



Expanding Your Market



The hospitality industry prides itself on giving its customers a warm welcome and providing outstanding service in pursuit of high guest retention and consumer satisfaction. By extending that same level of customer service to guests who have disabilities, hotels and lodging establishments can build a clientele in a growing, diverse market that remains as yet nearly untapped. People with disabilities and older adults who benefit from accessible features are likely to become repeat customers for businesses that provide them with accurate information, informed assistance, and a friendly attitude.

Accessible Customer Service Practices for Hotel and Lodging Guests with Disabilities

The Market of Travelers Who Benefit from Accessibility

People with disabilities, in the United States and around the world, travel for both business and pleasure and regularly patronize hotels. Statistics indicate the enormous size of this prospective market.

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. (1) That is larger than the percentage of Hispanic Americans in the U.S. population (13.3%), the country's largest ethnic, racial, or cultural minority group. (2)

According to a 2005 study by the Open Doors Organization (ODO), a Chicago non-profit organization, more than 21 million adults with disabilities traveled at least once in the preceding two years. (3) 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 annual spending by travelers with disabilities equals \$13.6 billion. (4)

Statistics from the 2000 U.S. Census indicate that almost 42% of adults 65 and older have disabilities. (5) The Census Bureau projects that by 2030, 72 million Americans will be 65 and older. (6) And, currently more than 50% of the total U.S. discretionary income is controlled by those 50 years and older. (7)

The Deloitte Research study, "Wealth With Wisdom: Serving the Needs of Aging Consumers," points out that consumers over the age of 50 experience changes in vision, hearing, and mobility that affect how they interact with businesses and their products. Most accessible facility, product, and program features will accommodate the physical changes this market segment experiences. (8)



Customer Service Issues for People with Disabilities

Poor customer service can ruin the stay of a guest with disabilities, even if the hotel facility itself is fully accessible. Here are a few examples of ways hotels and lodging establishments can turn guests with disabilities into satisfied, repeat customers.



Reservations

Staff working in central reservations as well as in individual hotel reservations offices need to know and be able to accurately inform potential guests about the accessible features offered in each of their facilities. Understanding what constitutes an accessible feature and how each feature serves guests with disabilities will enable staff to provide essential information to customers. Correctly answering a reservation inquiry about a hotel's accessible features helps avoid an awkward or unsolvable situation when the guest with a disability cannot use the room that was reserved.

Once an accessible room is guaranteed to a prospective guest with a disability, an accessible room must be available to him or her upon arrival at the hotel. If an unexpected problem occurs that makes it impossible for the hotel to provide the accessible room promised, the hotel should make every reasonable effort to locate a comparable accessible room in the hotel or in another local establishment and cover cost differences, if they occur.

Communication

Hotel team members who have direct contact with guests should be prepared and ready to communicate with customers with disabilities. When telephone calls are received from a deaf person using a TTY or relay service, the call should be answered promptly and appropriately. When a guest with a disability arrives, hotel staff should talk to the customer with a disability rather than to her companion. Front-line employees must be informed and attentive to details related to guests with disabilities.



Maintaining Accessible Features for Customers

Attention to detail also plays a major role in maintaining a hotel's accessible features. Sidewalks blocked by large trash receptacles, lowered reception desk areas filled with decorative vases, routes to public restrooms blocked by supplies, and poorly placed, oversized furniture in accessible rooms all convey to the customer with a disability a lack of understanding about accessibility. Hospitality is not provided when a guest cannot get to the front door, register at the front desk, eat in the restaurant, or maneuver around his room.

Without training, housekeeping staff and bellmen can unwittingly compromise the best intentions to provide access. For example, if an employee places the television remote control atop a tall chest of drawers or leaves the adjustable shower head at the highest position, then a guest who uses a wheelchair cannot reach them. If the housekeeping staff adjusts the thermostat or opens the guest room curtains during a post-arrival room cleaning, a guest who is blind may be left in an uncomfortable and possibly embarrassing circumstance. With instruction and consistent service, employees can maintain accessible features and raise the level of a hotel's guest satisfaction rating.

Trends that Enhance or Hinder Accessibility

Trends in hotel decor and service can limit access: popular large furniture, such as armoires, may take up valuable maneuvering space in accessible rooms, and plush, pillow-top mattresses may make beds too high to transfer to from a wheelchair. A platform bed precludes the use of a personal lift in an accessible room. A hotel restaurant that creates ambience with low lighting can make travel to a table difficult for an older customer; while a restaurant menu with a crisp, high contrast contemporary design will make it easier to read for that same guest. It is essential to understand the positive and negative effects of trends on service to all customers, including customers with disabilities.

Good customer service practices that assist people with disabilities will bring repeat business from guests with disabilities, older travelers, and friends and families that accompany this large and growing market.

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