Expanding Your Market

Americans with Disabilities Act
ADA Business Connection

"People with disabilities are problem solvers. They often encounter unexpected barriers and so must be able to identify solutions to a problem and implement the solution rapidly. It makes sense to invest in customers with disabilities. Their experiences and adaptations to their disabilities represent a set of skills and traits that are extremely valuable in a competitive market."

Paul J. Tobin
Executive Director,
United Spinal Association

Gathering Input from Customers with Disabilities

The Importance of Customer Feedback

Understanding what customers want is fundamental to business success. As customers routinely expect more customization of products, personalization of services, and all-around enhancement of their purchasing experiences, businesses need to learn about their preferences, desires, and requirements.

Businesses can benefit enormously by listening to customers. Customer innovations in product development, marketing, and customer service methods increase the bottom line. No matter how businesses learn about customer needs -- through focus groups, product usability studies, and customer surveys; mystery shoppers and comment cards; or a successful customer complaint process -- they will satisfy their customers with their attentiveness and impress them with positive responses to suggestions and complaints. Both build customer loyalty.

Including Customers with Disabilities in the Process

All customers should be included in these information-gathering processes, including customers with disabilities. And, there are reasons beyond equalizing opportunities that make this inclusion significant for businesses.

- Customers with disabilities are part of a large and growing market segment whose customer requirements are often overlooked. Businesses cannot afford to ignore more than 50 million consumers with billions of dollars to spend.
- Business environments and product characteristics that serve people with disabilities also benefit other markets. People with disabilities, who frequently need to find creative ways to work around physical barriers and product inaccessibility, can offer ideas and innovative solutions to attract and keep new customers, especially those in the burgeoning older adult market.
- People with disabilities can assist businesses in finding cost-effective, usable solutions that bring facilities and customer service policies and practices into compliance with the ADA.

Accessible Means for Gathering Feedback

If businesses want to gain input from people with disabilities, their research and consultation practices should be accessible to these customers. Some examples of accessibility considerations for gathering feedback from customers with disabilities:

- Customer surveys must be accessible to people who are blind or who have low vision. This may be accomplished by producing the survey in alternate formats (e.g., Braille, large print, or an electronic format) for independent use by customers or by providing an assistant who can read the survey to a participant and record his or her responses.

- Product usability interviews with customers who are hard of hearing or deaf may require the use of an assistive listening system or the services of sign language or oral interpreters.

- If businesses require complaints to be filed at customer service desks, the desks must be accessible to people who use mobility devices (e.g., the desk must be on an accessible route and have a writing surface at the required height or a clipboard available for people who use wheelchairs).

- Training provided for mystery shoppers with disabilities has to be provided in an accessible location and communicated in an accessible manner for all participants.

- Focus groups that include people who are hard of hearing or deaf may need to enlist the services of a realtime captioner to ensure that there is effective communication among all parties. As a secondary benefit, this service can provide a verbatim transcript of the session's discussion for follow-up research purposes.

Customers with disabilities can be assets to a business if it is willing to make the necessary investment to listen. Input from these customers not only can help businesses comply with the ADA but also develop creative, innovative customer service policies and practices as well as product and facility designs.

Duplication of this document is encouraged.

The Americans with Disabilities Act authorizes the Department of Justice (the Department) to provide technical assistance to individuals and entities that have rights or responsibilities under the Act. This document provides informal guidance to assist you in understanding the ADA and the Department's regulations.

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