



# Welcoming disabled customers

A guide to providing great  
customer service.



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# Foreword

# Business Disability Forum

**Disabled people want to access the same products, facilities and services, as everyone else and have a right to do so under the law. Despite this, some businesses are - inadvertently - excluding disabled people.**

This prevents not just disabled people but also their friends and family from enjoying the services of these businesses and spending their money with them.

The spending power of disabled people in the UK is around £249 billion per year\* and rising. This means that quite apart from being the right thing to do as an ethical retailer, it makes good business sense to provide services, premises and websites that are both accessible and usable for the widest possible group of customers.

Businesses that don't cater for disabled people risk losing a significant customer base; it is estimated that 1 in 5 of your customers and clients will have a disability and many will have a condition which is not immediately visible. And, when surveyed, 72 per cent of disabled people said that were more likely to visit somewhere new if they were welcomed by staff or the venue appeared to care about access.\*

\*Source: Euan's Guide



**Diane Lightfoot,**  
Chief Executive, Business  
Disability Forum

At Business Disability Forum we know that too often it comes down to a lack of confidence; fear of doing or saying “the wrong thing” can mean that customer facing staff – at all levels – do nothing.

But it doesn't have to be difficult. A good approach to welcoming disabled customers comes down to one question for every business to ask: 'What is great customer service?'

I very much hope that this practical guide will equip customer facing staff with the confidence to not only serve but truly welcome disabled customers – and provide the best consumer experience for everyone.

**Diane Lightfoot,**  
CEO, Business Disability Forum

**The spending power of disabled people in the UK is around £249 billion per year\* and rising.**

**\*Source: Euan's Guide**



# About this guide

This guide is for:

- Customer and client facing colleagues.
- Customer service teams.
- Colleagues with responsibility for developing and delivering new products and services.
- Colleagues with responsibility for accessibility and inclusion.
- Colleagues with responsibility for training and development.

**The spending power of disabled people in the UK is around £249 billion per year [i] and set to increase as the number of people living with a disability grows. Therefore, providing an inclusive and welcoming service for disabled customers and clients is a must for every business.**


Disabled people want to access the same products, facilities, and services, as everyone else, and have a right to do so under the law.

In this guide, we will look at the role that you can play in making sure this happens.

This guide considers the needs and preferences of customers and clients with different disabilities and how you can meet them through the customer service you deliver.

Often you may not know if a customer has a disability or the specific disability they have. Therefore, whilst we hope this guide will help you to better recognise and understand the particular needs of people with different disabilities, it is important to remember that you should never make assumptions about the absence or existence of disability. Offering support to all customers, will ensure you provide good customer service to everyone.



A man with a beard and a blue lanyard is speaking to a group of people. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt and has a blue lanyard around his neck. He is gesturing with his hands as he speaks. The background is blurred, showing other people at what appears to be a social event.

**Golden rule: Be proactive. Ask a customer if they need assistance. Just the simple question “Can I help with anything?” can encourage the customer to tell you what they need. Don’t be embarrassed about saying or doing the wrong thing.**



## Using the guide

Each section of this guide is clearly marked and broken down by type of impairment or condition, so you can find the information you need quickly and easily, and without having to read the whole guide.



**'Quick tips' highlight the key points covered in each section. 'Quick tips' are also useful when you are in a rush or need a quick reminder. Below the 'Quick tips' are useful facts about the particular disability and then wider information to help you deliver the best customer service possible.**



**You will also find multiple choice questions throughout the guide to help you recap what you have learnt. You can go through the questions on your own or discuss them in a group training setting. Answers are at the end of the guide.**

If you would like to know more about the law and how it relates to disabled customers, please contact Business Disability Forum's Advice Service.

Contact details can be found in the further information section at the back of this guide. Here you will also find signposting to other places you can go for advice on the topics covered in this document.

## Always ask

We have consulted widely (see Acknowledgements) to ensure that this latest version of Welcoming Disabled Customers is accurate and reflects the needs of disabled customers and businesses. However, it is important to remember that disabled people are individuals. The best way to ensure that you are offering the individual a personal service, is to ask the customer what they need or are finding difficult.



# Good customer service

## Quick tips:

- **Never assume the existence or absence of a disability.**
- **Always ask the customer how you can best assist them.**
- **Remember, to meet the customer's needs you may need to do things differently, but the standard of service you provide should be the same.**
- **Be aware of accessible facilities and equipment available, such as ramps and hearing loops.**
- **Be prepared to offer and spend extra time with someone who might need it.**

**Receiving good customer service is important to everyone, but it can be particularly important to disabled customers and clients who may have very specific needs and be concerned about how these will be met by your organisation.**

When surveyed about physical access, 72 per cent of disabled people said that were more likely to visit somewhere new if they were welcomed by staff or the venue appeared to care about accessibility [iii].

## **Knowing your customer**

- It is likely that more than one in five of your customers and clients will have a disability [iii] and many will have a condition which is not immediately visible.
- A customer may have a disability but may never mention it to you or describe themselves as being “disabled”.
- Disabled customers should be treated with the same courtesy and respect as anyone else.
- Listen to the customer and respect their choices, as you would any other customer.

## **Using your service**

- Under the law, you must ensure that disabled customers can access your service in the same way, or as close as possible to the same way, as customers without a disability.
- When this is not possible, you must offer a reasonable alternative. This may mean doing things differently and providing the service in a different way. However, the level of service should not change.
- Think flexibly about the way you serve disabled customers in order to meet their needs.

- Make sure signage is clear and direct.
- Grant access to assistance and therapy dogs. Assistance and therapy dogs provide vital support to a wide range of disabled people and people with long-term conditions.
- Know about the accessible facilities that are available in your building, such as lifts, toilets, ramps and hearing loops. Regularly check that these facilities are working. If they are not, make sure you inform disabled customers and offer alternatives. You can't help things breaking down, but you can ensure that you have contingency measures for when they do.
- Be aware of emergency evacuation procedures and how they affect people with disabilities. Be ready to explain procedures to people if needed.
- Some disabled customers may not feel confident asking for help. Always be on the lookout for people who may need extra assistance and offer help regardless of whether or not you think the person has a disability.
- Some people may need extra time paying for goods or completing a form. Always be patient and never rush the customer, even if other customers are waiting.
- Have local public transport information available including numbers of accessible taxis.

## **Returning customers**

- Disabled customers are more likely to return if they receive good customer service. Providing such service gives out a positive message to everyone about how much you value all your customers.



# Communicating effectively

## Quick tips:

- ➔ **Ask the customer how you can best meet their needs.**
- ➔ **Speak in a positive and friendly tone.**
- ➔ **Be patient and listen attentively.**
- ➔ **Look at the customer when you are speaking to them.**

**We all have preferred ways that we like to communicate. For some people having a disability may affect the way that they communicate and may mean they have particular communication needs. Some communication needs may be obvious, others less so, and it may take some time before you become aware of them.**

## **Do**

- Ask someone how you can best meet their needs. Never assume.
- Use positive body language (eg. unfolded arms, facing people directly).
- Smile. This will help to put people at ease and make customers more likely to ask for help if they need it.
- Speak in a positive and friendly tone.
- Adapt your communication to meet the person's needs.
- Address a disabled person in the same way as you would address other customers or clients.
- Look at the person when you are speaking to them, so they can see your face. Position yourself at eye level, if possible. This may mean coming around to the front of a counter.
- Be patient and listen attentively.

## Don't

- Address your questions to the interpreter, Personal Assistant, or support worker but to the person themselves.
- Use jargon.
- Use language which could cause offence.
- Interrupt or finish someone's sentence.
- Ask personal questions about the person's disability. The person may not wish to share this information with you or recognise themselves as having a disability.
- Be concerned if the person doesn't want to look at you or won't make eye contact.

## Recording communication preferences

If a customer provides you with information about communication preferences, ask if you can make a note of these so that you are better able to meet their needs in the future. Note that as this is personal data, it is important to make sure you are recording this information in the correct way. Check policies within your organisation or check the latest guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

See the Further information section of this guide.



## Words or phrases to avoid

Think about the language you are using. Some words or phrases can reinforce stereotypes and cause offence.

- Negative terms such as 'victim', 'cripple', 'deformed', or 'handicap'.
- Language which disempowers disabled people and implies vulnerability, frailty or dependency.
- Collective nouns such as 'the disabled' or 'the blind'. They emphasise the impairment and suggest that people are part of a uniform group, rather than individuals with their own needs and preferences.
- Words which suggest that someone is 'confined' by a wheelchair or 'bound' by another mobility or assistive aid.

## Words or phrases to use

- Use 'disabled person', or 'person with a disability' or 'someone with a condition'.
- Use 'has' rather than 'is' when speaking about someone else's condition or impairment. So 'Steve has dyslexia'.
- Use 'disabled people' or 'people who have sight loss' (depending on impairment or condition), when speaking about more than one person.
- Wheelchairs enhance independence, so just say 'wheelchair user'.



# Welcoming disabled customers

## Customers who are blind or have sight loss

### Quick tips:

- ➔ **Speak to a customer who is blind or has sight loss when you approach them. Introduce yourself and ask if they would like assistance.**
- ➔ **Never just take a person's arm. Offer the person your elbow but note that some people may prefer verbal guidance instead.**
- ➔ **Offer to bring items to the customer.**
- ➔ **Make sure customer spaces are free of trip hazards and well-lit.**
- ➔ **Accept chip and signature cards for payment. The card will automatically ask for a signature instead of a PIN to authorise payment and will print out a payment slip.**

**Content has been removed  
for sample purposes. Pages  
19 to 78 are available in the  
full booklet.**

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