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Welcoming Disabled Customers Communication, Etiquette and Language

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1. Introduction

This Guide gives advice about those issues which often cause concern or embarrassment because you are not sure what to do, how to offer help or what language to use.

There is no check list which can be used in this field and often disabled people are more concerned about your intention rather than whether you 'get it right' all of the time. This will be difficult in any case as disabled people have their own preferences which vary considerably.

2. Principles

Generally speaking there are four key 'principles' to follow:

- Assumptions: don't make assumptions about anything including the person's disability, its effect or what you might need to do differently. Keep an open mind and respond to what you hear and see.
- Control: leave disabled people in control of what is happening to them – don't impose what you think is the right approach or solution.
- Dignity: don't undermine an individual's dignity; after all you wouldn't deliberately do this to someone who wasn't disabled. Ask yourself the question 'how would I feel if I were treated like this?' – why would it be different for a disabled person.
- Ask: if you aren't sure what to do or say simply ask the person – it is how you ask that is the important thing.

3. Practicalities

Although most disabled people will appreciate your help when they need it, don't automatically assume that someone needs it. Ask first and then provide the help that has been requested. Remember, it is how you offer that is the important thing. Things to remember include:

- If someone looks as if they need assistance, offer it, but wait for them to accept before you help.
- In offering assistance don't ask leading questions, for example, "are you OK" as this tends to evoke the response of "yes". Instead ask something like "excuse me, can I help" or "excuse me, may I assist".

- If assistance is requested ask how you may help. All disabled people have their own preferences about how they like to be helped and you need to respect this; you should not assume how any help should be provided.
- Don't touch a disabled person without their permission unless it is to attract their attention or to prevent an accident.
- If assistance is turned down don't let that put you off offering help to someone else in the future. Disabled people vary widely in their responses to offers of help and their need for it. Remember they should be treated as individuals.
- Don't ask about someone's disability. If you need information about how to assist them it is more effective to ask about the effect of their disability and its implications in the way you assist them, for example, if assisting a blind person, rather than asking 'how much can you see' ask them if you need to tell them about steps.

A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself 'how would I feel if this was done to me'. Also consider whether what you are doing adversely impacts on the disabled person's dignity and if it does, then perhaps you are not providing assistance as effectively as you could.

When talking to a disabled person remember:

- don't patronise or make assumptions about their abilities or needs;
- don't forget some disabilities are not apparent, for example epilepsy and mental ill health;
- when a disabled person is with someone who is assisting them, for example, a translator, guide or advocate, talk to the disabled person directly;
- if someone has difficulty understanding you - perhaps because they have a learning disability - be patient, and, where necessary, explain something more than once and use simple language;
- if understanding each other is proving difficult then try to find alternative ways of communicating with each other;
- don't ask personal questions about a person's disability as these may be considered rude;
- if someone looks 'different' do not stare at them;
- never compromise a person's right to privacy and dignity; and

- remember that people with the same disability will have varying needs and techniques in dealing with its effect so don't make assumptions about what someone with a given disability might need.

4. Specific Issues

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive list about issues which apply to specific disabilities. However, below are a few examples which you might find useful. If you want guidance on specific disabilities it is recommended that you go to the website of a major organisation that represents people with that disability, for example, Mind for people with mental health issues, Scope for people with cerebral palsy.

4.1 When talking to a hearing impaired person:

- talk to them directly even if they are accompanied by a sign language translator;
- if they lip read make sure your face is in the light, look directly at the person and speak clearly and naturally – don't try and help by changing the way you talk; and
- if you are not understood be prepared to repeat yourself or re-phrase what you have said or see if a different method of communication might work better.

4.2 When talking to a visually impaired person:

- introduce yourself on first meeting; and
- when you are going to move away, tell them.

4.3 When talking to someone with speech impairment:

- be patient and don't try to guess what they want to say or finish their sentences;
- if you don't understand, don't pretend you do - ask them to repeat what they have said or find an alternative method of communicating; and
- ask straightforward questions which require short answers or a nod/shake of the head.

4.4 When talking to a wheelchair user:

- facilitate eye contact, for example, by sitting down, facing the wheelchair or taking a step backwards;
- don't lean on the wheelchair - it is part of the user's personal space; and
- don't push a wheelchair without permission.

5. Non-visible Disabilities

By their very nature it is not possible to identify people who have a non-visible disability and readily determine whether you need to use different communication techniques. On the other hand the majority of people who have a non-visible disability do not need you to do anything different anyway. Most of the time dealing with anyone is a question of using our existing inter-personal skills and techniques and it is only when these do not work we need to use alternative approaches.

5.1 When to use alternative techniques

There are a wide variety of behaviours which may indicate that alternative communication techniques might be appropriate when dealing with someone. Non-typical behaviours may indicate a non-visible disability and a change of approach may be appropriate. These might include the following, but the list is not exhaustive:

- exhibiting non-typical body language (see section on body language);
- using irrational language or demonstrating unusual behaviour;
- being angry, irritable or cross;
- showing signs of nervousness;
- becoming easily frustrated or impatient;
- being intimidating;
- demanding unrealistic treatment;
- being indecisive;
- appearing confused; and
- lacking clarity in explaining themselves.

Of course these behaviours might not indicate anything relating to a disability, however, it does indicate that different skills and approaches might be needed and the cause of such behaviours is irrelevant.

5.2 Dealing with the behaviour

Where behaviour is outside what is usual don't concern yourself about the cause and just deal with it. Some useful things to bear in mind include:

- Realising you can't control anyone else's behaviour. However, you can influence how people respond to you, what they do and how they react and feel; your own behaviour, therefore, is key to dealing with these situations.
- Don't argue: if you allow yourself to become emotionally involved you will lose control of the situation.
- Don't make assumptions about what the cause of the issues might be or what is required – the former is irrelevant and the latter can't be predicted.
- Your approach should be to problem solve and your techniques should be flexible and reflect this approach.
- The person wants to be listened to, acknowledged and understood. Maintain eye contact. Show your attentiveness by standing or sitting up straight; lolling or slouching makes you seem inattentive and disinterested.
- Let the person talk, and pay close attention. Repeat or paraphrase some of what you hear to check you have understood and seek confirmation.
- Don't show negative reactions such as boredom, irritation, disdain or displeasure, either through your body language or in your responses.
- Show concern and respect for the person's feelings. Maintain a concerned, sincere and interested facial expression. Your voice, as well as your body language and expression, communicates your attitude. People respond more to how you say something than what you say.
- When someone tries to intimidate you, stay calm and ask, "What can I/we do for you?" or "What would you like me to do?".

6. Body language

It is generally accepted that many of – if not most – people's feelings are communicated via non-verbal communication (body language). The sending and

receiving of these 'emotional' messages is mostly sub-conscious and they play a major role in determining how interactions take place between people. Disabled people's non-verbal communication may not always work in the same way that it does for non-disabled people and this can create some misunderstanding and be a cause of discomfort to those not used to it.

For example, not being able to make eye contact with a visually impaired person or not having the benefit of voice intonation in someone with a speech impairment can prove unsettling; this can have a negative impact on the interaction simply because one usual channel of information is not working in the way it usually does. It is important to be aware that this might be an issue as most of these exchanges take place sub-consciously. Non-typical body language may also be an indicator that someone has a non-visible disability.

The main areas to consider are:

- proximity;
- orientation;
- posture;
- facial expression;
- appearance;
- gestures;
- eye contact; and
- tone of voice.

7. Language

This area of disability etiquette often creates concerns for people when first meeting disabled people. Whilst it is important to promote positive language and terminology it is equally important not to get overly cautious about it. Most disabled people are more concerned about your intention and not whether you are being politically correct.

It is not possible to produce a checklist about what you should or shouldn't say as this is likely to change over time. It is disabled people who, in effect, own the language about themselves and this varies between individuals even with similar disabilities. However, it is considered good practice to promote the use of preferred terminology through your own use.

You will get it wrong sometimes and most disabled people are more concerned about your intention in any case. However what is important is that you learn from your experiences and do not become “defensive” when somebody has told you their preference. One way would be to just say sorry and ask ‘what would you prefer?’. Good practice dictates asking this type of question at any time if you are in any doubt.

Preferred terminology is about being socially aware, respecting people and appreciating that what you say and how you say it may promote a negative image or have a negative impact on people. This table gives examples of some of the common language and highlights the issues about it.

Avoid saying	Explanation	Preferred terminology
the disabled	This groups everyone together into one homogeneous group which ignores individuality and encourages stereotyping	disabled people
victim of . . .	Some terms are judgemental and imply disability is negative, sensational or emotive	she/he has . . .
handicapped	Old fashioned and considered offensive due to connotations with begging i.e. cap in hand	disabled person
spastic	A medical term which is now generally used in a negative way, e.g., name calling, playground culture	has cerebral palsy
the deaf	As above for “the disabled”	people with hearing impairments
mentally handicapped	A generic term with negative implications	has learning difficulties
partially sighted	“Sighted” is based on the concept of “normality” therefore being partially sighted is not being ‘normal’	a person with a visual impairment
wheelchair bound	Gives a negative and limiting image and implies the person spends all their time in the wheelchair and cannot get out	wheelchair user
suffers from . . .	As for ‘victim’ above	a person with . . .
able-bodied	Implies disabled people are not able	non-disabled

In summary, these are some key issues to consider when meeting disabled people for the first time:

Is the language:

- negative;
- judgmental;
- old-fashioned;
- de-humanising;
- patronising; and
- stereotyping.

Consider:

- has the meaning changed;
- who owns the issue;
- asking the individual if you are unsure what to use; and
- the context and intention.