

Growing your customer base to include disabled people

A guide for businesses



This guide has been developed in partnership with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, the Employers' Forum on Disability, the Office for Disability Issues (Department for Work and Pensions) and disabled people, with support from Lloyds Banking Group and Microlink.

The 2012 Legacy Promise for Disabled People aims to help to bring about a radical shift in how society views disability; the removal of barriers to inclusion for disabled people and the contribution that disabled people are making in all walks of life.

One part of this contribution is the potential spending power of disabled people. However, there is evidence to suggest that many Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), which make up the majority of UK businesses, are unaware of this potential market.

Research carried out by Atkins Management Consultants for the Office for Disability Issues in 2010 found that there were two main barriers to SMEs focusing on disabled customers. One was low awareness of how they could boost their sales and profits by making their business more attractive to disabled customers. The other was fear and discomfort with disability coupled with a narrow understanding of “access” and confusion about what is meant by “reasonable adjustments”.

In contrast, those organisations that are more clued up on issues related to disability have found that there are clear benefits to focusing on disabled people as potential customers. For example, an insurance company saw a 90 per cent increase in its online sales after upgrading its website to make it fully accessible to disabled people. Additionally, some stores are realising that an effective home delivery service gives them access to greater numbers of both disabled and non-disabled customers.

Growing your customer base to include disabled people: a guide for businesses aims to address these issues and encourage SMEs to embrace the positive business opportunities presented by disabled customers.

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01 Introduction

Disabled people: an opportunity for your business

Did you know that disabled people contribute over £80 billion a year to the UK economy? Or that disabled people may account for up to 20 per cent of the customer base for an average UK business?

Despite these compelling figures, the needs of disabled people are poorly addressed by most UK businesses. By ensuring disabled people have the same opportunities to use your business or service as everybody else you will gain new customers, increase customer loyalty and enhance your company's reputation.

This guide tells you how you can make your business more accessible to disabled people. It explains:

- what you must do to comply with the law and what is meant by a reasonable adjustment,]
- simple changes you can make so that disabled people will find it easy and enjoyable to do business with you,
- why making these changes may help your business to grow.

Growing your customer base: Tom Hart's story

Tom Hart runs Eildon Holiday Cottages in the Scottish Borders. A former riding stable, Eildon has been converted into six holiday cottages, five of which have been developed from the design stage for accessibility. Eildon Holiday Cottages has achieved high all year-round occupancy.

The business has benefited from loyal guests and a high incidence of returning customers. VisitScotland's promotion of the business model developed by Mr Hart and the wider opportunities offered by accessible tourism are already attracting increasing interest from the Scottish tourism industry. Mr Hart notes that "ensuring your business is accessible makes excellent commercial sense because an accessible business attracts new loyal customers."

How will improving accessibility help my business?

There are sound business reasons to take account of the needs of disabled people.

- Your company will gain the opportunity to do business with a significant proportion of the UK's population, all potential customers who your competitors may well be neglecting.
- Disabled people, older people, their families and friends have increasingly high expectations. They will go elsewhere if they are not satisfied with the service they receive.
- Once disabled people have found a business that suits their needs, they will become loyal customers returning time after time.
- The consumer experiences of disabled people affect the choices of their family, friends and carers. The new business they bring to your company will increase your cash flow and create additional business revenue.
- Improved physical access will make your business more appealing to many others, including the 3.3 million families with children under five who use prams or pushchairs.
- Studies show that corporate reputation increases for businesses that welcome disabled customers.

Disability in numbers

- There are over 11 million disabled people in the UK today (19 per cent of the population)¹ with an estimated annual spending power of over £80 billion.
- Disabled customers may account for up to 20 per cent of the customer base for an average UK business.
- 15 per cent (5.4 million) of adults of working age and 45 per cent (5.3 million) of adults over the State Pension age are disabled².
- There are currently around 19 million people aged 60 or over in the UK and this is forecast to rise to 22.5 million by 2020.³
- Almost 5 million people care for a friend or relative⁴.

1 Family Resources Survey 2010/11

2 Family Resources Survey 2010/11

3 National Populations Projections 2010 ONS

4 Caring for our future: reforming care and support Dept of Health 2012

Who are disabled people?

You might not know that someone is disabled just by looking at or speaking to them. Some people, such as those with long-term health conditions or older people, see their impairment as part of aging and don't consider themselves to be disabled at all. Disabled people are all different and may have a wide range of impairments. These include people who are:

- blind or partially sighted,
- deaf or hearing impaired,
- wheelchair users.

And people who have:

- a physical disability,
- long term illnesses,
- mental health or psychological difficulties,
- an acquired brain injury,
- learning or intellectual disabilities.

Top Tip

All of these people and their families, friends and carers could be your potential customers. The advice in this guide will help you get ready to welcome them to your business.



02 The basics: What the law says you must do

Disability discrimination

The parts of the law relating to the provision of services and public functions apply to almost every business and public authority, however small, whether the service is charged for, or provided free.

It is unlawful to discriminate against a disabled person by:

- refusing to serve them,
- providing them with a worse standard of service,
- offering them a service on worse terms.

You must make sure that everyone you employ or serve is treated equally and according to their needs – whether or not they are, for example, mobility impaired or deaf, or have a speech impairment, mental health difficulty, arthritis or a learning disability.

Providers of services and public functions must make their services and premises as accessible as possible for disabled people. This is not just about buildings – it also includes the ways in which you communicate with your customers and the choices and opportunities you offer them.

Reasonable adjustments

The law requires companies to anticipate the needs of disabled customers and any barriers they might encounter in doing business with them. Companies must make changes, called reasonable adjustments. The law also requires companies to treat people differently according to their needs by making reasonable adjustments for them.

Providers of services and public functions must make reasonable adjustments for disabled people to enable them to use their services, including changes to the way they carry out their business, so that disabled people are not disadvantaged as customers. What is considered reasonable for a small business with limited resources will be different from what might be expected of larger organisations.

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There are always ways to provide a service to disabled customers so they are not turned away or forced to go elsewhere. Many adjustments are common sense and can be put in place by making simple and cost-effective changes to the way something is done. Other adjustments might need more consideration but could, for example, be put in place as part of a general refurbishment or redecoration programme.

Top Tip

Always choose reasonable adjustments that enable disabled people to access the same or as nearly the same service as non disabled people.

Working to the spirit of the law

Disability discrimination is every bit as serious as discrimination on the grounds of race or gender. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has a statutory remit to enforce the rights of disabled people.

Some of your colleagues may find it difficult to accept disabled people on equal terms. They may feel awkward or embarrassed because of lack of contact with disabled people in the past. Disability awareness training will help managers and staff to understand that disabled people are to be valued as customers and employees, just the same as anyone else.

You must make sure employees know their responsibilities, understand what it means to make reasonable adjustments and receive appropriate information or training.

Top Tip

You can get more information by visiting the EHRC website at www.equalityhumanrights.com

Or you can call their Helpline:

England: 0845 604 6610

Scotland: 0845 604 5510

Wales: 0845 604 8810



03 Beyond the basics: doing business with disabled people

Attracting and keeping disabled customers is not just about catering for wheelchair users, who in fact make up less than 8% of the UK's disabled population.

By taking a holistic approach and looking at every aspect of your business, you should find that you can meet the needs of most disabled people by being positive and flexible.

Practical and often low-cost solutions will overcome most barriers. Many of the changes you need to make involve common sense and forethought rather than the purchase of expensive specialist items, or structural changes to your premises.

Top Tip

Don't miss a marketing opportunity! Once you've decided to take action, tell everyone what you are doing. Include information in your advertising and promotional literature, on your website, in employee newsletters and on any appropriate signage. Your commitment to accessibility and a public statement that your company welcomes disabled customers will help to:

- increase the loyalty and satisfaction of existing customers,
 - attract new customers, especially if you publicise your new policies,
 - gain advantage over your competitors,
 - enhance corporate reputation,
 - improve job satisfaction and loyalty amongst your employees.
-

Case study

A shop provides a seat near to the till. This allows customers to sit while waiting to be served, or to rest their purchases at a raised level if lifting is difficult for them. This extra seating is appreciated by other visitors as well, especially people with pushchairs.

Language

Using the right language will help to build positive relationships with disabled people and their families, friends and carers. Many disabled people would prefer you to:

- say 'disabled people' rather than 'the disabled' or 'handicapped',
- avoid words that imply frailty or dependence (e.g. John 'suffers' from MS),
- say 'John has epilepsy' rather than 'John is an epileptic' or a 'victim of epilepsy' if you need to refer to a person's impairment,
- say John 'is a wheelchair user' rather than John 'is wheelchair bound' or 'John is confined to a wheelchair'.

Finally, remember to be natural. Don't worry about using everyday phrases that may seem to refer to an impairment, such as 'see you later' to a blind person.

Serving disabled customers

Always ask disabled people about their requirements in advance. For example, use 'Please let me know if you require any particular assistance' as a standard line in letters and as part of your customer care procedures.

Build responses to requests for adjustments into standard procedures and practices and make sure everyone knows what you can offer. For example, consider including a standard statement on printed matter and in your marketing materials.



Top Tip


Include tailored local travel information in letters and emails when customers contact you in advance of a visit.

Face-to-face contact and customer support

All your customer facing staff should:

- feel comfortable with disabled people,
- never patronise, make assumptions or think they know best,
- be ready to offer assistance, but never impose it,
- confidently ask whether the person has specific requirements and be able to respond sensibly,
- know what reasonable adjustments your company offers.

They must be prepared to:

- move to a place that is quiet or where they can talk with a customer face-to-face,
 - sit or bend down to talk to a customer at her or his eye-level,
 - offer a customer a seat or help them with doors,
 - let a customer take their arm for guidance or support,
 - offer a customer the use of equipment, for example a clip board, as an alternative writing surface,
 - use appropriate ways of communicating with a customer, for example by writing notes if they find speech difficult to understand,
 - always talk to a disabled customer directly, never to his or her companion,
 - never shout at or call attention to a customer,
 - never compromise a customer's right to privacy or confidentiality,
 - check to make sure a customer has been understood correctly,
 - always be courteous and patient.
- 

Top Tip

Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do, it's always best to ask them.

Home visits

If staff visit elderly or disabled people in their homes, they should always:

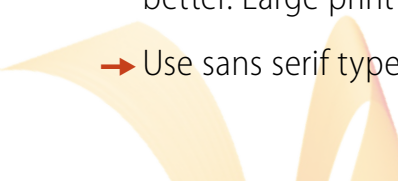
- try not to arrive unexpectedly,
 - check whether they need to agree a security password when making an appointment,
 - give the person plenty of time to open the door or answer the telephone if they call in advance,
 - say who they are, why they are calling and show proof of identity.
-

Top Tip

Furniture or equipment in a disabled person's home, office or workplace will be arranged to their needs. You should always put things back where you find them. Never leave bags or tools where they may be tripped over.

Written information

Providing information in a variety of formats will help remove a common and frustrating barrier for disabled people. Always consider how best to make your written information accessible – small changes and alternative formats can make a big difference to your disabled customers.

- Produce your leaflets, brochures, menus and other marketing or customer information in large print and other accessible formats. Most people who have a visual impairment can read clear or large print, and only a very few people need to use Braille.
 - Use 12 point as a minimum font size for all your written communications, though 14 point is better. Large print should be in 16 point as a minimum.
 - Use sans serif typefaces such as Arial, Univers or Verdana.
- 

- Ensure contrast between text and background. Avoid using red text and avoid justifying text as large gaps can be confusing. Don't use italics or capitals for large blocks of text.
- For customers with learning disabilities, consider producing materials in Easy Read and / or use pictograms and symbols to help users navigate text.
- Produce signs and labels in large clear text, and in contrasting colours, such as black text on a white or yellow background, and mounted at a suitable height.
- In all written information, always structure content in a logical order, use plain English and avoid long sentences.
- If you are using images, always include positive images of disabled people from a range of ethnic backgrounds.

Top Tip


Keep a magnifying glass available for customers to use to read your information when visiting your company.

Your website

Make sure you include an access statement on your website. An access statement is a clear, accurate and, above all, honest description of your company's current facilities and the services you offer. Customers and other visitors to your business will then know exactly what you have done to prepare for them. This allows potential customers to make informed decisions about whether your business meets their particular access needs.

When you commission a new website or upgrade your existing one, make sure the people in charge of your website are familiar with web accessibility and understand British Standard 'BS8878 – Web Accessibility Code of Practice' so you can build in accessibility for everyone.

Other important details to include on your website are:

- all relevant email addresses,
 - the company telephone number and, if possible, a fax number, which is useful for people who have difficulty using a telephone,
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- the postal address and travel information. For example directions and instructions for arrival. Always include the full postcode so that customers can use a Sat Nav or online route planner. Clear instructions about how to find you when travelling by car or taxi are also useful.

Case study

A supermarket develops a website that is accessible to the widest possible range of customers. They want their website to be available to everyone including those with sight, audio and motor impairment restrictions. Therefore they have used an easy to read font, tagged images, and used consistent navigation. They do not rely on colour as the only way of giving information and avoid using pictures and images of text.

Customer service

There are several other things you can do to make sure disabled customers have a positive experience when doing business with your company.

- Making contact with you: can people contact your business in a variety of ways, for example by phone, text phone, email and fax? Some telephone companies enable hearing impaired people to phone them by linking the person to an operator who relays the conversation.
- Staff helpers: can your staff be trained to assist customers who need help to access information? Examples of this type of help include reading a menu out loud to a visually impaired person, writing down a price for a person with a hearing impairment, or speaking in simple, plain English to a person with a learning disability.
- Your staff might also be able to help someone carry a product to a customer's car, show someone around your facilities, help to cut up food or to explain something in a different way if a customer doesn't understand a particular piece of information.
- Allow customers to bring their assistance dogs, even if you normally ban animals from your premises. These dogs are highly trained and are not a health and safety risk. Remember that it's not just visually impaired people who use them. Make sure you have a bowl of water on hand for the dog if your customer will be with you for a while.



Your premises

There are many things you can do to improve physical access to your business.

- Make sure your company premises are well lit and corners, steps and counter edges are marked with high visibility tape so they can be easily seen.

Case study

A small fast-food outlet has a narrow, stepped entrance that cannot be widened or have a ramp fitted. The company fits a low-level bell so that people who can't get into the building, including wheelchair users, can ring for service at the door.

- Lighting inside and outside your business must be non glare and evenly positioned so visitors can identify any obstacles in the dark, for example car parking, routes to the entrance, corridors and public areas.
- Paint the edge of entrance steps white to highlight contrast, fit a handrail or install a bell or buzzer and, if necessary, be prepared to go outside to serve a disabled person.
- Fit easy-grip handles or move existing handles to a more accessible height for wheelchair users.
- Consider a temporary ramp that you can fit if a wheelchair user visits. This will also help people making deliveries to your company.
- Keep corridors and aisles clear of clutter so wheelchair users and people with poor mobility can get through.
- Doors can often be heavy so make sure their opening and closing mechanisms work properly and fit simple to use handles.

Case study

A courier service, when refurbishing its premises, replaces the outward opening doors with automatic sliding ones. These save space, are more secure than the old doors and make access easier for everyone, including its own parcel carrying employees. It fixes bold notices to the doors, at eye-level, to identify them as possible hazards.

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- Provide a sturdy chair for customers who have to queue or wait. Consider fast-tracking people who are unable to stand in a queue. If required, you could also reserve particular seating or spaces for disabled visitors.
- Rugs or loose carpet fittings can be a trip hazard so if you use them make sure they are recessed or fixed securely onto the floor.
- Consider providing a personal shopping, home delivery or home visit service for people who can't get to your business.

Parking

- If you can't provide parking for disabled visitors on your premises, make sure staff know where the nearest parking is located.
- If you have staff parking, make a staff space available for disabled visitors by prior arrangement.

Top Tip

If you have a designated disabled parking bay, make sure it is well lit, clearly signposted and that it is not used by staff or delivery drivers.

Toilets

- Consider fitting a handrail to help with sitting down or standing up.
- Make sure the toilet paper holder and spare rolls are within easy reach.
- Consider having an easy to use lever tap fitted to the sink.
- Consider fitting an emergency cord.

Case study

A garage washroom is refurbished. Lever taps replace the original taps on the hand basin. People with limited strength can easily turn these, as can mechanics with greasy hands.



Getting it right

Don't forget to let customers know about the changes you are making and that you welcome their views on improving services. Their views will help you to make further improvements and increase customer loyalty.

Top Tip

Customer feedback is the best opportunity to learn more about your customers and their thoughts on how accessible your business really is. They may pass on some useful tips picked up elsewhere.



04 Disability Checklist for small businesses

- Does everyone understand the business case for welcoming disabled customers and making reasonable adjustments for disabled employees?
- Do you and your employees understand your legal responsibilities?
- Do you keep track of how requests for adjustments from employees and customers are managed?
- Do you routinely consider disability when you update or make changes to the ways you work or to your built environment?
- Do you ask your customers what you can do to make your service easier for them to use – and then take steps to do it?
- Do you highlight the good service you offer to your disabled customers in your marketing materials?
- Do your suppliers know you are serious about disability and that you expect the same from them?
- Are your advisers – legal and otherwise – competent on the requirements of the Equality Act 2010?



05 Useful contacts

Employers' Forum on Disability

Nutmeg House

60 Gainsford Street

London SE1 2NY

Phone: (020) 7403 3020

Textphone: (020) 7403 0040

Fax: (020) 7403 0404

Email: enquiries@employers-forum.co.uk

Website: www.efd.org.uk

Employers' Forum on Disability (EFD) is the authoritative employers' voice on disability as it affects business: employees, customers and stakeholders. EFD offers its members a one-stop-shop for advice, information and guidance. Through networking events, publications, briefings, website and help line, EFD makes it easier to employ disabled people and to serve disabled customers.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Phone: 0845 762 2633

Textphone: 0845 762 2644

Fax: 0845 777 8878

Email: info@equalityhumanrights.com

Website: www.equalityhumanrights.com



Growing your customer base: Kim and Terry Lord's story

Kim and Terry Lord run The Ramblers, a six bedroom VisitEngland four star guest house near Mablethorpe on the Lincolnshire coast.

"We speak to all our visitors and soon pick up if there's anything we can provide which will improve their stay. For example, some visitors with arthritis find a full size kettle too heavy so we provide travel kettles as an alternative.

To accommodate one disabled person, we were asked to move the bedroom furniture around. We didn't make an issue of it and rearranged the room to suit. Now that visitor stays with us four times a year and we've welcomed two other families directly from her recommendation. It cost nothing, just ten minutes of our time but our business gained over £1,000 from that one satisfied visitor."

Further copies of this publication are available online only.
Download at www.odi.gov.uk/involving-disabled-people

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