

What disabled consumers choose to buy and why – Customer service



Who is this for?

'What disabled consumers choose to buy and why' is for everyone involved in improving the experience of disabled consumers whether online, by phone or in-person. The findings will be useful for customer experience managers, customer service personnel, facilities and property managers and also for D&I and HR professionals responsible for attracting and hiring customer-service staff.

How important is customer service to disabled consumers?

When we asked respondents about the factors they considered when deciding to engage with a business in the last two years, aspects of customer service were some of the most important were:

- How they would manage my account or needs
 - **40 per cent** for banking and insurance consumers
 - **44 per cent** for utilities consumers.
- Confidence in how customer services and support would work
 - **40 per cent** for banking and insurance consumers
 - **41 per cent** for utilities consumers.

Confidence in the staff's ability to meet needs was mentioned by high proportions of respondents in relation to the remaining sectors:

- Hospitality – **29 per cent**
- Days out and leisure – **29 per cent**
- Holiday accommodation – **27 per cent**
- Technology – **24 per cent**.

Customer service for retail consumers

In terms of shopping, reasons directly related to customer services or sales staff were the most common causes for abandoning a shop in person or online.

Reasons for abandoning an in-person purchase or leaving a shop without buying included:

- Not having customer or sales staff available to help (**54 per cent**)
- Staff not being able to give them the answer to queries (**36 per cent**)
- Having a negative experience with customer or sales staff (**34 per cent**).

Reasons for abandoning an online shop or leaving the shop without buying included:

- Having limited access to/unable to use customer services to help (**40 per cent**)
- Customer services not being able to give information needed about products (**30 per cent**).
- Having a negative experience with customer services online (**22 per cent**).

Respondents in the research talked about a range of responses they looked for from customer service or sales staff. When asked what would encourage them to engage with a business, one of the most common responses was that staff were disability awareness trained, knowledgeable about accessibility and accessible features, and showed a positive attitude. Unfortunately, many participants had had poor experiences.

“No consistency at all – often the baseline is no understanding... it’s about the person I am dealing with not the company per se”

Relevant and respectful

“Connect the dots to make sure the consumer experience and staff are connected. [It is the] basic awareness of different types of needs.”

Many participants expressed the need to ensure a quality response from staff who are trained, equipped and confident to talk about accessible features and design.

Disability awareness training was raised as a solution to avoid poor experiences a number of times in the focus groups and the online survey. It aims to help staff feel confident in approaching a customer with a disability and not to fear saying the ‘wrong thing’ and to also understand the type of questions and access needs customers may have.

This should be coupled with a good knowledge of the product or service itself and how it should apply to various access needs or personal preferences of customers.

There were many examples of how participants had been communicated with which had led to frustration:

“When they speak to my husband and not me when it is me that asked the question, particularly when I have gone to complain... they pretend they can’t understand me.”

“[When they] give change to the carer – I gave them the money.”

“[The] ‘Does he take sugar syndrome’. People see a wheelchair and they assume that the person does not function on any level... They need to know in training that they speak to the person and not the carer unless told otherwise.”

“They don’t always understand what wheelchair access is – they have a ramp but it has a lip.”

“Actually think about the answers. Not saying things like ‘we are accessible’ but we have a small step that a lot of wheelchair users manage.”

In terms of softer skills, disability awareness training would ideally impact positively on confidence and problem solving.

One participant talked about the skillset that works:

“[Those] genuinely keen to get a problem solved – they have enthusiasm and determination to do that, guts to look up information, bug senior managers or go to Google to help the customer. [The] other is the type of person who can be trained and then empowered to use business processes.”

It was stressed however that training has to be backed up and refreshed otherwise it's forgotten. Also, training should be supported by the company ethos for disability inclusion which allows staff to take the extra time to do things in a different way for customers should they request or need it.

A proactive attitude

Proactive questioning from staff, asking what the customer needs (not what their disability is) and a demonstration that they are listening to requests and details of access needs was mentioned as a driver that would encourage engagement with business:

“Ask about my needs not what ‘my disability is.’ Impairments vary from one person to the other, knowing what my medical condition is gives them very little information on what I need.”

“Be sympathetic to the needs I require. Like, will it be suitable taking my disabilities into account?”

A proactive attitude was greatly appreciated when it was experienced. Participants mentioned a number of incidents where staff had prompted a solution to an initial pre-purchase enquiry which had pre-empted a challenging situation.

Customer accounts

Anticipating customer needs

One respondent gave an example of how customer support staff's ability to anticipate their needs significantly improved their experience.

In a cricket ground, a steward approached and provided a blind spectator with a headset without being asked which meant they did not have to look for, and queue for, the services.

“It's little things like that can make a really big difference. They show that the business is thinking about the customer journey of everybody... I am more likely to want to continue that relationship in the future.”

Re-thinking the experience

One respondent recalled how the seating allocations in a theatre detract from the experience. She likes to get memorabilia from trips to the theatre, but due to where the accessible seating is situated, she has to find her seats before the other theatre-goers.

This does not give time to find the stands and shop for it in the interval and it is too busy after the show. She has to resort to asking her carer to relay back to her what is there to buy, and this spoils the experience. Buying drinks is also a problem given that she has to get back to her seating before everyone else.

The power of good customer service

One respondent regularly goes to the football with her partner. She uses a wheelchair, and he has sight loss and uses a cane.

She talked about the difference that good customer service can make and how this can over-ride other negative barriers in the physical environment. They have travelled to over 60 football grounds and in most instances have been very happy with the experience.

“[It is] not necessarily the money and physical facilities that make an experience, it is the people there and how they respond.”

Pragmatic solutions to find answers

This respondent was looking for hair straightener. She told us that, in a sighted world, no one looks at whether the straighteners make a 'bleep' when heated up. In all the specifications no one was making reference to it. She didn't want to buy a set of straighteners without knowing that.

In the end, a pragmatic member of staff helped find the answer:

"I called [the department store] and explained to staff on the shop floor the issue. They switched one on in store and they let me know the answer by the end of the day – I did find that to be very refreshing. I will quite happily discuss my needs – at the end of the day I need to know 150 per cent."

Being responsive to information shared

Participants needed to know that if they shared their preferences and access needs, they would be taken seriously and acted upon. Many disabled customers stated that they didn't expect all sales staff to have all the answers, but they did expect a resolution to questions, even it meant drawing in advice via 'experts' in the business.

In the case of adjustments, all staff should understand the policies available and how to escalate where relevant for some queries or requests.

"I don't think there is always a responsibility on staff to have a detailed awareness, but they need time and capacity – we can explain to them what they need, and they can use their own knowledge of products and the store and talk to us."

"[It's] not necessarily the money and physical facilities that make an experience – it is the people there and how they respond."

Linked to responsiveness to customers is the useful feedback that the customer services and sales staff can, in turn, provide to the business to feed into its disability inclusion strategy. It was noted that feedback direct to customer services teams and the insights derived from these are often overlooked by businesses. It was thought that capturing data from enquiry stages would inform businesses how to better market and reduce friction for new customers.

"...Hear, listen closely and understand."

The business response: Awareness raising amongst customer services or sales staff

All interviews with business organisations raised the importance of customer services or sales staff and the role they play in developing customer relations.

A proactive attitude, being prepared to listen, learn and adapt, was seen as being as important as raising levels of awareness and understanding. It was felt that sometimes staff became worried that, with a disabled customer, they may say or do the wrong thing.

Organisations tackled this by targeted training, which could include any of the following:

- **General awareness raising** – Increasing the understanding of what disabilities are and the barriers that customers might experience in their environment, be it in store, in branch, in office or in leisure or hospitality venues.
- **Learning from experiences** – Videos and accounts from customers with disabilities were useful in highlighting how customer service or barriers impacts on experiences or interactions in terms of how it can make a disabled customer 'feel'.
- **Being proactive** – Identifying what barriers might be experienced for different types of access needs and anticipating demands, but never making assumptions.
- **Having hints and tips** – Real scenarios and responses are useful. Staff want to know when they are doing something well.

Some organisations had specialised customer services or sales teams in place that were trained specifically for queries relating to accessibility. These were available for customers with disabilities either on the phone, email or face-to-face.

It was felt this worked well and been borne out in customer feedback, particularly if a product or service is technical or complex, high value or a service needs a great deal of planning and research, such as a holiday or day out.

About Business Disability Forum

Business Disability Forum is the leading business membership organisation in disability inclusion. We are trusted partners, working with business, Government and disabled people to improve the life experiences of disabled employees and consumers, by removing barriers to inclusion.

Find out more about the benefits of joining us at businessdisabilityforum.org.uk/membership

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