

What disabled consumers choose to buy and why – Discussing disability and access needs



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.

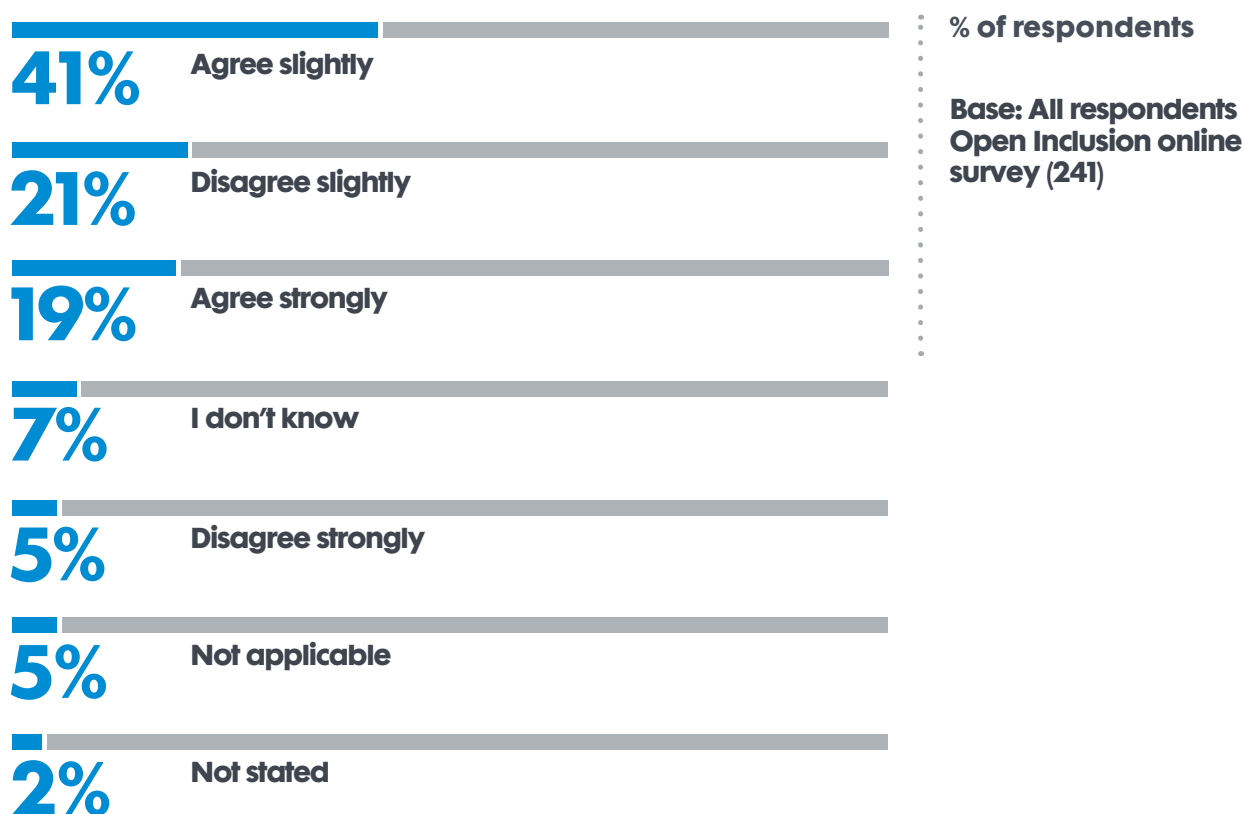
Current experiences of discussing disability and access needs

Disabled customers are empowered when they have the opportunity to express their preferences and discuss their access needs openly. This is clearly important to consumers with disabilities. However, our research suggests that dialogue with businesses at the decision-making stage is often limited.

Demonstrating needs and asking for adjustments

In the online survey, 60 per cent felt able to request adjustments or identify their preferences and needs when they tried to buy a product or service (19 per cent strongly agreed and 41 per cent agreed slightly). Over a quarter disagreed – 21 per cent disagreed slightly and five per cent disagreed strongly.

Chart 3: I feel I am able to request adjustments or identify my preferences and needs when I try to buy a product or service



Opening a dialogue about personal needs and preferences when talking to customer services or salespeople is more of an issue for people with disabilities than to those without.

In the Ipsos Mori survey, all respondents were asked:

'On balance, I am confident explaining my personal needs when talking to a salesperson about a purchase I want to make'.

Individuals with disabilities were significantly less likely than those without a disability to 'agree strongly' that this was the case (**50 per cent compared to 59 per cent**) and agree to any extent (**77 per cent compared to 85 per cent**).

Chart 4: On balance, I am confident explaining my personal needs when talking to a salesperson about a purchase I want to make



Key



% of respondents

Base: Ipsos Mori Omnibus Survey 2021 (All respondents 1001) Don't know and not applicable not included in the chart.

Opening communication with a business about needs and wants at the decision-making stage was often tied to:

- How **comfortable** the individual feels about talking about their access needs
- How **confident** disabled consumers feel that a business is willing to respond and act.

The next few sections explore these in more detail.

Levels of comfort discussing access needs

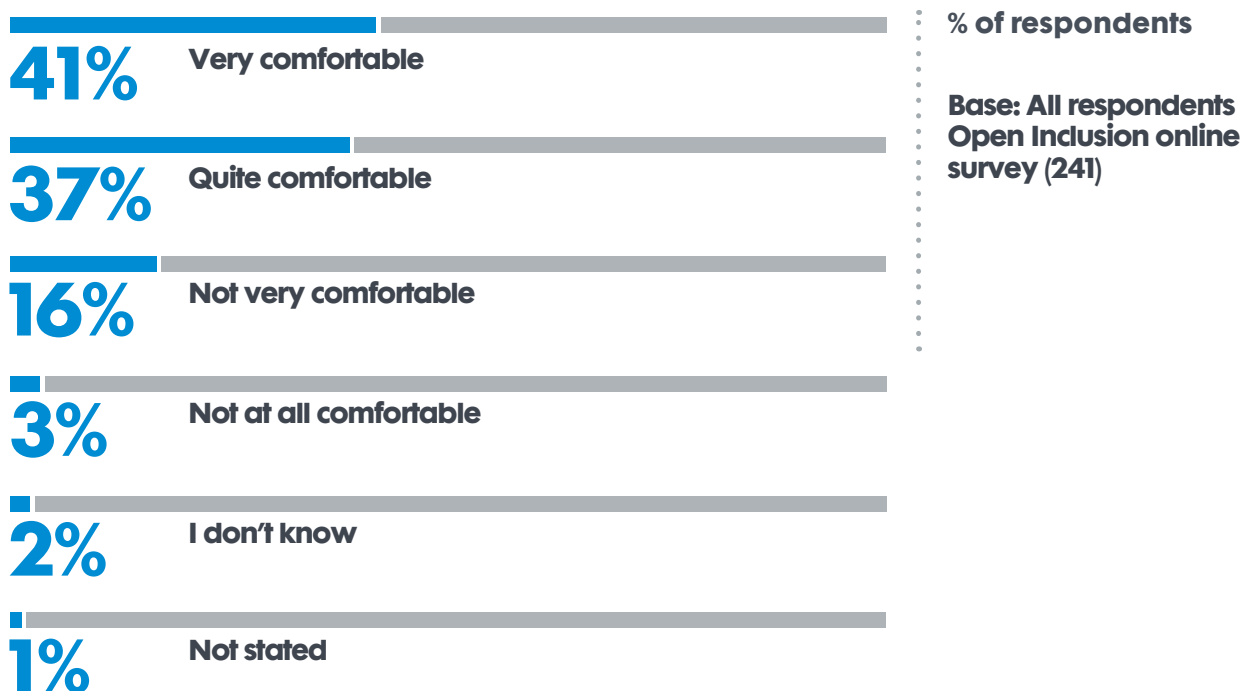
“I just wished they would be prepared to talk to me and listen to what we say.”

Whilst just over two fifths of respondents (**41 per cent**) in the online survey felt very comfortable discussing their preferences and needs with business at the decision-making stages, 37 per cent only felt quite comfortable and almost a fifth (**19 per cent**) were not very or not at all comfortable.

A large proportion of disabled consumers (**78 per cent**) are either very or quite comfortable discussing their needs with businesses before they purchase. Therefore, when it comes to these consumers, the onus is on businesses to engage with these consumers so that they have the opportunity to discuss their access needs.

There is also a significant minority (**19 per cent**) who do not feel comfortable discussing their access needs. Businesses have more work to do to make them feel more comfortable discuss their access needs with them.

Chart 5: How comfortable are you about discussing your preferences or needs relating to your disability, access requirements or older age with businesses you are engaging with before buying a product or service?



The level of comfort in discussing access needs is correlated with the regularity with which consumers share their needs with brands.

- **90 per cent** of those who 'very often' discussed their preferences and needs before purchase were either very or quite comfortable doing so
- At the other end of the scale, **55 per cent** of those who never discussed their preferences and needs before purchase were either very or quite comfortable doing so

Businesses need to understand that individuals will vary enormously in terms of their degree of comfort discussing access needs and not make assumptions. The following quotations highlight this wide spectrum.

"I feel it is important that when I'm purchasing a product or service, the business has a clear policy about accessibility and meeting the needs of its disabled customers. I will typically contact a business ahead of time to discuss my access requirements including any assistance I may need while engaging with their product or service. This could be including such things as obtaining accessible manuals for appliances, to obtaining assistance at venues such as guiding assistance where possible and practicable."

"I think the issue is me and my anxiety about making any kind of fuss."

"Ask questions about my needs as not everyone is comfortable coming forward."

The voice of business: What consumer-facing businesses said about encouraging customers to discuss their access needs

Create opportunities for consumers to ask questions

Organisations talked about the importance of creating an environment where customers could feel comfortable explaining their access needs. It was recognised that it is empowering to give disabled customers the space, and time, to ask about a product or service and also enable them to ask for help or adjustments. It was also pointed out that the conversation should be directed to 'needs' rather than 'disabilities.'

Businesses recognised that tackling consumers' perception that staff are too busy or not prepared to help needs lots of repeated positive messaging. For businesses where the consumer comes into store, site, branch or venue this could be achieved via posters or badges that colleagues wear or very visible signposting at all customer touchpoints saying 'we are here to help'. Organisations also talked about 'use cases' in other customer communications such as websites, which can include videos about how customer services have helped customers or how products or services can work for those with access needs.

Training customer-facing staff

Staff training was identified as being key for longer term strategies. While understanding that disability was important, attitude and confidence dealing with disabled customers needed to be integrated into all customer service training.

The objective of the training was to ensure staff were proactive in approaching customers and ready with a response if asked for help. This is easier in some retail environments than others, depending on the products and services on sale. One retailer talked about approaching all customers to ask how they needed assistance and assumptions never being made – giving the customer control. Another retailer talked about customer consultations about their products and how, as this is part of the experience, conversations about access needs were less of a barrier and evolved more naturally.

Welcoming new consumers – An opportunity for conversation

Outside of retail environments, onboarding when opening new accounts was viewed as critical for conversations. Among other things, onboarding often asks about preferred methods of communication and records these preferences across all business touchpoints. Businesses that let the customers know what will be done with the data and how they can update it gave a greater sense of control back to the customer.

Recruiting disabled staff

Some participants talked about the recruitment of disabled colleagues to sales and customer service teams and how representation among staff can impact how comfortable customers with disabilities feel about what the business represents.

Contact options

Finally, alternative contact options can create a 'bridge' between the customer and the business which can often be the precursor to a better-quality conversation and dialogue at the pre-purchase stage.

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.

Contact us

**Business Disability Forum
Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London
SE1 2NY**

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404

Email: enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Web: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

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