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The \$25 Billion Market Just Waiting to be Served

Making your business accessible to people with disabilities isn't just the right thing to do—it's a massive opportunity

Andrena Lockley-Brown and Jim Davidson || July 4, 2013



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Jim Davidson created the CCC's Mystery Shop Program. Isn't it time you checked it out?

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It's time to take a hard look at how accessible your business is to people with disabilities. In fact, you can't afford not to.

According to Statistics Canada, one in seven Canadians has a disability of some sort.

That's a lot of people—and they're big buyers. Studies have pegged the spending power of this cohort at \$25 billion each year—and that will only grow as the population ages. In Ontario alone, people with disabilities are expected to comprise 40% of the consumer base in the next 20 years.

Yet a shocking amount of businesses aren't equipped to accommodate the needs of people who live with mobility, agility, vision and other physical impairments. It's an oversight that can cost companies big-time—and not just in lost sales. Depending on the rules of your province, you could be fined for failing to meet accessibility criteria. And, thanks to social media, a dissatisfied customer can very swiftly publicize a bad experience and/or call for boycotts—and these are the kinds of stories that make the evening news. Not exactly the PR your firm wants.

That's why, as representatives of the Independent Living Centre of Waterloo Region and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce Mystery Shopper Program, respectively, we recently conducted accessible mystery shops at several establishments.

Working with Paula Saunders—a co-worker at Independent Living Centre of Waterloo Region who uses a wheelchair to get around—we anonymously visited several restaurants and stores to evaluate not only the establishment's staff and cleanliness, but also the degree to which a product, service, or space is available to as many people as possible.

It was a discouraging experience, to say the least. We saw a lot of things that just shouldn't happen anywhere, much less businesses focused on customer service. We've shared some examples of what we encountered during our visits and paired each with easy tips you can follow to make your own business more accessible to a growing—and highly lucrative—demographic.

A helpful attitude will make up for a lot

Our first stop was a casual restaurant. The establishment had recently been renovated, and we were excited to see whether any accessibility-boosting changes had been made since our previous visit.

To our great disappointment, the newly renovated restaurant was even less accessible than it was before. There was no electric door opener, and there was only one accessible washroom—which also doubled as the only men's washroom. There were booths and high-top tables all over the restaurant, many of which were secured to the floor, meaning that we were unable to move them to accommodate Paula's wheelchair. The patio had very tall picnic tables with footrests that were also impossible for us to use.

The restaurant is not well-suited to handle people with disabilities, and it was obvious the staff knew it—their looks of panic upon seeing Paula enter in her wheelchair were dead giveaways.

After some scrambling, the manager arrived and pulled a table out for us, allowing us to sit in the aisle—an arrangement would not have been possible if we chose to go at a peak time, as we were blocking two other tables. And after their initial worries had subsided, the staff were very attentive and friendly.

Even though this restaurant was not accessible, the staff's helpful behaviour kept the visit from becoming unpleasant.

Read: [How to Wow Customers Every Time](#)

The lesson here? Train your staff not to panic when they see a person using a mobility device—or anyone else with a visible disability—enter the premises. If your employees are willing to accommodate such clients in a helpful and professional manner, it will go a long way to improving the experience—even if your site is not fully accessible.

When a person using a mobility device or anyone else with a visible disability enters through your front doors, don't panic. Treat them like you would anyone else and demonstrate an interest in providing the best customer service you can.

Don't be afraid to ask questions

You do not have to be an expert on accessibility to provide good customer service; all you need is a commitment to do your best. How will you know what the customer needs? Ask them!

Imagine a customer with a white cane and service animal enters your café. You panic because you aren't sure how best to serve her. A myriad of questions might race through your head:

"Does she need a seat in an area that is better lit?"

"Does she need a large print menu?"

"Should I highlight some of the snacks and drinks on the menu?"

"Perhaps she needs someone to carry her hot beverage to her table?"

"Maybe she needs no help at all."

One thing is sure: the customer knows best what she needs. There's a good chance that in living with a disability for years she's very used to explaining what she requires. So just ask. It's as simple as training staff to say "I am here to help. Please let me know what you need to make your visit comfortable." We guarantee your customer will appreciate the effort.

Read: Proven Ways to *Really* Listen to Your Customers

Be open to suggestions

On another occasion, we visited a pub-style restaurant and discovered that their brand new patio was not accessible. There was a small step down from the main walkway onto the patio.

We explained the situation to our server and politely asked to speak to the manager. When the manager approached, we complimented the food and service but suggested that they replace the step with a ramp. We assured him that we only wanted to make his patio more inclusive and offered examples of others who would benefit from making small changes (parents with strollers, a customer with a broken leg, guests with low vision, and so on).

The manager was visibly irritated. "I didn't design the building, and we only rent the space," he said. When we asked for the contact information of the owner, he refused. While we offered our cards and asked that they be passed onto the owner so that we might offer our suggestions, we never received a call back. Needless to say, we haven't returned. No staff member should ever treat a customer this way, much less a manager. An adversarial, "well, we can't do anything about it" attitude towards your site's barriers serves no one's interests and makes the customer feel devalued. A simple apology for the pub's physical limitations and a promise to pass along our information to the building's owner would have gone a long way. Instead, the business lost clients—likely forever.

Treat customers with respect

Recently, we went to a very popular local fast-food restaurant during off-peak hours; the place was not busy. When one of us—Andrena—placed an order, the cashier was friendly and knowledgeable about the menu. But when Paula moved to the front of the line, the cashier turned to Andrena and asked "what does she want to eat?"

How rude of the cashier, and how humiliating for Paula! Front-line workers should always assume that the customer can communicate. They should converse directly to the customer in question and maintain eye contact at all times. Even if Paula did have a speech impairment—which she doesn't—there's a very good chance she'd be prepared to converse through a communication board, through an interpreter, or through some other means.

Read: Customer-Service Lessons from a Seasoned Mystery Shopper

Employees often ignore customers with disabilities in an attempt to avoid a potentially awkward situation. This is much more harmful than encountering an uncomfortable moment when staff discovers that the person they just spoke to is non-communicative. Your staff should be trained not to feel embarrassed for trying to speak directly to any client; it is simply a sign of respect.

A little goes a long way

There are many small and inexpensive (or free!) things that businesses can do to improve accessibility.

Take washrooms. Don't stack items such as high chairs, or boxes in the walkways leading to the washrooms. Make sure the soap dispenser in your is mounted at a height that can be comfortably reached from the seating position. Move the towel dispenser so that it's close to the sink; often, these are located by a door, meaning that a person using a manual wheelchair will have to use wet hands to push their chair to reach them. Matters like these can easily be corrected by simply moving things around.

A few more quick fixes: a local grocery store has started offering plastic bags on the base of the produce and meat displays in order to be more accessible; it makes a huge difference. In another instance, a pizzeria moved their huge planter from in front of their electric door opener so that people could access the button more easily.

Making your business more accessible can seem an overwhelming prospect. But it needn't be—small physical changes paired with the right attitudes can work wonders. And when more people can physically access your place of business—and feel comfortable doing so—more money will come your way.

*Andrena Lockley-Brown is the public awareness and education coordinator for the **Independent Living Centre of Waterloo Region**. Jim Davidson, principal of **Competitactics**®, created and manages the **Canadian Chamber of Commerce Mystery Shopper Program**.*