



Interacting and Communicating with Customers that have Disabilities

Treating all your customers with respect and courtesy is at the heart of excellent customer service.

All your customers deserve to be treated equally and with dignity and respect. Treating your customers as individuals and respecting their particular needs is at the heart of excellent customer service.

What you can do

- ▶ If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer, "May I help you?" Your customers with disabilities know if they need help and how you can provide it.
- ▶ Speak directly to the person with a disability, not to their support person or companion.
- ▶ Avoid stereotypes and don't make assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities the person has. Remember that your customers are not required to tell you what disabilities they have.
- ▶ Take the time to get to know your customer's needs and focus on meeting those needs just like you would with any other customer. Some disabilities are not visible.
- ▶ Be patient, optimistic and willing to find a way to communicate. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond. A good start is to listen carefully.
- ▶ If you can't understand what your customer is saying, just politely ask again.
- ▶ Don't touch or address service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- ▶ Don't touch assistive devices, including wheelchairs, without permission unless it's an emergency.
- ▶ Make sure your business has emergency procedures for customers with disabilities and know what they are.

What you need to know about serving customers with vision disabilities

Vision disabilities reduce a person's ability to see clearly. Few people with vision disabilities 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 people 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. Some of your customers may use a guide dog or white cane, but others may not. Sometimes it may be difficult to tell if a person has a vision disability.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- ▶ Guide dog
- ▶ White cane
- ▶ Magnifier
- ▶ Audio cassette
- ▶ Large print
- ▶ Braille
- ▶ Support person

What you can do

- ▶ Don't assume the individual can't see you.
- ▶ Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to them.
- ▶ Speak naturally and clearly.
- ▶ Never touch your customer without asking permission, unless it's an emergency.
- ▶ Offer your elbow to guide the person. If they accept, walk slowly, but wait for permission before doing so.
- ▶ If you are guiding your customer towards stairs:
 - ▶ let them know if they have to walk up or down;
 - ▶ approach the stairs head on, not at an angle and come to a full stop in front of the stairs;
 - ▶ make sure your customer is on the rail side and allow them to take hold of it;
 - ▶ let them find the first step and then start to climb or descend the stairs;
 - ▶ try to be one step ahead and always announce the last step.
- ▶ Identify landmarks or other details to orient your customer to the environment around them.
- ▶ 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 leave your customer in the middle of a room. Show them to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- ▶ Don't walk away without saying good-bye.

What you need to know about serving customers 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.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- ▶ TTY (Telephone Teletype)
- ▶ Relay Service
- ▶ Hearing aid
- ▶ Personal amplification device (e.g. Pocket Talker)
- ▶ Phone amplifier
- ▶ Sign Language Interpreter
- ▶ Service animal
- ▶ Paper and pen

What you can do

- ▶ Attract the customer's attention before speaking. The best way is by a gentle touch on the shoulder or with a gentle wave of your hand.
- ▶ Always ask how you can help. Don't shout.
- ▶ Make sure you are in a well-lighted area where your customer can see your face.
- ▶ Don't put your hands in front of your face when speaking. Some people may read lips.
- ▶ If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier, for example, using a pen and paper.
- ▶ Be patient if you are using a pen and paper to communicate. American Sign Language (ASL) may be your customer's first language. It has its own grammatical rules and sentence structure.
- ▶ Look at and speak directly to your customer. Address your customer, not the interpreter.
- ▶ Be clear and precise when giving directions, and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- ▶ If the person uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or move to a quieter area.
- ▶ Discuss any personal (e.g., financial) matters in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.

What you need to know about serving customers who are deaf-blind

A person who is deaf-blind cannot see or hear to some degree. 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.

Types of assistance your customer might use

- ▶ TTY (Telephone Teletype)
- ▶ Large print
- ▶ Braille
- ▶ Audio cassette
- ▶ Support person, such as an intervenor
- ▶ Service animal
- ▶ Print on paper (using black felt marker on non-glossy white paper or using portable white and black boards)
- ▶ Communication boards

What you can do

- ▶ 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 serving 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.

Types of assistance your customer might use

- ▶ Mobility device (wheelchair, scooter, walker, cane, crutches)
- ▶ Elevator

- ▶ Lift
- ▶ Support person

What you can do

- ▶ Speak naturally and directly to your customer not to their companion or support person.
- ▶ Try to put yourself at your customer's eye level by sitting, squatting, or standing at an increased distance if you are having a long conversation.
- ▶ Ask before you help. People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things.
- ▶ Be patient. Customers will identify their needs to you.
- ▶ Respect your customer's personal space. Do not lean over them or on their assistive device.
- ▶ Don't move items or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of the person's reach.
- ▶ Don't touch assistive devices, including wheelchairs, without permission unless it's an emergency. If you have permission to move a person in a wheelchair remember to:
 - wait for and follow the person's instructions;
 - make sure your customer is ready to be moved;
 - describe what you are going to do before you do it;
 - avoid uneven ground and objects;
 - never leave the person in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.
- ▶ Let your customer know about accessible features in the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, elevators, ramps, etc.).
- ▶ Remove obstacles and rearrange furniture to ensure clear passage.

What you need to know about serving customers with mental health disabilities

People with mental health disabilities look like anyone else. You may not know that your customer has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it.

Examples of mental health disabilities include schizophrenia, depression, phobias, and bipolar, anxiety and mood disorders.

Some of the most common features of a mental health disability are listed below. Any individual may have difficulty with one, several or none of these:

- ▶ inability to think clearly:
- ▶ hallucinations (e.g., hearing voices, seeing or feeling things that aren't there);

- ▶ depression or acute mood swings (e.g., from happy to depressed with no reason for the change);
- ▶ poor concentration, difficulty remembering; and
- ▶ apparent lack of motivation.

If someone is experiencing difficulty 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.

Types of assistance your customer might use

- ▶ Support person
- ▶ Service animal

What you can do

- ▶ 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 serving 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 the person's ability to learn, communicate, socialize and take care of their everyday needs. You may not be able to know that someone has this disability unless you are told, or you notice the way the person acts, asks questions or uses 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.

Types of assistance your customer might use

- ▶ Support person
- ▶ Service animal
- ▶ Communication board
- ▶ Speech generating device

What you can do

- ▶ 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 support person.

What you need to know about serving customers who have learning disabilities

The term "learning disability" describes a range of information processing disorders that may affect how a person acquires, organizes, retains, understands or uses verbal or non-verbal information.

Examples include dyslexia (problems in reading and related language-based learning), dyscalculia (problems in mathematics), and dysgraphia (problems in writing and fine motor skills).

It is important to know that having a learning disability does not mean a person is incapable of learning. Rather, it means that they learn in a different way.

Learning disabilities can result in many different communication 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 know that a person has a learning disability unless you are told. Be supportive and patient.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- ▶ Support person
- ▶ Tape recorders, mini pocket recorders
- ▶ Large print
- ▶ Communication board
- ▶ Speech generating device

What you can do

- ▶ When you know that someone with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can best help.
- ▶ Speak naturally 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 provide information in a way that works best for your customer. For example, have a paper and pen handy.
- ▶ Be patient and willing to explain something again if needed.

What you need to know about serving customers with speech or language impairments

Some people have problems communicating because of their disability. Cerebral palsy, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult to pronounce words

or may cause slurring or stuttering. They also may prevent the person from expressing themselves or understanding written or spoken language. Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards or other assistive devices.

Types of assistance your customer might use

- ▶ Communication board
- ▶ Speech generating device
- ▶ Support person
- ▶ Paper and pen

What you can do

- ▶ Don't assume that just because a person has one disability they also have another. For example, if a customer has difficulty speaking, it doesn't mean they have an intellectual or developmental disability as well.
- ▶ Ask your customer to repeat the information if you don't understand.
- ▶ Ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no', if possible.
- ▶ Be patient and polite. Give your customer whatever time they need to get their point across.
- ▶ Don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences. Wait for them to finish.
- ▶ Be patient, respectful and willing to find a way to communicate.

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

- ▶ Confirm the details of your arrival time in advance. Don't arrive unexpectedly.
- ▶ 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 identification cards and may want you to use a password. Check before you visit.
- ▶ Keep your customer informed of what you're doing.
- ▶ If you need to move some of your customer's possessions, make sure that you leave the house exactly as it was when you arrived. For example, someone with a vision disability will expect that their furniture is in the same place and could 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.

What you need to know when talking to your customers with disabilities over the phone

- ▶ Speak naturally, clearly and directly.

- ▶ Don't worry about how the person's 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 or respond.
- ▶ 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 your customer said, just repeat or rephrase what you heard.
- ▶ If a telephone customer is using an interpreter or a Relay Service, speak naturally 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.