4. How to help customers who are accompanied by a support person

Some people with disabilities may be accompanied by a support person who assists with mobility, personal care or medical needs. The Accessibility Standard for Customer Service requires that you welcome support people to your business.

TIPS:

- Welcome support people to your workplace or place of business.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to the support person. Do not assume the individual with a support person will not understand.
- Avoid charging entrance or other fees for a support person when possible. If you must charge admission for the support person, provide advance notice.

Resources

Available in alternate formats, upon request.

Visit www.AccessibilityMB.ca to learn more.

For more information contact:

Disabilities Issues Office (DIO)

630-240 Graham Avenue

Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 0J7

Phone: 204-945-7613

Fax: 204-948-2896

dio@gov.mb.ca

Join the #AccessibleMB conversation on Twitter and Facebook

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