

# JAN

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## Fact Sheet Series

### Real-Time Communication Etiquette for Communicating with Customers with Disabilities

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## JAN'S ACCOMMODATION FACT SHEET SERIES

### REAL-TIME COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE FOR COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES

According to the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) (1998):

the key to providing quality services to customers with disabilities is to remember that all customers are individuals. Persons with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes with diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs, and preferences --- just like every other customer. Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with customers with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Listen and learn from what the customer tells you regarding his or her needs. Remember, customers with disabilities will continue to patronize businesses that welcome them, are helpful, are accessible and provide quality products and/or services at competitive market prices.

Today, a lot of customer service takes place with voice calls over the telephone and Internet; however, there are other synchronous methods for communicating when individuals are not face-to-face, such as text and instant messaging. For the purposes of this document, non face-to-face methods of communication are referred to as real-time communication. Although the same general rules of etiquette apply when communicating with customers face-to-face, there may be additional issues to consider when communicating in real-time. The following discusses general etiquette issues as well as some issues unique to communicating in real-time.

#### **All Disabilities**

Use proper language when referring to a person with a disability. For example, make reference to the person first, then the disability. Use terminology such as "a person with a disability" rather than a "disabled person."

Newer technologies such as instant messaging (IM) and short message service (SMS) text messaging are increasingly popular real-time communication methods. In all situations, be prepared to repeat information using words or phrases instead of common abbreviations, and allow extra time for individuals to complete messages.

Keep in mind that in most cases, the best way to learn how to accommodate customers with disabilities is to ask them directly. However, do not ask unnecessary questions; ask only what you need to know in order to serve the person effectively. In addition, individuals may choose to use different communication technologies for various reasons. For example, communication technologies traditionally used by individuals with hearing impairments may also be helpful to individuals with speech impairments.

## **Speech Impairments**

People with speech impairments may stutter, slur words, sound hoarse, have unintelligible speech, or be non-vocal. When communicating verbally with a person who has speech impairment:

- Listen attentively, be patient, and avoid speaking for the person or finishing his/her sentences.
- Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty understanding; ask the customer to repeat what was said and then repeat it back to the customer to make sure that you understand it.
- When necessary for clarification, it is appropriate to ask short questions that require short answers.
- Voice clarity can sometimes be achieved by adjusting the frequency of the incoming voice.
- If the person is non-vocal, he/she may use a communication aid, which generates synthesized speech or a prerecorded voice. A person using a communication aid may need additional time to effectively operate the device.
- If no solution to the communication problem can be worked out between you and the customer, ask if there is someone who could interpret on the customer's behalf.

## **Cognitive Impairments**

People with cognitive impairments may have problems with memory and concentration, understanding oral communication, and learning. When communicating in real-time with a person who has a cognitive impairment:

- Be prepared to provide an explanation more than once.
- Be patient, flexible, and supportive; take time to understand the customer and make sure the customer understands you.
- Be prepared to follow up in writing.
- Take time to break long explanations into small, numbered, and sequential steps.

## **Fine Motor Impairments**

People with fine motor impairments may have limited use of one or both hands or no use of the hands and fingers. When communicating over the telephone with people who have fine motor impairments:

- Be prepared to allow extra time for the person to write notes or to use alternative input devices to document notes, numbers, and additional information.
- Be aware that if the person uses speech recognition software for computer keyboard functions in place of handwriting, the individual must speak directly to the computer and may need additional time away from the conversation to inactivate the telephone receiver and perform computer functions by speech.

## Vision Impairments

People with vision impairments may use alternative equipment, such as screen reading software and screen magnification software, to access their computers. When communicating in real-time with people who have vision impairments, it is useful to know how alternative equipment works:

- Screen magnification software may distort “typical” Webpage or document settings. What is visible to one individual on a screen may be wrapped or truncated to an individual using this software. Directional cues may need to be adjusted to effectively direct the individual through screens or other functions.
- Screen reading software allows text to be converted into computer synthesized speech. Screen reading software reads the information on the screen in a certain order that is usually controlled by how the document was designed. Customer service representatives should familiarize themselves with how the major screen reading software products work so they will know how to assist customers with vision impairments who use the software. It may be useful to contact the companies that market these products and ask for a demonstration. For more information on vendors of screen reading software, go to:  
<http://askjan.org/cgi-win/OrgQuery.exe?Vis11>

## Hearing Impairments

People with hearing impairments may have mild to severe hearing loss or may be completely deaf. When communicating with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, keep in mind that:

- For some individuals with mild hearing loss, it might help to raise your voice.
- Other individuals may use hearing aids or amplified telephones, which can sometimes result in high-pitched feedback on the telephone. If you hear feedback, let the customer know so he/she may be able to make simple adjustments to minimize the noise.
- Other individuals with more severe hearing loss may use a TTY (teletypewriter), which is a telephone device that enables individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to make and receive telephone calls to other TTY users. Businesses should have a TTY or TTY software on site. Customer service representatives should be trained on how to use a TTY and proper TTY etiquette.
- Individuals who are severely hearing impaired or deaf may use a relay service, which is a 24 hour, 7 day a week, free assistance service that allows TTY users to call people who do not have a TTY. To use a relay service, an individual uses his/her TTY to contact a relay operator who also has a TTY. The operator then calls the customer service center and serves as an interpreter. When the individual at the recipient end of the call answers, the operator explains his or her role in the call and from that point forward will relay the communication between the two parties exactly as stated by both parties. When using the relay system,

keep in mind that the relay operator types everything you say so do not make comments that you do not want the customer to hear.

- Some individuals may use a video relay service to communicate. Individuals can communicate through a sign language interpreter by placing a video relay call. Video relay calls are made using a high-speed or broadband Internet connection and a videophone, Web camera, or similar technologies. The person who is deaf signs (e.g., using American Sign Language) to a video interpreter (communications assistant), who then communicates with a hearing person by relaying the conversation between the two parties. For more information regarding video relay services, see the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) "Consumer Facts Sheet: Video Relay Services" at <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/videorelay.html>

## **References**

Office of Disability Employment Policy. (1998). Providing Quality Services to Customers with Disabilities. Retrieved December 17, 2009, from <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/ek98/provide.htm>

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