

Webcast transcript: Accessible Ontario: Providing accessible customer service for January 1, 2012 - Part 2

Part 2 Video Link: <http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcsc/programs/accessibility/customerService/>

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT – Part 2

Linda Markowksy: There are only ten requirements that all organizations across Ontario with one employee or more must meet.

The **first requirement** of the Accessible Customer Service Standard is to develop customer service policies and procedures for serving people with disabilities.

This isn't as complicated as it sounds. Start by listing what you do now to serve your customers or clients. This can include informal practices and procedures where you use only verbal instructions as well as formal, written policies and procedures.

Next, identify any gaps. Given what you do now, what things need to change so that people with disabilities will have equal access to your goods or services?

Finally, develop your new or revised policies, practices and procedures using reasonable efforts to ensure that they are consistent.

Let's look at some examples:

That clothing store that I mentioned earlier with the "no refunds" policy might revise their policy to include exceptions for customers with disabilities because its fitting rooms are not wheelchair accessible.

A coffee shop that has a customer with a mental health disability who finds it difficult to be around crowds might offer the customer a quiet table away from the busy section of the shop. This allows the customer equal opportunity to enjoy his food and drink.

To help you develop policies and procedures for your organization, there is an accessibility policy template on our website. When developing these policies, it is often helpful to include your staff in the process, particularly those who deal with customers most often.

Let's move on to the **next requirement**.

Make sure that the policies and procedures you develop are consistent with the principles of independence, dignity, integration and equality of opportunity.

Let me give you an example to illustrate this one.

Imagine you are organizing a meeting in a small board room. You've invited twelve of your customers but it's a tight fit with little room between the chairs and walls.

The first customer to arrive uses a walker, the next uses a cane. After they are seated, you become concerned that others entering the room may trip on the assistive devices, possibly injuring themselves or damaging the walker or cane.

You say, "I'm just going to take your walker and cane and put them over in the corner, so they won't break if someone steps on them."

While your concern is well meaning, this practice is not consistent with the principles of independence, dignity, integration and equality of opportunity, because the participants might not be able to choose to leave the meeting, change their seats, stand to make a point, without asking you to return their assistive devices.

There are other examples and more information about the principles of independence, dignity, integration and equality of opportunity available to help you understand this requirement in the on-line Manual I mentioned earlier that you can find under the tools to help you comply section at ontario.ca/accession.

The **third requirement**: Have a policy on allowing people to use their own assistive devices (these are things like canes, wheelchairs, oxygen tanks) to access your goods and services.

Your policy might be very general or may need to be more specific based on your business.

Let's look at another example.

Some people with low vision use magnification devices called monoculars to see large screens or other things at a distance. At a movie theatre that prohibits recording devices, a staff person might assume the monocular is a recording device and restrict a person from using one. Having a policy on the use of assistive devices could address this.

The **next requirement** is about communication.

The Accessible Customer Service Standards require that you or your staff communicate with a person with a disability in a manner that takes into account his or her disability.

For instance, a gym offers their group exercise 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 company website.

This works for the customer because she has a screen reader at home that reads what is displayed on the website. The manager could also ask if there are specific classes that the customer is interested in and offer to read her the information on those.

You can get some other ideas on how to communicate with people with different disabilities by visiting our website. Communication is the key to good customer service and it all starts with asking a simple question, ?How can I help??

We?ll go back to the studio a little later to get people?s reactions to that question but first let?s finish off the requirements.

The **fifth requirement** is that you allow people with disabilities to be accompanied by their service animal, such as a guide dog or hearing dog, in areas of your business that are open to the public.

The only exception here would be areas of your business where animals are prohibited by law, for example the kitchen of a restaurant.

If service animals are excluded by law, your policy will need to identify other ways for people with service animals to access your goods or services. Perhaps you can go to their premises or provide your services over the internet or over the phone.

When we talk about service animals, we often get questions about allergies. If your staff or other customers are allergic to animals, talk to all those involved to find a way to accommodate everyone's needs on the premises or provide your services over the internet or over the phone.

Talking about this with your staff and making sure they are trained and understand their responsibilities in advance makes all the difference. We?ll talk more about training shortly.

The **sixth requirement** is that you permit people with disabilities who rely on a support person to bring that person with them while accessing your goods or services.

For example, a person with a disability goes to meet with her financial advisor, accompanied by her support person. Before they start discussing specific financial details, the advisor simply asks the person with a disability for her consent to have the conversation while the support person is in the room.

The **next requirement** is related and indicates that where admission fees are charged, you must post information about your policy regarding what fee, if any, would be charged for a support person accompanying a person with a disability.

For example, a dinner theatre posts a notice on its website and at its ticket window stating that support persons will not be charged if they are not consuming food during the show. The notice states that support persons will be charged half of the usual price if they wish to eat the meal provided.

That?s specific and clear.

The **eighth requirement** says that if you offer facilities or services for people with disabilities (such as an elevator or accessible washroom), let people know when they are out of order.

For example, a dry cleaning business that needs to remove the ramp in front of their store for a few weeks for repairs posts a sign outside and leaves a message on their voicemail explaining the situation.

Both the sign and the message explain that repairs are being done, give the date when the ramp will be available again, and offer to meet customers outside if they call ahead in order to pick up or drop off garments. But it?s not just about ramps or elevators.

An art gallery has recorded audio tours for people with vision loss, but isn?t able to offer these tours for a two week period because the equipment is being upgraded. When this happens, notices are posted on the gallery?s accessible website ahead of time. Staff also inform visitors as they enter the gallery that recorded audio tours are not available but that staff would be willing to provide a guided tour instead.

The **ninth requirement** is that you train your staff, volunteers and contractors to serve customers with disabilities.

You also need to train the people in your organization who develop customer service policies, practices and procedures. This may be your managers, your board and/or your human resource staff.

Again, please visit ontario.ca/AccessON for free downloadable training manuals and an online course called ?Serve-Ability? that covers most of what your staff need to know.

The **tenth requirement** is that you let customers with disabilities and different abilities provide feedback on how you met their needs and establish a process to respond and take action on any complaints.

A hotel invites its guests to provide feedback by posting a sign in the lobby and including a notice on the bill. Front desk staff also mention that feedback is appreciated and can be submitted in person, by phone or on the company website.

Remember, it's not just customers with disabilities who can provide feedback on how accessible your customer service is, it?s anyone.

If you have 20 or more employees, you must complete **four additional requirements**:

- First, complete an online report on your compliance by the reporting deadline. This is a short online checklist report. You will be sent instructions on how to access and complete this report closer to the reporting deadline of 2012.
- Second, if you have 20 or more employees you must also document in writing all of your policies and procedures on how you met each of the requirements.

For example, if you hold a group training session for your employees, have each employee sign in, have

a person with authority in the organization certify that each of the participants stayed for the duration of the session, indicate the date of the session, the length of the training, the location, the trainer and the method used.

- Third, you must notify customers that all of the documents required by the standard are available upon request. This should be done in a number of ways. For example, post a notice in one or more places where customers will notice it, put it on your website, tell them in person, and include it on your phone message.
- The final requirement for organizations with 20 or more employees, indicates that when you are providing documents required under the standard, you need to make sure the information is in a format that takes into account the person's disability.

To recap, the Accessible Customer Service Standard requires that you:

- develop policies for serving people with disabilities
- make sure those policies adhere to principles of independence, dignity, integration and equality of opportunity
- allow assistive devices
- consider a person's disability when you communicate with them. (Remember it starts with asking "How can I help?")
- allow service animals
- welcome support persons
- post information about fees for support persons
- let people know when accessible services aren't available
- train your staff, managers with responsibility for policies, practices and procedures, volunteers and contractors, and
- invite customers to provide feedback

If you have 20 or more employees, there are additional requirements for online reporting and informing the public about how you provide accessible customer service.

Most of you are probably thinking that some of these requirements are just business as usual for you — and that's great. For those requirements that are new to the way you do business, we have tools to help you meet the requirements of the standard.

Let's go back to the studio one more time and ask them to sum it up.

Alfred Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: Persons with disabilities spend annually in Canada 25 billion dollars, so it only makes sense that if you are in business, that you look towards that sector to improve your business opportunities.

Victor Fiume, President, Canadian Home Builders Association: And what does it end up costing me? I'll tell you, nothing. Very very minimal. And what do I get in return? In the last three or four years we've built six homes with varying degrees of accessible features in them. Six sales that I would never have gotten, if I hadn't even reached out and tried to make those accommodations.

Alfred Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: So it is about incremental steps and it's about small changes.

Jim Sanders, Past President, Canadian National Institute for the Blind: How can I help? Those are four great words. I had to count them up. How can I help? Four great words because they apply to anything.

Ron Lessard, Learning Disabilities Association of Sudbury: You know, that is a very warm and engaging thing to say to someone with a disability. How can I help you?

Alfred Spencer, Director, Accessibility Directorate of Ontario: Often we are afraid to ask because we think we are going to offend, but sometimes the easiest way to learn is to actually ask the person about themselves and How can I help you? to participate with me in whatever we're doing.

Wilma Davies, Retired, Small Business Owner, Collingwood: We all have to help each other.

Ron Lessard, Learning Disabilities Association of Sudbury: By saying ...

Ben Shropshire: How can I help?

Female Coffee Shop Clerk: How can I help?

Male Grocery Clerk: How can I help?

Female Pharmacist: How can I help?

Female Florist: How can I help?

Linda Markowsky: How can I help? If everyone in your company asks that one simple question, you're well on your way to providing accessible customer service.

As you start to meet the requirements to make your business more accessible, you may have questions. We have tools, templates and lots of information to help you better understand and meet the requirements of the standard.