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Blog article by Frank Fleming, Equality Commission, Advice & Compliance

Staff attitude to disabled customers can be so important for business success

Two recent incidents highlight the importance of providing accessible goods and services for disabled people. In the first, security staff at a music concert confiscated a bottle of Lucozade from a young woman Kayla Hanna. Kayla has Type 1 Diabetes and, despite showing her diabetes tattoo and insulin pack, her energy drink was removed.

The second situation involved a disabled passenger refused permission to board an aircraft at Belfast International Airport. Steve Smither was turned away by security staff, who claimed that the spanner he carried in his wheelchair repair kit was deemed a security risk and could be used to “dismantle the aircraft”

Both of these situations demonstrate the need for all organisations, providing services to the public, to ensure that staff are trained on how to deal with disabled customers. All too often, when we think about access issues, we think about the physical environment, doors, steps, seating, toilets etc. While all of these are important, it is the attitude of staff and how they interact with disabled customers, which can have the greatest impact.

Making sure that your staff deliver great customer service can make a huge difference to disabled people in particular. Staff who receive disability awareness training are likely to provide a better experience for your disabled customers.

Customer Service Tips

- Introduce yourself, let customers know you are available to help
- Always talk to the customer directly, not to their companion or carer
- Don't be afraid to ask, 'Can I help you?' or 'How can I help you?'
- Be patient and ready to repeat or clarify something – your customers may present you with their JAM card
- Speak clearly and face-to-face to people who are lip reading
- Offer to write things down

Practical Assistance

- Offer to find or reach for items
- Be prepared to carry or put items aside
- Offer to describe items or help to read labels
- Ensure you know how to use your induction loop, portable ramp or other access equipment
- Offer a seat to waiting customers
- Offer to move furniture for people who need more space e.g. wheelchair users, people with assistance dogs
- Turn down any music to improve communication or help calm people with autism

The Commission's Every Customer Counts initiative aims to help businesses, and those who provide services to the public, to improve accessibility for disabled people by providing a range of practical guides. See our simple, easy-to-use checklist, www.equalityni.org/everycustomercounts

Remember, access does not have to be expensive. Reasonable adjustments mean reasonable changes relative to the size and context of the business. Changing your approach from, 'Do I have to...?' to 'What can I do...?' could possibly make the biggest difference of all.

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Further blogs are available online at www.equalityni.org/blog