

Accessibility Standard for Customer Service: Employee Tips

**It is not our differences that are the problem;
it is our responses to differences. (Anonymous)**

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

This guide offers tips to remove barriers your customers may face in accessing goods and services. By learning and acting on these tips, you will help meet the requirements of the Customer Service Standard.

You will learn about:

1. Attitudes that create or remove barriers;
2. How to keep the focus on the barrier, not the disability;
3. How to remove communication barriers;
4. Assistive devices and how to serve customers who use them;
5. How to help customers accompanied by a support person; and
6. The rights of persons accompanied by service animals;

Your customers are your best source of information about their needs. Most solutions will be simple, and your customers will appreciate the attention and consideration.

If you notice that a customer is having difficulty accessing your services, a good starting point is to ask:

How can I help you?

1. Attitudes that create or remove barriers

Attitudes: One of the biggest barriers faced by persons with disabilities is attitude. Your customers with disabilities come for goods and services; treat them as you would any other customer and do not judge what you think someone can or cannot do. Comments regarding their disability, expressing pity or telling them they are inspirational will single them out and would not be appreciated or appropriate.

General Disability Etiquette Tips:

- Do not make assumptions about someone's abilities or limitations; every person's disability is different. Focus on removing the barrier, not identifying the disability.
- Ask questions if you are not sure what someone needs. Do not ask "What is your disability?" Instead, ask "How can I help?"
- Address all of your customers, including those with a disability, with respect. Eye contact and a smile go a long way.
- Take cues from your customer. For example, if a person is blind, this does not mean the individual is also hard-of-hearing.
- Be patient – people with disabilities may need more time to express themselves or to move about.
- To support customers with serious anxiety, consider ways to make your reception area calming, or offer a separate quiet space, if possible.
- Speak to your customer, not to the person accompanying him or her. Having a disability does not prevent people from making their own decisions about which products to buy or services to request.
- Use respectful language that puts the person first. (Example: "person who has a mental health issue.")

2. Focus on the barriers, not the disability

Physical barriers create obstacles that make it difficult for people to easily access a place. Physical barriers may include obstructed hallways, narrow doorways, high shelves, curbs or stairs, etc. People with temporary or permanent health conditions, injuries, disabilities or age may be greatly impacted by such barriers.

Physical barriers not only create challenges to moving through space; they also affect an individual's ability to manipulate things, such as a box, an Interac machine, or doorknobs. A high shelf is an obvious barrier for a person of short stature. Other barriers may be less obvious, such as when your customer is having difficulty handling objects due to pain, numbness, or spasms.

TIPS:

- Do not assume what assistance is required. Instead, ask if you can help.
- Have seating available, for example, when customers wait for service. During longer conversations, consider inviting everyone to sit.
- Organize the space (aisles, desks, tables) so there is room for wheelchairs, scooters, and walkers.
- Inform customers where they can request assistance and make sure someone is available to help.
- If you are asked to help push someone in a wheelchair, do not leave the person in an awkward place, facing a wall, in crowded corridors, or in the path of opening doors.

Technological Barriers occur when technology, or the way it is used, cannot be accessed by everyone.

- Allow customers to contact you in a variety of ways (example: if you typically offer online registration only, also offer information for registration by phone or email).

- Always offer an option that does not rely on technology to access goods or services.
- Be prepared to converse with someone who uses a cell phone, ipad or computer to communicate.

Systemic barriers are policies, practices or procedures that result in some people receiving unequal access or being excluded. Let your employer know if you think policies are affecting access to goods or services.

- If you typically organize meetings with clients in the morning, but you have clients with insomnia or other issues affecting sleep, make exceptions.
- If you have a no-pet policy, know that this does not apply to service animals.

3. How to Remove Communication Barriers:

Communication barriers result when the way information is presented cannot be received or understood by everyone (for example, when successful messaging relies specifically on good sight, hearing, clear speech, and comprehension).

3.1 Communication barriers occur for people who are blind or have a vision impairment when customers are expected to read signs, forms and general information, understand physical gestures, locate landmarks or see hazards.

TIPS:

- Do not assume only persons with white canes or accompanied by service animals have low or no vision.
- If you realize someone has a visual impairment, identify yourself as you approach and speak directly to the customer.
- Always give customers the opportunity to tell you what they need.
- If someone requests guidance, offer your elbow or shoulder to guide them. Relax and walk at a normal pace. Let the customer know when you are approaching an obstacle (pillar), narrow opening, or stairs.

- If someone requests assistance with reading or instructions, speak clearly and offer precise and descriptive instructions, away from other customers.
- Offer alternative formats, in larger print or electronically. Many people who are blind use screen reader software on their computers to read.
- Some labels are too small for most of us to read. Consider having a magnifying glass readily available on site.
- See also “the rights of persons accompanied by service animals.”

3.2 Communication barriers occur for people who are hard of hearing, deafened or Deaf when there are no alternatives to spoken communication. People who are hard of hearing or deafened typically use amplification (e.g. hearing aids), speak and may read lips. People with severe/profound hearing loss may use a combination of communication forms, including American Sign Language (ASL), print and spoken language. Others communicate using ASL or through print.

TIPS:

- If you know a customer is hard of hearing, you may wish to attract the individual’s attention with a welcoming comment, a gentle touch or a wave.
- Always give customers the opportunity to tell you what they need.
- Make sure you face your customer and speak at a normal pace. Do not shout or exaggerate your lip movements. If necessary, move to a well-lit area away from a window, or to a quieter space.
- You may wish to ask if another form of communication would be helpful. Options include paper and pen or texting.
- If you are unsure the customer understood you, repeat or rephrase what you said. Confirm that you have been understood.
- Some matters discussed with Deaf clients may require professional interpretation. Look at and speak directly to your customer, not to the interpreter. Contact the Disabilities Issues Office for information.

- If communicating with customers and clients using a public address system, offer a visual alternative, for example, a public display screen.
- In an emergency, alert the Deaf individual by tapping them on the shoulder to get their attention. Use gestures to indicate the emergency, need to evacuate, etc.

3.3 Communication barriers occur for people with speech impairments when the customer must speak clearly in order to receive service in person or on the phone.

Some people's speech is unclear, so you may wish to request they repeat or write down information. Other people may use a communication board, computer voice synthesizer or other assistive devices to converse.

TIPS:

- Do not make assumptions about why a person is having difficulty speaking or is slurring words. A stroke, injury, disability, or a recent trip to the dentist may all affect your customer's speech.
- Do not assume that a person who is unable to speak clearly is unable to understand.
- Always give customers the opportunity to tell you what they need, including how they wish to communicate.
- Be patient. Find a quiet place. Do not interrupt or finish your customer's sentences.
- If you are unsure what was said, repeat it back to confirm, or politely ask the customer to repeat the information. If possible, ask questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" response.
- 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. Do not hang up!

3.4 Barriers to understanding may occur when the customer is required to comprehend, concentrate, learn, organize, or remember information.

TIPS:

- Do not make assumptions about why a person is having trouble understanding or about what they should be able to understand. Brain injury, learning and intellectual disabilities, mental health, dementia and a very busy day can all affect understanding or memory.
- Use a respectful tone and always give customers the opportunity to tell you what they need.
- Address your customer directly, not the person who may be accompanying them.
- Use plain easy-to-understand language. It may help to provide one piece of information at a time.
- If you are in a busy area with many distractions, consider moving to a quieter, less distracting location.
- Be patient - some people may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond.
- Write important information down so the person does not have to rely on their memory.
- Keep written information clear and simple. Leaving blank space on the paper (keeping the page uncluttered), using bullet points and using pictures can all help with messaging.
- Use simple signage in key traffic areas to help with way-finding.
- If a customer appears to be anxious or in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help. Be confident, calm and reassuring.

4. Assistive devices and how to serve customers who use them

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 or cell phones.

TIPS:

- Ask permission before touching or handling any assistive device.
- Do not move mobility devices out of a customer's reach or vision.
- Let customers know what assistive devices you offer. Some organizations, for example, have computers on hand with large monitors.
- If you have assistive devices on site, know how to help your customer use them (for example, how to increase the size of the font on the computer screen).
- Do not be afraid to use a cell phone for communication so a customer can read what they cannot hear.
- Always notify customers if an accessibility feature, such as an elevator or accessible washroom, is temporarily out of service. Provide a contact for more information and offer an alternative accommodation when possible.

5. How to help customers accompanied by a support person

A customer may be accompanied by a support person who assists them with mobility, personal care or understanding.

The Customer Service Standard requires that your business or organization permit your customer with a disability to be accompanied by a support person at all times. If the support person is required to pay admission, the Customer Service Standard requires that the organization provide advance notice.

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 there is a charge, notify customers in advance.

6. The rights of people with service animals

According to The Human Rights Code (Manitoba) a service animal is “an animal that has been trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability...” (for example, guide dogs are trained to assist people who are blind). Service animals assist people with a wide range of disabilities and illnesses, including autism, diabetes, epilepsy, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

TIPS:

- Service animals are welcome wherever the public is welcome.
- Service animals are working animals, not pets, so petting and addressing the animal may be confusing or distracting.
- Guide dogs typically wear a harness. Other service dogs may wear vests.
- If it is unclear whether the customer is accompanied by a pet or a service animal, staff may ask if the animal has been trained to help with a disability-related need. Do not ask what the customer’s disability is.
- Do not apply “pet policies” to service animals.
- Do not charge extra for the presence of a service animal.
- Service animals must be under the care and control of their owners at all times. Staff may remind the handler that barking, wandering and other misbehavior by the service animal are not permitted. If the handler is not in control of the service animal, staff may ask them to leave.

7. Maintaining Barrier-free access

The Customer Service Standard requires that your business or organization maintain features of a building or space that help create barrier-free access (for example, wide hallways). If accessibility features, such as an elevator, are temporarily unavailable, customers must be notified, preferably in advance.

- Ask customers if you can help (for example, by offering to open a door or help reach a product).
- Organize displays or tables with lots of passing room for wheelchairs, scooters, and walkers.
- Create access to goods by placing them in easy reach or by cataloguing your stock.
- Shovel pathways and apply gravel to slippery areas around your building.
- Post a sign to tell customers when an accessibility feature is temporarily unavailable and who to contact for more information.

8. Ask for feedback

The Customer Service Standard requires that your business or organization offer customers an opportunity to give feedback to help identify and remove barriers or to comment on great initiatives and service. Your business or organization must track any actions taken as a result of the feedback. As an employee you can help.

- Tell customers about your organization's feedback process and how they can comment in writing.
- Take note of any feedback you receive in person and share it with your manager.

- If the feedback involves a request for follow-up, tell the customers about the anticipated waiting period before someone will call them to discuss what action may be required.

In closing:

Accessible customer service is great customer service for everyone.

If you have not yet received training about accessible customer service, ask your manager about available options, or visit www.AccessibilityMB.ca and click in the Resource section to learn about Accessibility Services, including training.

For more information contact:

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Available in alternate formats, upon request.

Join the #AccessibleMB conversation on Twitter and Facebook

Visit www.AccessibilityMB.ca to learn more.

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