
Disability-smart customer complaint handling



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**Building
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We would like to thank our Partners and Members who as part of our external steering group provided us with such valuable advice during the writing of this guide.

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Disability-smart customer complaint handling

There can be many reasons why a customer is dissatisfied with the service they are getting, but there might be one you haven't thought about. The customer might have a disability that you can't see but which means that they cannot use your service in the same way as your other customers.

Customers with non-visible disabilities

Not all disabled people have a disability that you can see at once or indeed see at all. Some of your customers will have non-visible disabilities and so you won't know immediately that they might need you to do something differently for them. A customer, for example might:

- not be able to see or hear well and they won't always tell you this;
- struggle if too much is happening at once e.g. trying to talk to someone while music is playing or loudspeakers are making announcements or have problems queuing because they have autism or Asperger's;
- be forgetful or easily confused because they have dementia or a cognitive impairment;
- be in pain which can make people irritable or unable to stand for long in a queue or walk long distances;
- speak or behave in an unexpected way because they have a learning disability;
- be anxious, angry or confused because they have mental health problems;
- have a non-visible physical impairment such as heart or breathing problems or a prosthetic limb which means they cannot walk or stand for long periods; or
- have difficulty with words or numbers or orientation because they have dyslexia or dyspraxia.

The good news is that you don't need worry about what disability the customer might have. All you need to do is to bear in mind that a customer who is unhappy or dissatisfied might be disabled and so might need extra help and support from you or for you to do something differently for them because of their disability. As a general rule, if you can do what the customer asks easily then just do it. This is called making a "reasonable adjustment". Respond to their behaviour and what they are saying to you and

not to what you think their disability might be. Don't make assumptions – listen to the customer and try to provide them with the best possible customer service.

Remember though that not every disabled customer with a visible or non-visible disability will be unhappy or dissatisfied. Likewise, not every dissatisfied or unhappy customer will be disabled. The advice in this guide will help you to serve every unhappy or dissatisfied customer, whether disabled or not.

The good news is that you don't need worry about what disability the customer might have.

The ABC Approach

There are three signs that can lead you to think that a customer might need you to do something differently for them. These signs are the customer's:

Appearance

Behaviour

Communication

We expect people to look and behave in largely similar ways. In the following circumstances you might notice that a customer's appearance, behaviour or communication is unusual, but you probably won't need to do anything differently for them. Simply accept that everyone is different and everyone deserves to be treated with respect. Try not to make assumptions about them because of the way they look, behave or communicate.

Appearance

The customer:

- is dressed unusually for their environment e.g. wearing slippers, a "costume" or unusual accessories;
- isn't as well groomed or dressed like most of your other customers; or
- has poor personal hygiene or is unkempt.

Behaviour

The customer:

- isn't following the usual procedures or order for using your service or premises e.g. moving round an exhibition in the opposite direction to most people;
- is spending a long time on your premises without actively browsing, buying anything or using your service;

- won't make eye contact or alternatively appears to be looking intently or staring at you; or
- has unusual body language e.g. stands closer than normal or faces away from you.

Communication

The customer:

- makes an unusual comment e.g. "You're very pretty" or "I like tomato soup"; or
- is muttering or appears to be talking to themselves.

When might you need to intervene?

You may need to act, however, if the customer's appearance or behaviour is likely to place them, other people or you at risk. For example, in situations where clothing might get caught in machinery, footwear is

likely to cause injury or moving against the flow of people is causing an obstruction or trip hazard.

Before approaching a customer ask yourself why you are doing so. What is the risk to others or your business and is it a real risk? If the only reason you have decided to approach them is because they are different then you don't need to do anything at all. If what they say is unusual but unthreatening in the circumstances e.g. in a busy and impersonal environment, just accept it with a smile. Customers come in all shapes and sizes and your business should welcome them all.

Sometimes other customers may complain to you about the unusual appearance or behaviour of another customer. This may happen if they feel threatened or uncomfortable e.g. if another customer has poor personal hygiene or is talking to themselves.

- Do not automatically act on the complaint and ask the customer being complained about to leave. This could be discrimination if that customer has a disability.
- Ask the customer who is complaining what they would like you to do. If they say they want you to remove the other customer explain that you cannot do this as they are not causing any harm.
- Bring the conversation back to the customer who is complaining and ask what else you can do for them. Avoid discussing the other customer.
- If you decide that the customers need to be moved apart because one is complaining about the other, then ensure that you do not treat the customer who has not complained and who may be disabled unfairly. It may be tempting to appease the customer who is complaining by serving them first or moving them to a better seat but remember, the other customer hasn't done anything wrong. Be as fair as you can and serve people in the order they arrive or as you would normally.
- If you do decide to serve one customer more favourably then serve the disabled customer first or upgrade them - but be prepared to explain to them why you are doing this. The reason cannot be just because they are disabled or because someone else has complained about them.

Scenario

Gill notices Ellen the moment she comes in. Ellen appears to be wearing pyjamas under a scarlet cape and her feet are bare in what might be flimsy slippers despite the wintry conditions outside. Ellen doesn't seem to want anything in particular. She looks at a couple of things and appears to be talking to herself and then drifts out again. It is Gill's job to notice anyone who looks out of place or who might be a threat, but she decides that Ellen is not likely to cause harm to herself or anyone else and so can be left alone.

In some cases you may believe that a customer is harmless but they are getting in the way of your team doing their job or other customers are feeling threatened by their behaviour. In these instances you will need to approach the customer. Ask the customer with a smile what you can do for them today. If they don't seem to want anything specific from you, tell them that you and your staff are very busy today. Then lead the customer away from the busy area to somewhere quieter where they can remain if they wish.

Remember, you can ask a disabled customer to move away if they don't want or need anything from you. You are asking them to step aside not because you don't want to serve a disabled customer, but because you and your colleagues need to get on with your job of serving other customers.

If other customers complain to you about a customer who is trying to talk to them or "pestering" them again, approach the customer, engage them in conversation and ask what you can do for them today. Tell them in a simple and straightforward way that you know they don't mean any harm, but other customers don't like it when they do whatever it is that they are doing. Try to be as precise as possible and use language that is easy to understand.

A customer with a learning disability might not realise that their behaviour could be misinterpreted by other people as threatening. They may also have not realised that this isn't the place to come for a chat when they feel the need for company.

Remember, you can ask a disabled customer to move away if they don't want or need anything from you.

Scenario

As it is Thursday, Alice isn't surprised to see Rob. She knows that his sister drops him in town on Thursdays while she does the shopping because Rob has told Alice this on previous occasions.

Alice watches as Rob chats to one of the assistants until she tells him that she really has to stop talking to him as she has to get on with her work. Rob then approaches another customer and starts to talk to her. Alice overhears him tell the customer that her earrings are very pretty. The customer looks at Rob in some alarm and moves away from him. Alice decides she needs to talk to Rob. First she asks him how he and his sister are, and listens to his answers. Then she explains that unless he has something he needs from the assistants he shouldn't really approach them. Alice explains to Rob that the assistants have work to get on with and can't spend time just chatting. She also tells Rob that the other customers are usually very busy too and so don't have time to chat either.

Alice suggests that Rob goes to the café next door for a cup of tea or to the library if he has some time to kill while waiting for his sister so he can see some different places.

When to approach a customer: spotting the signs

Learn to spot the signs of when a customer is distressed and needs to be approached. If a customer is behaving in any of the following ways, you may need to approach them and ask them how you can help:

- pacing;
- wringing their hands;
- sweating or red faced;
- rocking;
- looking agitated or around in a confused manner;
- making incoherent noises;
- slumped or seated where they shouldn't be e.g. on the floor; or
- crying or in obvious distress.

The customer might be physically unwell in which case you may need to call upon a first aider and an ambulance.

What to do for distressed customers

Walk towards the customer slowly from the front or side if possible to allow them to notice your approach, but don't force eye contact or touch them without permission. Remember to introduce yourself and tell them who you are and why you have come over to them, which is to ask if they need any help.

Note – someone who a visual impairment may not be able to see that you are wearing a name badge or even that you are in uniform. Some people with autism, Asperger's or a learning disability can be distressed by security procedures and uniforms.

Some people are distressed or alarmed by people in uniforms and stringent security such as scanners. Remember that someone who looks nervous or refuses to make eye contact will not necessarily have something to hide. They might have a disability. You may not be able to remove the need for them to go through security but there are things you can do to help if someone becomes very distressed by the security process.

Remove your headgear and official badges if you can. Always take off sunglasses. Speak quietly and calmly and explain using simple language why the person needs to go through the security scanner, what they need to do and what will happen next. If you believe that you need to conduct a further search e.g. a body scan, again explain to the person what you are going to do and why using simple language.

Ask other members of staff and any concerned members of the public to step back so the person doesn't feel crowded or cornered. Anyone accompanying the customer should stay.

Note – this will help customers who have autism or Asperger's, a learning disability or a mental health problem like post traumatic stress disorder. People who are confused because they have a cognitive impairment like dementia or Alzheimer's will also appreciate not being crowded.

If you are outside or in bad weather, try moving the customer to a warmer environment. People respond better when they are not cold. Ask permission before touching them by saying "Would you like to take my arm and we can go over there where it is warmer?"

Note – someone with a visual impairment may need to take someone's arm and be escorted

Try to take them somewhere less public and away from loud noise such as traffic, other people or children talking loudly, loudspeakers making announcements or music.

Note – this will help customers who have autism or Asperger's who may find it difficult to concentrate if too much is going on at once. People with mental health problems, dementia or Alzheimer's may also appreciate being somewhere quieter as will people who are hard of hearing.

Provide a seat if you can and take one yourself so that you are both more comfortable.

Note – people who are in pain because of an illness or disability or who have a prosthetic lower limb are often more comfortable sitting and may need to do so until the pain subsides.

Speak to them in a clear and calm voice. Avoid any sudden movements and ask if they are alright and how you can help them.

Removing external stressors such as noise or bad weather might allow the customer to recover enough to tell you what they need, or be taken home by someone who is accompanying them.

If the customer is unable to speak to you and remains very distraught, you may need to call the emergency services for help. Only do this if you think you cannot help the customer and it doesn't seem safe to allow them to leave.

What to do for angry customers

You may become aware through a customer's body language that they are angry before they even speak to you. They may be pacing, muttering or be red faced. Most angry customers will, however, express their anger verbally.

If you are called upon to deal with an angry customer, first take stock of how you are feeling. Everyone has good and bad days but if you are going to resolve the customer's problem you will need to put how you feel to one side. Ask yourself how you are feeling, acknowledge it to yourself and then make a conscious decision to put it to one side for the time being.

Take a deep breath and count to ten before acting. It's an old trick but it works. This gives you time to breathe, acknowledge your own feelings and to talk to the customer calmly.

Stay calm. Try to focus on the customer's feelings and to remain unemotional yourself. Try not to take what they are saying personally.

Ask other members of staff to step back. It is natural for your colleagues to want to try to protect you if they think that the angry customer might be a threat. However you will be better able to deal with the customer's anger if you don't crowd them. Tell colleagues that you would like them to be there in the background so you can call them if you need help but that they should step back for now.

Take a deep breath and count to ten before acting. It's an old trick but it works.

Note – this will help customers who have autism or Asperger's or a mental health problem like post traumatic stress disorder. People who are confused because they have a cognitive impairment like dementia or Alzheimer's will also appreciate not being crowded. People with hearing impairments who lip read need to look at one person at a time to understand what is being said.

If there are two or more people arguing, split them up. If it is a member of staff who is being shouted at or arguing with the customer, ask them to step away from the customer so you can take over. If customers are arguing with each other,

ask a colleague to talk to one customer while you speak to the other. Get the customers talking to you rather than to each other.

Make sure that you don't literally corner the customer. Allow them to step into an open space where their back isn't against a wall and do the same yourself so you aren't cornered.

If possible move to a more comfortable place. This is somewhere that is away from other members of the public and noise such as music or loudspeakers making announcements. Try to go indoors or to a sheltered place if you are exposed to the weather. Reducing the need to shout to be heard will help to calm things down.

Note – this will help customers who have autism or Asperger's who may find it difficult to concentrate if too much is going on at once. People with mental health problems, dementia or Alzheimer's may also appreciate being somewhere quieter as will people who are hard of hearing.

If possible, ask the customer to take a seat and do the same. Speak clearly and calmly. Don't shout as keeping your voice low and sitting lower down can also lower people's emotions. Speak and move slowly and introduce yourself to the customer telling them who you are and what you do. It all helps to relieve tension.

Keep your body language neutral. Don't clench your fists or put your hands on your hips or lean over the person. Try not to make any sudden movements. You should be trying to make your body

language non-threatening. Remember to smile. It is harder to be angry with someone who is smiling pleasantly at you.

Listen actively to what the customer is saying. Don't rely on what other members of staff may have told you and try not to make assumptions based on how the customer looks or speaks. Listen to their complaint. Let the person let off steam without interrupting. Then repeat the complaint back to them ensure that you have understood the problem and to let the customer know that you are listening. Only once you have heard and understood the complaint should you move on to finding a solution.

Note – a customer with a disability might not display the same body language as non-disabled people. Someone with a hearing impairment may, for example, seem to be staring at your face. This is because they are trying to

read your lips. Someone with a visual impairment, autism or Asperger's might not make eye contact with you at all. Some people may seem to stand too close and invade your body space. Try not to make assumptions about the customer because of their body language.

If the customer has a good point and they have been served badly, acknowledge this. This will help to lower the tension levels. Say "That doesn't sound very good at all" or empathise by saying "That must have been annoying". Try not to use the word "I" as in "I would have found that annoying too" as this makes it about you rather than the customer. Then tell the customer what you intend to do to put things right for them. Don't ever, however, promise something that you can't deliver. If you raise expectations only to let the person down they will be even angrier later.

If you don't know whether you can do something for a customer, say so. You should then say you will find out what you can do, and tell them when you can let them know.

If a customer refuses to stop shouting at you or becomes abusive, then you may have to step away from them. Continue to speak quietly – try not to give into the temptation to shout back. Tell them that you cannot help them if they if they continue to shout and that you will not listen to abuse. If the customer continues to shout and/or swear, warn them that you are going to have to ask them to leave and if they still do not stop, call upon your security staff or colleagues to help escort them from the premises. If you feel threatened or the customer will not leave, you may need to call the police; but again, warn the customer that this is what you are going to do before calling for help.

What to do if customers want you to do something differently

Sometimes a customer will ask you to do something that you would not ordinarily do. If the customer is disabled and tells you that they need your help because of their disability, you have a legal obligation to do what you can. This is called making a reasonable adjustment.

For example, if a customer asks you to read out information from a screen or notice board, it might

be because they have a visual impairment and can't read it themselves. Remember they won't necessarily look like they can't see.

The customer might not always tell you that their request is disability related at the outset. They might only mention their disability if you or your colleagues have refused their request or sometimes much later in a formal complaint.

As a general rule, if a customer asks you to do something and it is relatively easy to do, then just do it.

As a general rule, if a customer asks you to do something and it is relatively easy to do, then just do it.

Scenario

Andy is speaking to a customer who is getting agitated. The customer won't meet Andy's eye and is shifting from foot to foot. Andy asks how he can help but the customer can't seem to get his words straight. Eventually the customer asks if Andy could turn off the music as he can't talk with it playing. Andy can't turn off the music but he can turn it down to a lower volume, which he does. Then he suggests to the customer that they move to a quieter spot away from the music so they can talk more easily.

This could be a reasonable adjustment for someone who has autism, Asperger's or a hearing impairment. Even though Andy didn't know that the customer had autism he has made a "reasonable adjustment" and provided good customer service.

If you cannot do what the customer is requesting, ask them why they are making the request. Try to find out why the current situation doesn't suit the customer's needs. If you ask them questions you might find out that the customer has a disability which, for example, makes it difficult for them

to sit or stand, to use a particular machine or to fill in a form. Remember to concentrate on what the customer wants to do or what they are finding difficult and not on their disability. There is no need to ask for details about their disability. Just ask them what the problem is and try to solve it.

If you really cannot meet the customer's request then tell them why. People always appreciate an explanation that isn't "because we don't do it that way". Then try to offer them an alternative which is possible e.g. "I'm really sorry I can't move you to another seat because they are all full. We are fully booked. Is there anything I can do to make this one more comfortable? For example, I could bring you an extra cushion or blanket."

Managing expectations

Remember though that if you do make an adjustment for a customer and they are likely to come back, they will most likely expect the same adjustment again whether or not you are there. If the adjustment is simple, then make sure that everyone knows they have the authority to make it e.g. it's fine to turn the music off if a customer doesn't like it.

If you do make an adjustment for a customer and they are likely to come back, they will most likely expect the same adjustment again whether or not you are there.

If the adjustment you are making is a one-off, let the customer know. For example: "I can get you an earlier appointment today," or "I can move you today but I'm afraid I can't guarantee this in the future." Then tell them what they need to do next time e.g. "Contact us in advance to let us know what you need so we can have someone available to help you".

Anticipating problems

If your premises is as accessible as possible to everyone, you are less likely to have unhappy or angry customers. If a customer tells you that some part of your service is difficult for them to use because of their disability or that they didn't have all the information they needed before coming in, then pass this feedback on to the relevant internal contacts. It will help them to improve the premises and the service for everyone and hopefully mean you have fewer angry customers to deal with.

Scenario

Raj has taken an angry customer, Marcus, into a quiet room. Once seated, Raj asks Marcus to tell him what the problem is and Raj listens closely. Marcus tells Raj that he tried to use the website but after spending nearly an hour entering the information it told him that his session had timed out. He couldn't work any faster because he finds it difficult to remember numbers and letters and has to look them all up. His typing isn't very fast either because he has arthritis in his hands.

Marcus then tried to call the helpline number, but got confused by all the options. It asked him to press 1 for this and 2 for that, so he pressed buttons randomly just to try to speak to someone but when he got through, the customer service representative said she couldn't help him.

Marcus tells Raj that he gets very frustrated by the way he just isn't listened to these days and that's why he started shouting. Raj acknowledges that it must have been very frustrating for Marcus. Raj says that if Marcus has time, they can sort things out here and now. Raj also tells Marcus that he will feedback to head office the problems Marcus had with the website session timing out and the call routing system on the telephone. Later, Raj writes to Marcus to tell him that his feedback has resulted in a review of the website and the call routing system.

Conclusion

- Your customers come in all shapes and sizes and some of them will have visible and non-visible disabilities.
- You don't need to be an expert on disability. If a customer asks you do to do something differently, do it if you can without making assumptions about them.
- Sometimes customers are angry, distressed or unhappy. You can make things easier by remaining calm, listening to them and explaining what you can do to help.
- Serve everyone with respect and, of course, a smile!

You don't need to be an expert on disability. If a customer asks you do to do something differently, do it if you can without making assumptions about them

Further Information

Access to work

Access to Work provides practical advice and support to disabled people and their employers to help them overcome work-related obstacles resulting from disability. Access to Work is delivered by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) through Jobcentre Plus.

An individual may be able to get Access to Work if their disability or health condition stops them from being able to do parts of their job and they are: in a paid job; self-employed; unemployed and about to start a job.

Access to Work is intended to provide assistance towards covering the costs of adjustments which otherwise would not be reasonable. Employers still have a duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010.

Access to Work Operational Support Units (OSUs)

When you contact Access to Work you may need:

- your National Insurance number
- your workplace address, including your postcode
- the name, email address and work phone number of a workplace contact, eg your manager
- your unique tax reference number (if you're self-employed)
- the name of your New Enterprise Allowance mentor (if you have one)

Email: atwosu.london@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Telephone: 0345 268 8489

Textphone: 0345 608 8753

Mailing address:
Operational Support Unit
Harrow Jobcentre Plus
Mail Handling Site A
Wolverhampton
WV98 1JE

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