

Purpose

This procedure implements, in part, the City of Peterborough's Corporate Accessibility Policy. The purpose of this procedure is to provide guidelines for effective communication between customer service representatives and people with disabilities.

Application

This procedure applies to:

- Every customer service representative;
- Anyone who participates in developing City policies, practices, and procedures governing the provision of City goods or services to members of the public or other third parties;
- Premises, where City goods or services are offered, to which the public or other third parties have access; and
- Managers/supervisors of facilities and service areas where City goods or services are provided who are responsible for ensuring compliance with this procedure.

Procedure

Providing customer service to people with disabilities

Customer service representatives will use reasonable efforts to ensure that customer service is consistent with the principles of dignity, independence, integration and equal opportunity. Customer service representatives will consider the following when providing service to people with disabilities:

- Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Use tolerance, optimism and a willingness to find a way to communicate.
- Smile and relax.
- Don't make assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities a person has.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer, "How may I help you?" Offer to help. Don't just jump in. Your customers with disabilities know if they need help and how you can provide it.
- Some disabilities are not visible. Take the time to get to know your customers' needs.
- Find a good way to communicate. A good start is to listen carefully.

- If you can't understand what your customer is saying, just politely ask again.
- Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Look at your customer, but don't stare. Speak directly to a person with a disability, not to their support person.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- Don't touch or address service animals. They are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Be knowledgeable of best practices, accommodations and special services available.

How to provide customer service to people with specific disabilities

Each person with a disability may need a slightly different type of accommodation to receive City services. Customer service representatives will communicate in a way that takes a person's disability into account. They will provide customer service in a way that demonstrates an understanding of the typical needs of the various types of disabilities.

Physical disabilities

Physical disabilities include a range of functional limitations from minor difficulties in moving or coordinating one part of the body, to muscle weakness, tremors, and paralysis. Physical disabilities can be congenital such as muscular dystrophy, or acquired, such as tendonitis. A physical disability may affect an individual's ability to:

- Perform manual tasks such as holding a pen, turning a key or gripping a doorknob;
- Move around independently;
- Control the speed or coordination of movements;
- Reach, pull, or manipulate objects; and
- Have strength or endurance.

To communicate and interact effectively with people with physical disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Avoid touching, moving, or leaning on wheelchairs or other mobility devices as they are part of the person's personal space;
- Keep ramps and corridors free of clutter;

- Step around a counter to provide service if it is too high or wide; and
- Provide seating for those that cannot stand in line.

Hearing disabilities

Hearing disabilities can cause problems with distinguishing certain frequencies, sounds, or words. A person who is deaf, deafened or hard-of hearing may be unable to:

- Use a traditional public telephone;
- Understand speech in noisy environments; and
- Pronounce words clearly enough to be easily understood;

To communicate and interact effectively with people with hearing disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Direct their attention to the person with a hearing disability, instead of the person's interpreter;
- Write notes back and forth to share information, if necessary;
- Provide documents or images to provide information;
- Face the person and keep their hands and other objects away from their face and mouth;
- Speak clearly at a moderate pace and avoid shouting; and
- Verify that all parties understand what has been communicated.

Deaf-blindness disabilities

Deaf-blindness disabilities involve a combination of hearing and vision loss. The result for a person who is deaf-blind is significant difficulty accessing information and performing daily activities. Deaf-blindness interferes with communication, learning, orientation, and mobility. People who are deaf-blind communicate using any combination of various sign language systems, Braille, telephone devices, and communication boards.

Many people who are deaf-blind use the services of an intervener who relay information, facilitate auditory and visual information, and act as sighted guides.

To communicate and interact effectively with people with deaf-blindness disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Start by verbally identifying themselves;

- Be patient and understand that communication may take some time;
- Direct their attention to the person with a deaf-blindness disability, instead of the person's intervener; and
- Verify that all parties understand what has been communicated.

Visual disabilities

Visual disabilities range from slightly reduced visual acuity to total blindness. Vision loss can result in:

- Difficulty reading or seeing faces;
- Difficulty maneuvering in unfamiliar places;
- Inability to differentiate colours or distances;
- A narrow field of vision;
- The need for bright light, or contrast; and
- Night blindness.

To communicate and interact effectively with people with vision disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Start by verbally identifying themselves;
- Speak clearly and at a moderate pace;
- Avoid touching service animals. They are working animals;
- Verbally describe the setting, form, and location as necessary; and
- Offer their arm to guide the person, without grabbing or pulling the person.

Intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disabilities affect a person's ability to think and reason. A person with an intellectual disability may have difficulty with:

- Standard information, either written or spoken;
- Conceptual information;
- Perception of sensory information; and
- Memory.

To communicate and interact effectively with people with intellectual disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Use clear and simple language at a moderate pace;
- Be prepared to explain and provide examples regarding information;
- Remember that the person is an adult and, unless otherwise determined, can make their own decisions;
- Be patient; and
- Verify that all parties understand what has been communicated.

Speech disabilities

Speech disabilities involve the partial or total loss of the ability to speak. Typical speech disabilities include problems with:

- Pronunciation;
- Pitch and loudness;
- Hoarseness or breathiness; and
- Stuttering or slurring.

To communicate and interact effectively with people with speech disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Communicate in a quiet environment, if possible, in order to better hear the customer;
- Give the customer full attention and avoid interrupting or finishing sentences;
- Ask the customer to repeat as necessary, or to write a message; and
- Verify that all parties understand what has been communicated.

Learning disabilities

Learning disabilities are generally invisible and can result in a host of different communications difficulties for people. Learning disabilities include a range of disorders that effect verbal and nonverbal information acquisition, retention, understanding, and processing. People with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence but take in and process information and express knowledge in different ways. Learning disabilities can result in difficulties with:

- Written communication;

- Problem solving;
- Time management;
- Way finding; and
- Information processing.

To communicate and interact effectively with people with learning disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Be patient and willing to find a way to communicate;
- Ask “How may I help you?”;
- Speak clearly and directly to the customer at a moderate pace;
- Respond to any requests for verbal information;
- Offer assistance in completing forms;
- Allow extra time to complete tasks if necessary; and
- Verify that all parties understand what has been communicated.

Mental health disabilities

Customer service representatives will not know that a customer has a mental health disability unless they are informed of it. Usually, mental health disabilities will not affect customer service at all. Mental health disabilities include a range of disorders, however there are three main types of mental health disabilities:

- Behavioural;
- Anxiety; and
- Mood.

If someone is experiencing difficulty in controlling their symptoms, they may seem edgy or irritated; act aggressively; be perceived as pushy or abrupt or be unable to make a decision. To communicate and interact effectively with people with mental health disabilities, customer service representatives will:

- Treat each person as an individual - ask what would make them the most comfortable and respect their needs as much as possible;
- Try to reduce stress and anxiety in situations; and

- Stay calm and courteous and focus on the service they need and how to help, even if the person exhibits unusual behaviour.

Smell disabilities

Smell disabilities can involve the inability to sense smells or a hypersensitivity to odors and smells. A person with a smelling disability may have allergies or sensitivities to certain odors, scents, or chemicals or may be unable to identify dangerous gases, smoke, fumes and spoiled food.

Customer service representatives will not know that a customer has a smell disability unless they are informed of it. Usually smell disabilities will not affect customer service.

If a customer identifies that they have a smell disability, the customer service representative will ask “How may I help you?” and will make reasonable efforts to deliver service in a way that takes the person’s ability into account. For example, a customer with a sensitivity to scents may need to be served by an alternate customer service representative who is not wearing perfume.

Touch disabilities

Touch disabilities can affect a person’s ability to sense texture, temperature, vibration, or pressure. Touch sensations may be reduced or heightened. This could result in either a hypersensitivity to touch, temperature, or the opposite, numbness and the inability to feel touch sensations.

Customer service representatives will not know that a customer has a touch disability unless they are informed of it. Usually touch disabilities will not affect customer service.

If a customer identifies that they have a touch disability, the customer service representative will ask “How may I help you?” and will make reasonable efforts to deliver service in a way that takes the person’s ability into account. For example, a customer with a sensitivity to temperature may need to be served in an alternate location that is more temperate.

Taste disabilities

Taste disabilities can limit the experience of the four primary taste sensations: sweet, bitter, salty, and sour. A person with a taste disability may be unable to identify spoiled food or noxious substances.

Customer service representatives will not know that a customer has a taste disability unless they are informed of it. Usually taste disabilities will not affect customer service.

If a customer identifies that they have a taste disability, the customer service representative will ask “How may I help you?” and will make reasonable efforts to deliver service in a way that takes the person’s ability into account. For example, a

customer with a taste disability may need a customer service representative to confirm the freshness of a food item.

Other disabilities

Other disabilities result from a range of other conditions, accidents, illnesses, and diseases including ALS, asthma, diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDs, environmental sensitivities, seizure disorders, heart disease, stroke and joint replacement.

Customer service representatives may not know that a customer has another disability unless they are informed of it. If a customer identifies that they have another disability, the customer service representative will ask “How may I help you?” and will make reasonable efforts to deliver service in a way that takes the person’s ability into account. For example, a customer with heart disease may need a chair to sit during lengthy transactions.

Serving people with disabilities on the telephone

To communicate effectively with people with disabilities on the telephone, customer service representatives will:

- Speak clearly and directly;
- Concentrate on what is being said;
- Be patient and not interrupt or finish the person’s sentences. Give the customer time to explain themselves;
- Ask the customer to clarify if the customer service representative does not understand. Avoid guessing what the customer is saying;
- If uncertain what was said, repeat or rephrase what they have heard;
- If a telephone customer is using an interpreter or a TTY line, direct your conversation to the customer through the interpreter or TTY; and
- If the customer has great difficulty communicating, offer to make arrangements to call back when it’s convenient to speak to a support person.