

ACS | best practice

WELCOMING DISABLED CUSTOMERS

Everyday activities like shopping can often present challenges for disabled customers. This guidance outlines some of the ways in which you can accommodate the needs of disabled customers in-store.



Disability is not always visible. Many impairments such as:

- ★ epilepsy
- ★ dyslexia
- ★ dementia

are non-visible

Disabled people have an annual spending power of around

£212bn

If your goods and services are **EASY** for disabled customers to find and use they will be more **ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL** your customers.

THE LAW



The expectations of your disabled customers are rising.

As service providers you have to ensure disabled people can access the goods and services you provide however you provide them; on your premises, online or by other means.

In practice this may mean changing the way you normally serve customers and do your job where this is relatively simple and inexpensive – this is called making a “reasonable adjustment” for a disabled customer.

SOME THINGS THAT MAKE IT EASIER TO SERVE CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES:

Large print Clear signage

Induction loops Lower counters Seating

GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE

Making it easier for disabled people means making it easier for everybody.

For example, clear, easy to read signs benefit every customer. A doorway or ramp that makes it easy for someone with a mobility impairment will also be useful for a parent with a pram or buggy.

Try to ensure that disabled customers can access your services in the same way or as close as possible to the same way as customers without a disability. However, sometimes you may not be able to provide a disabled customer with exactly the same service, so be prepared to offer them a reasonable alternative. This may mean providing the service by a different method.

Top tips

- Treat a disabled person in the same manner and with the same respect and courtesy you would anyone else.
- Providing good customer service to disabled customers will sometimes mean doing things differently.
- Try to think flexibly and creatively about the way you serve disabled customers in order to meet their needs.
- Do not make assumptions about the existence or absence of a disability; many people have disabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent.
- A disabled individual/customer may not introduce a personal assistant or an interpreter. Take your lead from the person using the services.
- People who use assistance dogs may have a visual, hearing or mobility impairment, or they might have epilepsy. These dogs are working dogs and should not be treated as pets.
- Advertise that your services are fully accessible and provide relevant details, otherwise disabled people will go somewhere else that does.
- Don't worry if you ever feel embarrassed because you aren't sure what to do. We can all feel anxious about doing the wrong thing on occasions, and this may be the first time you have met anyone with your customer's particular disability.
- Be confident; relax and ask your customer how you can help.
- Some disabled people need a little more time than usual for everyday tasks such as finding items or paying. Always be patient and give extra help if it's needed.

COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CUSTOMERS



The basics

When serving disabled customers you might be worried or embarrassed by saying the wrong thing. Disabled customers are the same as everyone else but if in doubt ask yourself how you would want to be treated and always be willing to adapt to a person's individual preference. The majority of difficulties faced by disabled people are caused by other people's misunderstanding of their capabilities. Improving access means not just removing physical barriers like steps. It also involves adjusting policies, procedures and outdated attitudes towards disabled people.

Common sense and common courtesy will help you to know what to do and say. Just remember to be patient and to listen attentively and:

- ✓ Use a normal tone of voice when extending a verbal welcome.
- ✓ Address a disabled person by their first name only if you address everyone with the same familiarity.
- ✓ Speak directly to a disabled person, even if accompanied by an interpreter or companion.
- ✗ Do not attempt to speak or finish a sentence for the person you are speaking to.
- ✗ Never ask “What happened to you?” Restrain your curiosity.

WELCOMING DISABLED CUSTOMERS

Accommodating the needs of disabled customers does not necessarily need to be an expensive process. While accessibility and induction loops are important, many of the tips outlined in this guide do not require any investment.

This illustration sets out some of the main areas that a convenience store should address regarding welcoming and communicating with disabled customers and is meant to be used for training purposes. It is not intended to be a definitive list.

MOVE TO THE FRONT OF HIGH COUNTERS

If you need to speak with someone in a wheelchair for more than a few moments, it is advisable to move to the front of any high counters in-store. Try to put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye-level to avoid stiff necks.

LOWER COUNTERS

Lower counters will allow you to serve customers using wheelchairs more easily.

MAKING PAYMENT SIMPLE

- Tell the customer clearly how much their items cost and ask the customer how they want to pay.
- Remember to tell the customers about any offers or special promotions.
- If a disabled customer gives you cash, count change out aloud, coin by coin, as you place it in the customer's hand.
- Allow the customer to pick up a card machine and hold it close to see the numbers as they enter their pin.
- Offer payment by chip & signature. Use a signature stamp provided by their bank.
- Tell customers if you offer contactless payment.

SEATING

People who use walking aids may find it hard to use their hands when standing up, for example to count out money. Offer a seat if you can and offer to open doors. If a customer has difficulty walking be prepared to offer a more personalised service. Find a place for the customer to sit down and bring goods directly to them.

OPEN HEAVY DOORS

Offer to open heavy doors for customers who use sticks, crutches, walking frames or wheelchairs.

GUIDE DOGS

The customer may have a guide dog. Remember these are working dogs and should not be treated as a pet. Speak to the customer rather than making a fuss of the dog. More information about helping customers with guide dogs is available at <http://www.guidedogs.org.uk/>

REMOVE OBSTRUCTIONS

Try to keep aisles free from obstacles and ensure furniture does not restrict access for people with mobility impairments or sight problems. This will aid customers navigation in-store, such as those using wheelchairs or scooters and people who have difficulty walking.

DEMENTIA / CONFUSION

Customers may become confused or distressed and not know where they are or why, for example those with dementia. Reassure them and allow them to sit down somewhere quiet. Tell the customer where they are and ask if they know what they want. People with dyslexia or Asperger's, may also require guidance.

ASSISTING BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED CUSTOMERS

- Ask the customer how you can help.
- Remember to talk and speak clearly.
- Offer an arm to guide the customer to their requested location in-store

HELPING WHEELCHAIR USERS

- Avoid leaning on a wheelchair. This is the equivalent of leaning or hanging onto a person.
- Remember to speak to the wheelchair user, not their companion unless instructed otherwise.
- A wheelchair is a user's personal space. Never push a wheelchair without the user's consent, or move crutches, canes or walking frames, without the user's consent.

ACCESSIBILITY / RAMPS

Your store should be fully accessible for people who use a wheelchair or scooter. Try to make your premises step free or accessible by using permanent or portable ramps. Deep-pile carpets or rugs can also be barriers to access.

Other ways in which to serve customers who cannot get into your shop include:

- Serving the customer outside if it is a small item.
- Shop for the customer and bring goods out to them.
- Regular customers could call you with a list of what they want and have their shopping ready for them to pick up later.

PORTABLE RAMP



SERVE OUTSIDE



CONFIDENT COMMUNICATION

There aren't many situations in a customer service environment where you will have to refer directly to a person's disability but if you do bear in mind that certain words and phrases may give offence.

What to say

- ✓ Say 'disabled people' or 'people with disabilities'.
- ✓ Keep it simple. Just say what the person has. 'Mary has epilepsy'. 'John is deaf'.
- ✓ Don't worry about using common expressions like 'see you later' or 'I'll be running along', which may relate to a person's impairment.

What NOT to say

- ✗ Don't talk about 'the disabled' as though they are a group apart.
- ✗ Don't describe a disabled person in terms of a condition, like 'Mary is an epileptic'.
- ✗ Don't use the word 'handicap' because it can prompt negative images.
- ✗ Don't say 'Peter is wheelchair bound' or 'confined to a wheelchair'.

CUSTOMERS WHO ARE BLIND OR HAVE SIGHT PROBLEMS

Some blind people can see nothing at all. Most have some sight, but it may be blurred, distorted or limited.

Always speak to a blind customer when you approach them. Say clearly who you are (but don't shout) and ask how you can help. If the person asks for help going somewhere ask, "May I offer you an arm?" and then guide them there but remember to mention steps in advance, saying if they're up or down. Don't leave the customer talking to an empty space. Tell them before you move away.

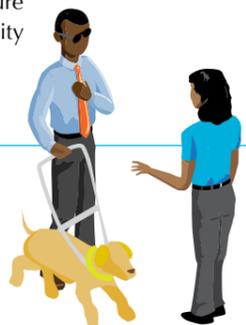


If you provide written materials for customers you may need to supply them in a suitable alternative format such as electronic large print, audio or Braille.

Try to keep aisles kept free from obstacles and ensure furniture does not restrict access for people with mobility impairments or sight problems.

Guide dogs

The customer may have a guide dog. Remember these are working dogs and should not be treated as a pet. Speak to the customer rather than making a fuss of the dog.



Taking payment from the customer

- ✓ Tell the customer clearly how much their items cost and ask the customer how they want to pay. If you have any special promotions such as "two for one" remember to tell the customer about this as they may not have been able to see the offer signs.
- ✓ If they give you cash count change out aloud, coin by coin, as you place it in the customer's hand.
- ✓ Card machines can be difficult for people with sight problems. Allow the customer to pick it up and hold it close to see the numbers as they enter their pin. Some customers might ask to pay by chip and signature and use a signature stamp provided by their bank.
- ✓ Contactless payment for smaller amounts can be helpful so tell customers if you offer this.
- ✓ Check customers have picked up all their possessions when they leave.

CUSTOMERS WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

There are many different degrees and types of deafness and different ways for deaf people, or those who are hard of hearing, to communicate. You won't immediately know that someone is deaf or hard of hearing. It may only become apparent when they speak or fail to hear you when you speak to them. Some deaf people use Sign Language and may have an interpreter with them but many will rely on lip reading and hearing aids.

Make sure your customer is looking at you before you begin to speak. If necessary, attract the customer's attention with a light touch on the shoulder. Always ask how you can best help; don't guess. Don't shout. If the customer can't hear what you say, write it down. You can use hand gestures to help convey what you mean but don't over-exaggerate them.

If they're using a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the customer, not to the interpreter. Induction loops and infrared induction systems can help communication. They enable hard of hearing people to tune-in their hearing aids directly to speakers and minimise background noise.

Top tips

- ✓ Look directly at the person you are speaking to.
- ✓ Speak clearly and at an even pace, but do not distort or exaggerate your lip movements.
- ✓ If you must turn away from the customer, stop talking.
- ✗ Do not speak with your back to a light source as this will put your lips in shadow and try to make sure you are in good lighting when talking.
- ✗ Do not use exaggerated gestures.
- ✗ Do not block your mouth when talking.

COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CUSTOMERS



Words and phrases

Certain words and phrases may give offence but preferences vary, so be prepared to ask the individual. Although there are no concrete rules about the "right" and "wrong" thing to say people are increasingly sensitive to the way in which the 'language of disability' can inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes. Here are some general tips on what to say and what not to say.

Common sense and common courtesy will help you to know what to do and say. Just remember to be patient and to listen attentively and:

✓ Use...	✗ Instead of...
Disabled people or people with disabilities.	The Disabled.
A person with a mental health difficulty or mental health issues.	Mental, mental patient, schizophrenic, lunatic, psycho, etc.
Disabled person, or person with a disability or, if appropriate, a person with a mobility impairment.	Cripple, or invalid.
A person who is deaf without speech or a deaf person. Note that British Sign Language is a recognised language.	Deaf and dumb, or deaf-mute.
A person of short stature, or a person of restricted growth. (Although some individuals do prefer to be called a dwarf.)	Midget, or dwarf.
Seizures	Fits, spells, attacks.
A person with a learning disability or difficulty.	Mentally handicapped, subnormal.
A wheelchair user.	Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair.

CUSTOMERS WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS AND SCOOTERS

Wherever reasonably possible, buildings which offer a service to the public should be fully accessible for people who use a wheelchair or scooter.

If you cannot reasonably make your premises step free or accessible by using portable ramps you will need to think about other ways in which to serve customers who cannot get into your shop. This could include serving the customer outside if it is a small item that they want to purchase or doing their shopping for them and bringing it out to them. You could even offer regular customers the option of calling you with a list of what they want and having their shopping ready for them to pick up later.



Top tips

- ✓ Keep aisles and floor space free from obstacles in order to aid navigation for people who use wheelchairs or scooters and people who have difficulty walking.
- ✓ Always speak directly to the wheelchair user and not to their assistant or companion. Try to put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye-level to avoid stiff necks. Come round to their side of high counters. Offer help with heavy doors.
- ✗ Do not assume ramps solve everything. Even if there is step free access heavy doors and deep-pile carpets or rugs can also be barriers to access.
- ✗ A person's wheelchair is an extension of a person's personal space and should not be leant on. Don't hang items on a person's wheelchair.

CUSTOMERS WHO USE STICKS OR WALKING FRAMES

- ✓ People who use walking aids may find it hard to use their hands when standing up, for example to count out money. Offer a seat if you can and offer to open doors.
- ✓ If a customer has difficulty walking be prepared to offer a more personalised service. Find a place for the customer to sit down and bring goods directly to them.
- ✗ Never touch or move crutches, canes or walking frames, or push a wheelchair without the user's consent.



COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CUSTOMERS

Disability etiquette

The one universal rule is never to assume you know what assistance, if any, a disabled person requires. Ask if, and what, assistance they need

However, here are a few more general pointers:

- ✓ Treat a disabled person in the same manner and with the same respect and courtesy you would anyone else.
- ✓ Treat adults as adults not children.
- ✓ Use appropriate physical contact, such as a handshake, as you would with anyone else.
- ✓ A disabled individual may not introduce a personal assistant or human aid to communications (eg an interpreter). Take your lead from the person using their services.
- ✓ Do not be embarrassed about using common expressions that could relate to someone's impairment, e.g. "See you later" or "I'll be running along then".
- ✗ Do not make assumptions about the existence or absence of a disability; many people have disabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent.
- ✗ Assistance dogs are working dogs. They should not be treated as pets.

Customers with visual impairments

Remember to talk!

The customer may not be able to see where you are pointing or if you are nodding or shaking your head. Answer questions clearly and if necessary show customers where things are by guiding them their location. In other cases you may need to get things for the customer.

CUSTOMERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Top tips

- ✓ Many people with learning disabilities lead independent lives. Begin by assuming the person will understand you and speak to the person as you would anyone else.
- ✓ Be patient and encouraging but keep things simple.
- ✓ Be prepared to offer extra assistance for customers unfamiliar with technology like chip and PIN.
- ✓ Accept written signatures or signature stamps as an alternative payment.
- ✗ Do not assume you can predict from your initial impression what the person will or will not understand.
- ✗ However you must never take payment if you think the person seems unsure, worried or confused about what they are buying.

CUSTOMERS WITH DEMENTIA WHO ARE CONFUSED



Sometimes a customer may become confused or distressed and not know where they are or why.

- ✓ Be reassuring.
- ✓ Allow the customer to sit somewhere quiet and turn off loud music and any flashing lights.
- ✓ Tell the customer where they are.
- ✓ Ask if they know what they want.
- ✓ If a customer wants to go home ask if they have their address.

People with dementia sometimes carry their address and telephone number for situations like this. If they give this to you call the number to see if someone can collect the customer. Allowing the customer to sit quietly for a few minutes might be enough for them to collect themselves but if they remain distressed and you don't have a next of kin number to call you may have to call the emergency services for help.

COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CUSTOMERS

Customers who are deaf or hard of hearing

- ✓ If you do not understand what someone has said, ask him or her to repeat the sentence.
- ✓ If you need to get their attention touch them lightly on the shoulder or arm.
- ✓ Speak clearly and at an even pace, but do not distort or exaggerate your lip movements.
- ✓ Stop talking if you must turn away.
- ✗ Try not to feel uncomfortable about communicating with a deaf or hard of hearing person, even if the communication feels awkward at first.
- ✗ Do not pretend you have understood when you have not. Sometimes it can help to write things down but remember the person can't lip read and read your note at the same time so don't talk while they are reading.
- ✗ Try not to stand in shadows or with your back to a light source if the person is lip reading you.
- ✗ Do not use exaggerated gestures.
- ✗ Do not block your mouth with your hands or anything else.

Customers who are deaf or hard of hearing

- ✓ Don't correct or speak for the person.
- ✓ Wait quietly while the person speaks and resist the temptation to finish sentences for them.
- ✓ If you need more information, break down your questions to deal with individual points that require short answers.
- ✓ If you do not understand what someone has said, ask the individual to say it again. Never pretend to understand when you do not.
- ✗ Be attentive, encouraging and patient, but not patronising. Slowness or impaired speech does not reflect a person's intelligence.

CUSTOMERS WITH A FACIAL DISFIGUREMENT

Some people are born with a disfigurement and others acquire it through accident or illness. Largely as a result of social attitudes, living with a disfigurement can be a major challenge for a person and their family. If you focus on the individual person and what they are saying, you will find that you soon overcome any feelings of awkwardness.

Top tips

- ✓ Make contact as you would with any other customer.
- ✓ Remember that a person's 'looks' may be different, but that doesn't mean they are different in any other way.
- ✓ Concentrate on what they are saying and respond accordingly.
- ✗ Don't be put off by someone's different appearance.
- ✗ Don't turn away in the hope that someone else will help the customer.
- ✗ Be careful not to stare.
- ✗ If you feel uncomfortable, try not to let this make your customer feel uncomfortable too.

CUSTOMERS WHO ASK FOR HELP

If a customer asks for help ask them what they need from you and try to provide it even if it seems simple or obvious such as for an item that is clearly in view.

Remember that not all disabilities are visible. You may not know that someone has a sight impairment which means they can't see the item. Other people with disabilities like dyslexia or Asperger's may become confused if you have changed the layout or if your layout is different from where they usually shop.



COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CUSTOMERS

Customers who use a wheelchair, cane, walking frame or crutches

- ✓ Leaning on a wheelchair is the equivalent of leaning or hanging onto a person. A wheelchair is a user's personal space.
- ✓ If you are talking for more than a few moments to someone in a wheelchair move to the front of high counters and try to position yourself so you are at the same level, or at least ask the person if they would like you to sit down.
- ✓ Speak directly to a wheelchair user, not their companion.
- ✓ Never touch or move crutches, canes or walking frames, or push a wheelchair without the user's consent.
- ✓ Unless you know it is easy to move around your building in a wheelchair, offer to help. Heavy doors or deep-pile carpets are just some of the hazards to watch for.
- ✗ This doesn't mean you should patronise the person – remember you are talking to an adult and a customer.
- ✗ Do not assume ramps solve everything; they may be too steep or too slippery.
- ✗ Do not be offended if your offer of help is refused. Many wheelchair users prefer to travel independently whenever possible.

COMMUNICATING WITH DISABLED CUSTOMERS

Customers with learning disabilities or dementia

Many people born with learning disabilities, those in the early stages of dementia or people who acquire a brain injury, live full and independent lives. Most can make their own choices, with varying levels of support.

- ✓ Begin by assuming the person will understand you.
- ✓ Speak to the person as you would to anyone else
- ✓ Keep all your communication simple. Avoid jargon.
- ✓ Consider putting information in writing, including your name and phone number.
- ✓ If they are displaying non-typical or distressed behaviour ask, preferably in private, if there is anything you can do to help.
- ✗ Do not assume you can predict from your initial impression what the person will or will not understand.

Always ensure people can complete their business without feeling humiliated or a failure.

Meeting people with mental health problems

Often the most significant disability people with mental health problems experience is created by the attitudes of others.

- ✓ Be patient and nonjudgmental.
- ✓ Give the person time to make decisions.
- ✗ Remove any sources of stress and confusion such as noise or flashing lights if you can.

Customers with facial disfigurements

Some people are born with a disfigurement and others acquire it through accident or illness. Disfigurement is usually only skin deep, but it can be associated with facial paralysis and other impairment such as speech difficulties. It does not mean the person is any different and certainly does not affect his or her intelligence. Most of the difficulties, indeed discrimination, people with facial disfigurement experience stem from other people's behaviour.

- ✓ Make eye contact as you would with anyone else.
- ✓ Smile if you would for someone else.
- ✓ Listen carefully.
- ✗ Do not stare.
- ✗ Do not let the person's appearance distract you.

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed by the Association of Convenience Stores in consultation with the Business Disability Forum. It was last updated in May 2015.

ACS BEST PRACTICE

ACS best practice guides have been developed by ACS and other stakeholders to provide industry leading information on a range of issues for convenience retailers. The information within these guides is meant as best practice only, and has not been assured as part of the Primary Authority partnership between ACS and Surrey County Council. More information about all of ACS' advice guides is available online at www.acs.org.uk/advice

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