

Missed Business!

How to attract more customers by providing better access to your business

A guide for small business

“There is no doubt this has helped my business.” (Small business owner)

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You could be missing out on potential customers

In Australia 3.6 million people, or **19 percent** of the population, have a disability. Together with their friends and families, the number of people affected by a disability is bigger still - and every one of them is a potential customer.

More than half of people aged 55 years and over have difficulties with mobility, sight and hearing. While they may not consider themselves to have a disability, easier access would be a great benefit.

As a small business, quality service is one of the most important things you can offer. This guide aims to help you, the small business owner, understand how to improve access to your goods and services for a large part of our community you may be missing out on - customers who have a disability.

Which customers are we talking about?

Providing good access to your business will benefit:

- people who are blind or partially sighted
- people with learning or intellectual disabilities
- people who are Deaf or hearing-impaired
- people with a physical disability who may use a wheelchair or walking frame or have arthritis
- people with long-term illnesses
- people with mental health or psychological difficulties, and
- people with an acquired brain injury.

Good access also benefits:

- parents or carers of young children – particularly those with strollers or prams
- older people
- delivery people
- shoppers with heavy bags
- every customer – particularly when it's busy.

Can you afford to miss out on all this business?

"I look for businesses that are easy to use for me and my friends. When I find one that I can enter without a problem I feel welcomed. When a business is accessible, has good service *and* an inclusive attitude, it gives you a feeling of belonging. They're the places I go back to and take my friends as well." Marrickville resident.

Good access makes good business sense

As potential customers, each of these people will make choices about your business based on how easy it is to use.

If a person uses a wheelchair and there is a step at your front entrance, they, and the people who accompany them, will probably go to another business in your area which has a flat entrance or a ramp. If they find your staff unhelpful they probably won't come back to your business.

But if you make an effort to provide corridors that aren't cluttered with boxes that could be fallen over, then people will appreciate the ease of shopping at your business. If you train your staff to be respectful – not patronising – then people with a disability are more likely to become regular customers.

Remember: what you do to improve accessibility doesn't have to be extravagantly expensive – a combination of providing easier entry and improving staff training will go a long way to making your business more attractive to many people including people with a disability.

Meeting your legal responsibilities

Improving access will also assist your business to meet your legal responsibilities.

In Australia, the law says that customers with disabilities should be able to access your goods or services just like any other customer. If a customer with a disability cannot get into your building or cannot access your goods or services they could make a complaint of discrimination under either State or Territory anti-discrimination laws, or the Federal Disability Discrimination Act.

Making your business more accessible is also likely to make it safer for both customers and staff and could have an effect on your public liability and workplace safety responsibilities.

For more information on your legal obligations see 'Further contacts' at the end of this guide.

Four ways to improve access for *all* your customers

1. Make it easy for people to find you

To attract customers who have a disability you can take some simple steps to make your business easier to find and get to.

Advertise your advantages

- If your business is accessible, let people know. For example, if you have wheelchair access include this in your promotions and advertisements.
- Put up clear external signs to help people with vision impairments or learning difficulties identify what your shop is.

Make the entrance easy to see

- Paint the entrance to your business in a colour that contrasts well with the surroundings. This will make it stand out for people with a vision impairment. Highly contrasting colours not only distinguish an entrance from the general environment but also make it easier to tell the difference between the immediate door surrounds and the doorway itself.
- If there are multiple entrances, make sure there are clear directions to where each entrance is.

Be aware of reflective glass in your shop front. People with a vision impairment often find this presents them with a confusing picture of reflections, light and shadows. One good solution is to put safety markings on the glass so people don't walk into it. This makes it easier to tell the difference between the window display and the doorway.

Avoid obstructions

- Ideally, remove dangerous obstacles such as advertising boards, displays or furniture from the entrance so that people in wheelchairs, older people, or people with a vision impairment don't have to risk falling over them.
- If you are permitted to have advertising boards, display items or furniture outside your business, make sure there is a clear pathway leading to the entrance.

Tip: think about your surroundings

It also pays to look at the surroundings of your business. You will probably need to talk to Council about these matters.

Carparks. Think about making at least one customer car space wider for a person with a disability to use.

Pathways. Make sure the path from the carpark to your entrance is accessible for a person using a wheelchair (e.g. wider and more even) and less slippery for someone older or using walking aids.

Lighting. Would better lighting make carparks and pathways safer?

Hazards. Make sure overhanging trees or signage do not cause a hazard to a person who is blind or vision impaired

2. Make it easy for people to get in

In new buildings all customers, including people using wheelchairs, must be able to enter the shop independently. But in many older buildings the main entrance may have one or several steps, or be difficult in other ways. Here are some ideas on how to make it easy for customers to get in to your business.

While many of these ideas are easy to put into practice, some may require technical advice to ensure they are done correctly (see 'Further contacts' at the end of this guide).

Level access

- Ideally, get rid of steps and provide a level entry.
- If you can't provide a level entry, build a ramp.
- If these are not possible for technical or financial reasons, consider moving the main entrance to another more accessible position.

Better doors and doorways

- Reposition the entrance door handles to an easier height.
- Make the door easier to open by making it automatic or lighter.
- Make the doorway wide enough to allow a person with a walking frame or someone who uses a wheelchair to pass through with ease.
- If the door has a lot of reflective glass attach safety markings so people do not walk into it.
- Make sure any doormats are secure and only use them if they can be made flush with the surrounding floor
- Put in a handrail.

Clear sight lines

- If possible make sure there are clear sight lines between the entry and the counter so that staff are aware when a customer needs assistance to enter the premises or purchase goods.

“Many customers comment on the fact that we have the ramp. It’s not just people who use wheelchairs but also parents with prams, and even people who don’t have an access issue. There is no doubt this has helped my business.” (Con Kazantzidis, owner, Last Drop Café, Dulwich Hill)

3. Make it easy for people to get around

Ideally, once inside your shop or premises customers with disabilities should be able to find their way to all sales areas, browse and inspect goods, bring them to the cash desk or receive services in the same way as people without a disability.

The following tips are designed to assist you to better understand and meet the needs of customers with a range of disabilities.

For people who are blind or have vision impairments

- *Signs.* Make sure signs and product pricing labels are clear and use high contrast colours. Ensure overhanging signs do not cause a hazard.
- *Information.* Make board menus in cafes or product information displays easier to read. Provide written menus or other product information in large print versions (e.g. 18 point Arial) or have staff read information out to customers. Look at the possibility of providing information such as menus in Braille.
- *Lighting.* Think about improving lighting, especially around service counters.
- *Layout.* Avoid having dangerously placed fittings and fixtures that can make independent movement difficult for customers who are blind. Make sure your aisles provide a clear path of travel and do not have displays sticking out into them.
- *EFTPOS.* Make sure the electronic payment system and EFTPOS machines have the features that mean people who are blind can use them.

For people who may have difficulty hearing

- *Noise.* Find ways to reduce the amount of background noise and to easily turn down the music when necessary.
- *Hearing loop.* Look into installing a ‘hearing loop’ or other system to assist people using hearing aids at counters, especially if there is a screen from the public at the counter.

For people with mobility impairments

- *Aisles.* Make sure shopping aisles are wide enough (preferably 1.2 metres).
- *Counters.* Ensure at least part of your customer service area is at a height that is suitable for people using wheelchairs (750-800mm from floor level). Make sure that at least one of your checkout aisles is wide enough, has a lower checkout counter (750–800mm) and is always open.
- *Reach.* Try to place goods, particularly the most popular ones, within reach of someone using a wheelchair. If this is not always possible, make sure staff are trained to offer assistance.
- *Chairs.* If your customers need to wait, make a chair available for someone who may be older and frail, use crutches or have poor balance
- *EFTPOS.* Ensure that electronic payment systems and EFTPOS machines are on a long enough cord to pass over to someone using a wheelchair.
- *Surfaces.* Make sure the floor surface is free from trip hazards and is non-slip.

Should you be providing accessible toilets?

Where toilets are provided for the public (e.g. in cafes or in other situations where customers may be on the premises for a period of time) an accessible toilet should be provided where possible. Under building laws a unisex accessible toilet counts as a male and a female toilet.

If you do not have an accessible toilet make sure all staff know the location of the nearest accessible toilet and, if necessary, get approval for your customers to use it.

If you decide to make your toilet accessible you should get technical advice on how to do so.

4. Make the most of customer service

When talking about ‘improving access’ it’s easy to think only in terms of installing ramps, toilets and other fixtures. But one of the simplest and cheapest solutions is to change the way you think about customer service for people with disabilities. It’s not difficult to train your staff on how to communicate effectively with all your customers and how to give practical assistance when it’s needed.

Respect

You and your staff should treat customers with disabilities as you do all customers – with respect:

- *Focusing on the person.* Treat each customer with a disability as an individual customer with their own likes and dislikes. Always focus on the person, not their disability. Always address the customer directly, not the other people who may be with them (such as a Deaf sign interpreter).
- *Giving assistance.* Always ask the customer first if they want help; do not assume they need assistance. Always accept the answer if the customer declines your help. If you have a conversation that will last more than a few moments with a customer using a wheelchair, bend to eye level or pull up a chair.
- *Asking questions.* And remember: ask customers with disabilities how they would like goods and services to be provided particularly where there are barriers to equal access.

Communication

For people who may have a learning difficulty, an intellectual disability or brain injury:

- *Being clear.* Address the customer directly, listen carefully, speak clearly and check for understanding. Always use clear language without being patronising.
- *Allowing time.* Allow your customer time to ask questions and try not to rush them. Try not to overload people with an intellectual disability with information. Reassure your customer you are there to help if they forget the information.

For people who have a hearing impairment or are Deaf:

- *Lip reading.* Always face the customer so they can read your lips. Try to make sure there are no bright lights behind you that may limit their ability to see your lips.
- *Sound.* Use your normal tone of voice and volume. If possible, move out of the way of background noise.
- *Interpreters.* If your customer is there with a sign language interpreter always address your comments directly to your customer rather than to the interpreter.
- *Pen and paper.* Have a pen and paper on hand to help you communicate with your customer.

For people who have a vision impairment or are blind:

- *Using names.* Always identify yourself by name. If appropriate, ask for their name so you can address them directly and so that they know you are talking to them and not to someone else.

- *Giving assistance.* If a customer asks for assistance to go somewhere ask which side you should be on and offer your arm so they can hold just above your elbow.
- *Guide dogs.* Never pat or distract a guide dog or offer it food while it is in harness, it is a working animal under the control of its owner.

Finding alternative ways to provide service

The best way of attracting business and fulfilling your legal responsibilities is to make your business as accessible as possible. Where it is not possible to provide full access in the short term, you might also consider alternate ways of providing the same service. Here are some examples:

- A butchers shop might consider operating a telephone, mail order or local delivery scheme.
- A florist might have a call bell at the entrance and have staff put together an order and bring the goods to the front door or the nearest easy collection point.
- A hairdresser might consider offering a home visiting service for a customer with a disability.
- An estate agent might consider providing their service in an alternative, accessible location either by appointment or on a regular basis.

Alternatives such as these will not provide full equality for people with disabilities, but they will assist in reducing the chances of a complaint.

What's the best language to use?

If you are making the effort to make your business more accessible it is also important to make sure your staff and the signage you use is part of that effort.

Use signage that identifies:

- 'Accessible Toilet' not 'Disabled Toilet'
- 'Accessible Parking' not 'Disabled Parking'
- 'Accessible Entry' not 'Disabled Entry'.

And always refer to:

- a *person with a disability* rather than a *disabled person*
- a person who *uses* a wheelchair rather than someone *confined* to one
- a person who *is* blind rather than a person who *suffers* blindness.

Further contacts

For more information on planning issues, building approvals and local access requirements:

Contact the Planning Officer, Building Surveyor or Disability Services Worker at your Council.

For more information on design ideas and contacting an Access Consultant:

Association of Consultants in Access Australia Inc

Web: www.access.asn.au

For more information on legal issues and responsibilities:

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

Phone: 02 9284 9600

Web: www.humanrights.gov.au

Or your State/Territory anti-discrimination agency.