

Interacting with People with Disabilities – What do we call them?

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Recent statistics from the US Department of Labor show that there are approximately 54 Million Americans with a disability. That means that roughly 1 in 5 people will experience a disability their lifetime. Stop and think about it, Disability is the only minority that anyone can join and without any notice usually as well.

The DOL study further showed that those 54 Million people have approximately \$175 Million dollars in discretionary income to spend. What business would not like their share of those dollars?

Since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, people with disabilities have become more visible. They have more opportunities, more buildings and businesses are becoming accessible and more employers are hiring these qualified applicants.

Like any other culture, the community of people with disabilities has a certain etiquette that not only makes interacting easier in most cases but also affords everyone a certain amount of dignity and respect.

Now the intent of this article is not to rant on and on about political correctness but we do hope to offer you a few basic, common sense tips on interacting with people with disabilities to prevent unintentionally offending someone and even avoid a possible discrimination complaint.

“What do we call them?”

Labels and classifications change with the wind and to be honest even the people with disabilities can't always agree on what to be called. Should we be “Challenged” or “Differently Able”? Oh, Please. Let's just stick to the basics.

We are all **PEOPLE FIRST**. I use a wheelchair but it allows me to be independent, it doesn't limit me. So while I am a Person who uses a Wheelchair, I am certainly not “Wheelchair Bound”.

In addressing someone with a disability address the person first. Their disability is a part of their lives but it is not their whole life.

Appropriate Language would include:

- **Person with a Disability**
- **Wheelchair User**
- **Person who is Blind or has low vision**
- **Person who is Deaf or has limited hearing**
- **Person who is Mentally Ill**
- **Person who is Developmentally Challenged**
- **Person who has Cancer, MS, HIV, Etc.**

This simple language demonstrates that you are aware of disabled issues, respectful of people with disabilities and this small thing can be the difference between a complaint and a positive image for your business.

Tips for Wheelchair Users

- If the person appears to have little hand strength or movement, do not be afraid to shake hands. This is a traditional part of business and social etiquette and signals that you are giving equal consideration.
- Do not hold on to a person's wheelchair. It is a part of the person's body space and is both inappropriate and dangerous.
- Talk directly to the person using the wheelchair, not to an attendant or third party.
- During a conversation with a person using a wheelchair, consider sitting down in order to share eye level. This is not only more respectful, but will be more comfortable for both parties.

Tips for People who are Blind or have Low Vision

- Introduce yourself to a person who is blind or visually impaired by using your name and/or title.
- To guide a person who is blind, let him or her take your arm. If you encounter steps, curbs, or other obstacles, identify them and pause briefly before proceeding.
- Point out obvious obstacles in the direct path of travel.
- Speak directly to the person in a normal tone and speed. Do not shout or speak in an unnaturally loud voice.
- Do not pet or play with a working guide or "service" dog (usually indicated by a harness). The dog is working and should not be distracted. If you are unsure whether or not it is okay to pet or interact with the dog, ask the owner.
- When entering or leaving a room, say so. Anyone would feel foolish talking into thin air or not knowing who is present.

Tips for People who are Deaf or have Limited Hearing

- Use a normal voice tone and provide a clear view of your mouth.
- If a sign language interpreter is involved, speak directly to the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.
- Ask the person to repeat themselves if you do not understand.
- Avoid standing in front of a light source or window that might silhouette your face, making it difficult to see you clearly.
- Use facial expressions, body language, and pantomime.
- Explain any interruption (such as a phone ringing or knock at the door) before attending to it.
- Learn a few basic “signs” if you will come in regular contact with them as a coworker or regular customer.

As you can see these are not extraordinary measures to take. Most are very simple, common sense courtesies and you may wonder why you have not thought of them before.

The ADA is a Federal Civil Rights law but unlike other civil rights laws covering race, gender or age, the ADA does require some effort and sometimes may involve some cost to your business. But what is the cost in reality?

There are tax breaks for monies spent on ADA Compliance. There are qualified applicants with disabilities to hire to help your business grow. There are 54 Million potential customers for your business with money to spend. Ramps and grab bars do cost money, training for your staff costs money but so do ADA Complaints and the bad press and damaged corporate image if you are seen as the business that welcomes “Able Bodied Only”.

The ADA is not affirmative action and does not grant special privileges to people with disabilities it merely establishes a level playing field, equal access.

As you continue to increase your interaction with people with disabilities we hope these simple tips help you to have a positive experience as you welcome this segment of the population into your business as employees and customers.

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