

**Prepared Remarks of Grace Chung Becker
Acting Assistant Attorney General**

**ADA Business Connection Leadership Meeting
Contemporary Resort, Disney World
Lake Buena Vista, Florida
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Thank you, Loretta, for the kind introduction. My thanks to Stuart Vidockler, of Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality (SATH), and Jeannie Amendola of Disney World, for co-hosting this meeting and helping us bring together this extraordinary group of people. I also want to thank our speakers Nadine Vogel, President, Springboard Consulting, and Ms. Amendola, for talking to us today about the power of accessible customer service to improve business accessibility and welcome the market of people with disabilities. And, thanks to Jani Nayar of SATH, Jack Humburg, of the Boley Centers, Elizabeth Howe of the Center for Independent Living of Central Florida, and Shelley Kaplan, of the Southeast DBTAC, for the great help they gave us in putting this meeting together.

Most notably, thank you all for making time in your busy schedules. We appreciate your willingness to participate in this important discussion that we call the ADA Business Connection Leadership meeting. As I was named Acting Assistant Attorney General fairly recently, this is my first ADA Business Connection meeting. I am looking forward to learning from our co-hosts and speakers and to developing a discussion that will result in ongoing relationships within the greater Orlando area as well as in the national disability rights and business communities.

Today's presentations and discussion will focus on the mutual benefits of accessible customer service in the travel and hospitality industry. In business management books and articles, we find repeated references to the need for today's companies to become "customer-centric" and to offer customers as many choices as possible in products and services in order to remain competitive. Experts talk about "re-inventing the customer experience" and "turning ordinary into extraordinary " because customers expect more and base their loyalty to businesses on whether they get what they want and get it in ways that make them feel valued by the company.

All too often, however, customers with disabilities are not part of the equation when providing these new and over-the-top experiences. Yet some of what business experts are touting now as providing exemplary customer service is exactly what the ADA requires. For example, Jonathan Tisch, CEO of Loews Hotels and author of Chocolates on the Pillow Aren't Enough, writes about how a company can individualize its services by giving staff permission to adjust standard procedures as needed to best serve a customer. The ADA calls that modification of policies, practices, and procedures.

Tisch also argues that attracting diverse customer groups – and he includes people with disabilities in this group – will be key to success for businesses in the coming years. But he cautions that "respecting diversity doesn't happen automatically; it requires thought, training, and commitment." I am sure we will talk often this afternoon about the value of these three elements when creating a welcoming environment for customers with disabilities.

Organizations large and small can win over this market with good service. In his book, The Starbucks Experience, Joseph A. Michelli relates numerous success stories about Starbucks employees and their efforts to provide exemplary customer service. One story took place in a California Starbucks where the baristas observed that many of their customers were deaf. Wanting to improve the customer experience, the baristas independently took the initiative to enroll in sign language classes to improve their communication with these patrons. With such a warm welcome, the deaf customers not only continued to patronize that Starbucks, but also created a website called Deaf Chat Coffee at www.deafcoffee.com to encourage deaf individuals throughout the U.S. and Canada to set up coffee groups in their own neighborhoods. Even the site's logo is a salute to the ubiquitous Starbucks insignia. There are three Deaf Chat Coffee groups in the Orlando area, two of which are held in Starbucks stores. I guess that's what Howard Schultz, Chairman and CEO of Starbucks, meant when he said, "We are not in the coffee business serving people, but in the people business serving coffee."

Reinventing the customer experience for people with disabilities can boost a company's accessibility and its compliance with the ADA, draw in a new market, and improve service for all of its customers. In an IBM executive brief, Dr. Paul Horn, senior vice president of IBM research, is quoted as saying "Out of our work making computing easier to use for people with disabilities we will think of radically new approaches. Out of these approaches we will find not just ways of helping people with . . . disabilities but ways of making computing far more natural and intuitive." If accessibility can make

computing more intuitive, just think of what it can do for the service-oriented hospitality industry.

The market is there, it is growing, and it is expecting accessible customer service. The proof of this market's importance is in the statistics:

- The U.S. Census Bureau's 2002 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) found that there are 51.2 million people with disabilities in the United States. To put that number into perspective, the 2002 SIPP indicates that the U.S. population's percentage of people with disabilities is 18.1 percent. That is larger than the percentage of Hispanics in the U.S. population (13.3%), the country's largest ethnic, racial, or cultural minority group.
- Almost 21 million American families have at least one member with a disability.
- According to the Department of Labor, individuals with disabilities have \$175 billion in annual discretionary income to spend.
- A 2005 study by the Open Doors Organization (ODO), a Chicago non-profit organization, found that more than 21 million adults with disabilities traveled at least once in the preceding two years. More than 50% of

adults with disabilities stayed in hotels while traveling within this two-year period. In a 2002 study, the ODO found that spending by travelers with disabilities exceeded \$13.6 billion annually.

- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2002, more than 42 percent of those 65 and older had disabilities. In 2000, in the U.S. alone, there were 35 million people in this age group. Doing the math, we can estimate that approximately 14.7 million of these older adults have disabilities. Globally, the story is even larger: a recent UN study reported that between 2005 and 2050, the worldwide population of people 60 and older is expected to almost triple.
- In addition, those 76 million Baby Boomers -- the oldest of whom turned 60 last year -- experience biological and psychological changes before age 65 that might not be identified as disabilities but can be accommodated by accessibility in businesses. A Deloitte Research Study, "Tracking Travel: Exploring the Latest Trends in Business and Leisure Travel," adds that while customer ratings for preferred lodging amenities were similar among age groups, the 51-65 year old group had two additional choices: comfortable beds and easy-to-use electronics. Those accessible features do make a difference.

- Older adults also have money. A Deloitte's research study states that consumers over age 50 control almost half of all consumer spending in the United States; and that consumers 65 and older are the most affluent of any U.S. age group.
- And, they like to spend it. Reports from Deloitte, Canada Statistics, and Abacus International indicate that the older adult demographic segment in the U.S., Canada, Asia, and Europe dominate all other age groups in travel: traveling more and spending more on their travel.

Businesses are focusing on this audience not for altruistic reasons but for the bottom line: millions of customers with billions of dollars in disposable income.

And finally, a recent study by Weber Shandwick found that Baby Boomers regularly look to their peers for product recommendations and consider them to be trusted sources of information. Anecdotally, persons with disabilities across the country maintain informal but very strong information-sharing networks about accessible venues. In these days of blogs, online reviews, and omnipresent, immediate communication, this is an audience to cultivate and keep satisfied.

I would like to conclude with a quote from IBM Global Business Services: "To stand out in a crowded marketplace, retailers need customer advocates, not just shoppers . . . Becoming more customer focused is a multiyear journey that will require executive

sponsorship in order to orchestrate the changes required in culture, organization, processes and technology. It is a vital strategy for all retailers and the means for turning shoppers into advocates and creating a sustainable, differentiated advantage." I hope that after today's meeting, the people in this room will embrace the cultivation of customer advocates among people with disabilities, Baby Boomers, family, and friends through providing accessible customer service that "turns ordinary into extraordinary."

Thank you all for coming.