

How to make customer service accessible

How businesses and non-profit organizations can meet the accessible customer service standard by creating a policy and a plan to train staff on how to serve people with disabilities.

People with disabilities

1 in 7 people in Ontario has a disability. That's almost 2 million Ontarians. By 2036, that number will rise to 1 in 5 as people age.

Over the next 20 years, aging Ontarians and people with disabilities will represent 40% of total income in Ontario. That's \$536 billion.

People with disabilities are a growing market that businesses can't afford to overlook.

Ontario has laws to ensure all Ontarians can access your organization's goods, services or facilities.

Barriers to accessibility

Barriers to accessibility are obstacles that make it difficult — sometimes impossible — for people with disabilities to do the things most of us take for granted, like shopping, working or taking public transit.

For example, a clothing store with a no-refund or return policy creates a barrier if the fitting rooms are not wheelchair accessible and a person can't try on the clothes before purchasing them. Providing exemptions to this policy removes the barrier.

A dance studio offers their class schedule in paper format at the front desk. When a customer with low vision asks for the schedule in braille, the manager explains that it is not available in braille, but is available in an accessible format on the studio's website. This works for the customer because she has a screen reader at home that reads content displayed on the website.

The law

The law requires your organization to identify those barriers, and remove them, in order to provide customer service that is more accessible to people who have disabilities.

These requirements apply to organizations that:

- serve the public
- provide goods, services or facilities to other businesses or organizations (e.g. manufacturers, wholesalers and

professional services have other businesses as their customers)

Follow the steps below to learn what you must do to provide accessible customer service and train your staff on how to serve people with disabilities.

Step 1: create policies

Develop and put in place policies that outline how you will provide goods, services or facilities to people with disabilities. “Facilities” in this case, refers to rooms or spaces used to provide a service, such as a stadium or a banquet hall. It does not refer to the physical structure of a building.

Document your policies if you are:

- a business or non-profit with 50 or more employees
- a public sector organization

Make sure your policies are guided by these principles:

- **Dignity** – provide service in a way that allows the person with a disability to maintain self-respect and the respect of other people.
- **Independence** – a person with a disability is allowed to do things on their own without unnecessary help or interference from others.
- **Integration** – provide service in a way that allows the person with a disability to benefit from the same services, in the same place, and in the same or similar way as other customers, unless a different way is necessary to enable them to access goods, services or facilities.
- **Equal opportunity** – provide service to a person with a disability in such a way that they have an equal opportunity to access your goods, services or facilities as what is given to others.

Example of equal opportunity

A small store offers a 10% discount for online orders, but their system is not yet accessible for people with vision loss who use a screen reader. The store offers the same discount to a customer who is blind and places an order in person. This provides the same opportunity to benefit from the discount.

When creating your policies:

- make a list of what you do every day to provide customer service
- identify, remove and prevent potential barriers for people with disabilities

Your policies must include information on how your organization will address the requirements below.

Consider a person's disability when communicating with them

Ensure your employees are prepared to communicate with customers who have various types of disabilities in a way that takes into account their disability.

Example of inclusive communication

Rashad has a learning disability and has difficulty understanding the yoga class schedule at his local gym. He asks the receptionist to read it out loud to him.

Allow assistive devices

An assistive device is a piece of equipment a person with a disability uses to help them with daily living (e.g., a wheelchair, screen reader, hearing aid, cane or walker, an oxygen tank).

When creating your policies:

- identify any assistive measures that you currently offer to help people with disabilities access your services (e.g. an electric scooter, a TTY phone line)
- consider integrating additional helpful measures (e.g., carry-out service or delivery)
- evaluate and address any risks or dangers for customers entering your premises with assistive devices (e.g., an open flame could be dangerous for someone with an oxygen tank)

Examples of assistive measures

Janet can walk short distances and uses a scooter. It's often difficult to find space at a busy service counter to park her scooter. She finds it helpful when staff suggest parking options and make space by keeping aisles clear.

Mario uses an oxygen tank. When he visits his local pub, the hostess makes sure candles are extinguished and she seats Mario in a location that is safe for both Mario and the other patrons.

Allow service animals

There are various types of service animals besides guide dogs that support people with various types of disabilities, such as:

- vision loss
- epilepsy
- autism
- anxiety disorder

There are no restrictions on what type of animal can be used as a service animal. An animal is considered a service animal if:

- it wears a harness, vest or other visual indicator
- the person with a disability provides documentation from a regulated health professional (<http://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/110191#s8Op45s4>)

Sometimes you might be able to identify that an animal is a service animal because it helps a person with a disability perform certain tasks, like opening a door, or picking up a dropped object.

Don't make assumptions. If you cannot easily identify that the animal is a service animal, you can ask the person to provide documentation (e.g. template, letter, form) from a regulated health professional. The documentation must confirm that the person needs the service animal for reasons relating to their disability.

Welcome service animals into public areas of your workplace or business. In cases where the law prohibits service animals, provide another way for the person to access your goods, services or facilities.

Service animals have a job to do. They are not pets. Avoid touching or addressing a service animal. Your customer is responsible for the care and supervision of their service animal. When creating your policies:

- clearly identify the areas of your premises that are open to service animals
- evaluate how you should adapt your practices to provide services to people who have service animals
- think about how else you would provide your services if the law prohibits a service animal from an area in your workplace or business

Examples of when a law prohibits a service animal:

Pauline is a supplier for a restaurant and she uses a service animal. Although the restaurant must allow service animals in the public dining area, another law prevents animals from entering the restaurant's kitchen, where the manager usually meets with suppliers. When Pauline comes for her meeting, they use the office upstairs.

A charity runs a cooking class. It does not allow service animals into its kitchen as this is a place where food is prepared and stored. Instead, the charity offers a person with a service animal a safe place where their animal may wait during the class. At the same time, an employee provides assistance as a sighted guide to the person attending the class without their service animal.

Welcome support persons

Support persons help people with a disability perform daily tasks. Often, people who need the help of a support person are not able to do certain things by themselves. For example, a support person might help with communication, mobility or personal care. Without support, that person may be unable to access your organization or your services.

When creating your policies:

- think about how customers who require the assistance of a support person will use your services
- decide how you will deal with special situations or services
- identify any possible situations where a support person might be required to accompany a person with a disability for health or safety reasons
- include information on how you will handle situations where a support person is required for health or safety reasons

Your organisation can only require a support person to accompany a person with a disability:

- in very limited circumstances, and
- when there is no other available option

Before making a decision, you must:

- consult with the person with a disability to understand their needs
- consider health or safety reasons based on available evidence
- determine if there is no other reasonable way to protect the health or safety of the person or others on the premises

Admission fees if you charge admission:

- let people know if you charge an additional fee for a support person

- clearly disclose the fee in advance
- waive the admission fee for the support person if you require them to accompany the person with a disability due to health or safety reasons

Example of accommodating for support persons

A movie theatre posts a notice on its website and at its ticket window that support persons will be charged 50 per cent of the admission fee when accompanying a person with a disability.

Inform customers when accessible services are temporarily unavailable

Sometimes accessibility features or services require repair or are temporarily out of service (e.g., an elevator, ramp, audio announcements or accessible washroom). When this happens, let your customers know by providing public notice.

To create your policies:

- make a list of the facilities and services people with disabilities rely on
- prepare a template notice in advance and state the reason for the disruption, how long the service or facility will be unavailable and a description of alternative facilities or services, if available
- determine how the notice will be provided so that people are aware of the disruption (e.g., a sign at the entrance door to your business or in another high-traffic area, a message on your website or phone line)

Not everyone is able to read written notices. Consider other ways to provide notice, such as having staff tell customers about service disruptions.

Examples of notification

A dry cleaning business must remove the ramp in front of their store for a few weeks. They post a sign outside and leave a message on their phone explaining that repairs are being done. They give the date when the ramp will be available again and offer to meet customers outside if they call ahead to pick up or drop off garments.

A bakery serves customers by providing them with a ticket and then an electronic sign displays which ticket number is next to be served. An audio announcement also calls out the number. When the electronic display sign unexpectedly malfunctions, the staff posts a sign to let customers know. Then they approach customers with hearing loss or who are deaf to let them know when it is their turn.

Invite customers to provide feedback

Provide a way for your customers who have disabilities to comment on how you provide accessible customer service. Let them know how to provide that feedback and how you will act on complaints. It's a good way to learn about barriers that exist in your workplace so that you can work to address them.

Ensure your feedback process is accessible by providing or arranging for [accessible formats and communication supports](http://www.ontario.ca/page/how-make-information-accessible) (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/how-make-information-accessible>) on request.

To create your policies:

- determine how you want to receive feedback and complaints (e.g., in person, by telephone, in writing, by email or another way)

- clarify how you will respond to feedback, including complaints
 - state how you will let customers know about the process
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Step 2: train your staff

Train all members of your organization on accessible customer service and how to interact with people with different disabilities (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/how-train-your-staff-accessibility>).

To create your policies:

- determine when you will train your staff
 - state the required training topics (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/how-train-your-staff-accessibility#section-o>) in your policies
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Step 3: document your policies and training

Put your accessible customer service policies in writing and make it available to people who request it if:

- you are a business or non-profit with 50 or more employees
- you are a public sector organization of any size

When creating your policies:

- use the customer service policies template (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/accessible-customer-service-policy-template>) or create your own to document the policies that you created in step 1 – your policies can be made up of one or more documents
 - let customers know how to find it (e.g., post a notice on your website or in a high-traffic area)
 - offer your policies in an accessible format or with a communication support, when requested (e.g. you may direct the person to your accessible website, offer to read it aloud or provide it in large print)
 - provide the accessible format in a timely manner and at no additional cost than what you would normally charge
 - keep a log of the training you provide (step 2); keep track of the number of people you trained, on what and when
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Step 4: follow additional accessibility laws

Your organization has to meet all applicable accessibility requirements (<http://www.ontario.ca/page/accessibility-laws>).

Keep track of the past and future deadlines to comply with accessibility laws, and find out if and when you have to file accessibility compliance reports.

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