

Guide to COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES



Under the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*, it is against the law to discriminate against people based on a protected attribute (personal characteristic) including disability.

Preventing discrimination is not just required by law – it makes good business sense. Failing to provide accessible premises and services could mean some customers avoid your business or they make a complaint of discrimination to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. You could also put your business's reputation at risk because of poor customer reviews.

A fully accessible environment is one where all customers can easily access premises, facilities, goods and services. Effective communication is key to achieving this.

Some forms of disability can affect people's ability to communicate. You may need to make adjustments when communicating with people with disabilities, especially a disability that might affect muscle control or mobility.

Depending on the level of disability, a person's communication may involve more than simply hearing and speaking – it might involve a range of

ways to communicate such as using signs, Auslan interpreters or communication aids.

If you have difficulty communicating with a customer, do not make assumptions about their ability to understand – adjust the way you communicate to meet their needs.

While this guide on communication focuses on retail and hospitality industries, the principles may also assist other businesses.

Below are some general principles that can assist you or your staff:

- be helpful at every stage – from the moment your customer first enters your premises until they exit
- always have a pen and paper or small whiteboard on hand
- focus on the person and not the disability
- treat each person as an individual
- provide assistance and ask if the customer needs any help *(continued on next page)*



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- always accept if the customer declines your help
- take your time and do not rush the person
- ask questions if you need to clarify. Do not pretend to have understood
- offer alternative ways of delivering your goods

and services for customers with disabilities where there are barriers to equal access

- use communication aids to assist, such as large print menus, pen and paper or signs and symbols.



Be mindful that a person may have more than one disability (this includes a mental health disability, which is included in the definition of 'disability' under the Equal Opportunity Act) and so you need to use a tailored approach to suit each person's needs.¹

Train staff – managers should provide training for staff on how to communicate effectively with people with a range of disabilities.

Act naturally – Just relax and be yourself. There is no need to monitor your every word or action.

Greet a person with disabilities just as you would any other person. If they are unable to shake hands, simply address the person, nod or smile and use whatever approach is most natural.

Be aware of body language – Use an open, relaxed stance, respect personal space and make direct eye contact – this can help you communicate more effectively. It is respectful to place yourself at the eye level of a person using a wheelchair or mobility aid during a conversation.

Hear – listen actively and take the customer's concerns seriously. Focus on the message and not on the symptoms the person may have and try not to interrupt.

Empathise – show empathy and reassure the customer that you acknowledge their feelings because of their concerns. For example, depending on the situation, words you could use are, "I understand that when this keeps happening, it may be very frustrating for you..."

Lip reading – Always make sure the customer can see your lips clearly. Make sure there are no visual obstructions such as bright lights behind you (or dim lighting) that might make it difficult for your customer to read your lips. Remember that not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing can lip-read but when addressing them always speak slowly, clearly and face to face.

Treat people with respect – Be courteous and friendly. People with disabilities deserve a courteous response, no matter what their disability may be.

Be clear – Address the customer directly and listen and state your message clearly and calmly. Always use clear language without being patronising.

Sound – Use your normal tone and volume of voice, be alert to cues and be guided by your customer. If possible, reduce background noise.

¹ The term 'mental health disability' is used in this fact sheet because it falls within the definition of disability in the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*. The Commission acknowledges that people may not necessarily use or identify with this term and that a range of other terms are used in Australia and internationally. These include: mental illness, psychosocial disability and survivors of psychiatry.

Allow time – Be patient. Allow your customer to take their time when asking questions or when they tell you their preferences for goods or services. Don't feel the need to rush them or overload them with information. Let them know that you are there if they need any more information.

Interpreters and communication aids – If a customer has a sign language (Auslan) interpreter or a communication assistant with them always address your comments directly to the customer rather than the interpreter.

Be familiar with how to use electronic and non-electronic communication aids – An example of electronic communication aids include tablets, teletext or TTY (teletypewriter), or the National Relay Service if your customer asks you to make a phone call on their behalf. Visit www.relayservice.com.au.

The National Relay Service also offers training and other support to use the service.

Give assistance – if a customer asks you for help to go somewhere, ask which side of their body you should be on and offer your arm so they can hold just above your elbow.

Confirm understanding – Rephrase what the person has said to you, confirm with the person that your understanding is correct and provide a clear next step or agreed action.

More information on communicating with customers with disabilities

To find out more about your legal obligations, other agencies that work with and for people with disabilities, and how to improve communication accessibility, visit the Commission's Come In, We're Accessible web page at www.accessiblebusiness.com.au.

Scope Victoria

Scope Victoria offers a range of services to support people with disabilities, and to support businesses and services to be more inclusive. Scope provides an accessible written information service to create easy-to-read documents such as brochures, menus and other important information.

Scope offers a communication access accreditation process and will award the Communication Access Symbol (below) to businesses and services that meet the minimum standards for communication access. These standards contribute to great customer service and successful communication for everyone.



For more information, visit the website: scopevic.org.au or phone (03) 9843 3000.

Sane

If you need more information on communicating with customers with mental health disabilities, see details of the *SANE Guide to Customer Service* at www.sane.org, email info@sane.org or call (03) 9682 5933.

Communication Rights Australia

Communication Rights Australia is an advocacy and information service for people with little or no speech, and can also assist and advise businesses about communicating with customers with disabilities.

Visit www.caus.com.au or phone (03) 9555 8552.



Where can I get more advice and information?

To find out more about protected attributes, your legal obligations, other agencies that work with and for people with disability, and how to improve communication accessibility, visit www.accessiblebusiness.com.au

