

Reducing Barriers at Reception and Counter Service Areas for People Living with Hearing Loss

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As someone who has lived with hearing loss my whole life, the idea of using reception desks or counter service areas has always filled me with a sense of dread. It is typically a lot harder to hear in these areas and usually includes a line-up with other people around you watching and listening to your communication breakdowns with the increased pressure of the need to rush because people are waiting on you. Not my favourite situation to be in.

Reception desks or counter service areas are the face of a business or organization and a customer's first point of contact. Quality customer service makes customers feel valued, treated fairly, and appreciated. This is typically done with staff training and careful marketing and messaging to optimize communication. There is a lot on the line - if things don't go well, it could mean losing business and future loyal customers.

With so much riding on this interaction, why do most organizations focus on what is said and not enough on whether the message is heard or understood? An unsatisfactory experience can hurt the bottom line.

The reception desk and counter service areas should be accessible for people to hear and to communicate effectively. Background music, poor lighting, poor acoustics, machine noise, and other people talking create an impossible situation for many people.

Counter service is now even more challenging because of COVID-19. In addition, the installation of plexiglass barriers and the use of masks has caused physical barriers that further distort and reduce speakers' volume. Plexiglass and masks also both reduce facial cues, which is needed for speech reading.

Counter service areas, such as those found at pharmacies, hospitals, and banks, have caused me to have 'crisis communication situations' at times where, depending on the situation, I cannot

communicate effectively and leave feeling embarrassed, isolated, anxious, and agitated. In addition, requiring family members and friends to communicate for you is frustrating. Because of this negative experience naturally leads me to seek out businesses and services that are easier to communicate in.

I'm sure I'm not alone.

When someone encounters physical accessibility barriers, news spreads and it impacts not only the person who struggles with the barrier but also their family and friends. Communication barriers such as these can have a cascading negative effect throughout a community causing social isolation, loneliness, and the increased need for supports from family and friends.

Think about how often people use reception desks or counter service areas in the run of a day.

Imagine if all businesses and organizations focused on reducing barriers at reception desks or counter services areas. This would improve accessibility for people living with hearing loss and improve the chances of having a returning customer. In addition, hearing accessibility promotes loyalty through improved service, decreased listening effort, and demonstrating equitable and inclusive practice.

Hearing loss is common, and the likelihood that a significant number of your customers have some degree of hearing loss is high. According to Statistics Canada, about one in five Canadians live with hearing loss, and that number is expected to rise to one in four with the aging population. Hearing loss occurs in all age groups, with about 4 out of every 100 newborns born with hearing loss. It increases with age rising up to 78% in 60-to-79-year-olds. Therefore, a business or organization should be 'all ears' (pardon the pun) if at least 25% of their customers may be experiencing barriers at their main point of service.



Here are 14 tips businesses and organizations can do to

reduce barriers at reception and counter service areas that will make a big difference in creating an accessible community:

1. **Speech Transfer Systems with hearing loops:** A speech transfer system is an important technology you can use at a reception desk or counter service area that uses a universal design approach to reducing barriers. It uses a microphone and speaker on both sides of plexiglass to increase the volume for both communication partners and an installed hearing loop to allow people who wear hearing aids and cochlear implants to directly connect with the microphone system with the use of their t-coil. This solution is geared towards people who use an auditory oral approach focused on using hearing and speech for communication. A hearing loop further helps to understand in background noise for people who wear amplification by directly connecting with the signal.

The benefit of a speech transfer system provides access to people with hearing loss who don't wear hearing aids (with the microphone and speakers) and those who do (microphone/speakers/hearing loop system).

Another reason why it is inclusive is that other people find communicating in background noise challenging or fatiguing other than people who are hard of hearing that could benefit from a speech transfer system such as seniors, people with a history of concussions, autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, and people who use English as a second language.

Here is an article about HEAR PEI and their excellent work towards making PEI more accessible at reception and counter service areas:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-access-hearpei-speech-transfer-1.5827321>

If you provide any accessible technology, it is important to use accessibility signage at your location (door entry and reception area) so people know what is available.

2. **Reduce background noise and improve acoustics:** One of the biggest barriers for people who are hard of hearing is background noise and poor acoustics. Reduce all unnecessary background and ambient noise as possible. For acoustics, try not to have large reflective surfaces that can cause excessive reverberation. Some solutions include acoustical ceiling tile and acoustic partitions.
3. **Improve visual cues:** Speech reading is an important way people living with hearing loss can help understand the spoken word. Speechreading involves watching the lip, jaw, tongue, and teeth movements of the speaker. It also involves facial expressions, gestures, postures, and movements to help convey the speakers meaning. Good visual cues include being able to fully see the person who is talking to allow for speech reading, communicating at an appropriate distance (5 feet is best), having good room lighting, and not being backlit by a bright window:
<https://www.chha.ca/resources/speech-reading/>
4. **Require communication skills training for all of your staff:** Effective communication skills are essential for connecting with other people. For example, when talking to someone with hearing loss, it helps to gain their attention first before talking, maintain eye contact, always face the person, avoid putting your hands in front of your face, speak distinctly but do not exaggerate your words or shout, and speak at a normal rate. If there is a communication breakdown, try to re-phrase what you are trying to say instead of repeating the same thing over and over. Remember: it is always important to ask the person what works best for them or what kind of supports they would prefer. For people who communicate using sign language, having staff take a basic sign language class would be beneficial.
5. **Consider using speech-to-text apps:** There are many speech-to-text apps available today (e.g.,

otter ai, AVA, Live Transcribe) and there have been big improvements over time with accuracy. This can make for a much more fluid conversation than exclusively using pen and paper:

<https://canadianaudiologist.ca/issue/volume-8-issue-2-2021/column/accessibility-issues/>

6. **UBI-DUO (text-to-text information system):** For people who are hard of hearing who still have difficulty communicating even with their hearing aids or cochlear implants, who are late deafened, or people who are Deaf who are communicating with people who do not know sign language, one solution is using a text-to-text information system like the UBI-DUO. This system, which looks like two laptops, allows each person to type and see the writing at the same time and does not require data or WIFI (unlike speech to text apps). For more information: https://www.specialneedscomputers.ca/index.php?l=product_detail&p=3953
7. **Provide accessible phone options for customers:** For more information check out the CAA guide to phone and video accessibility: https://canadianaudiology.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/CAA_Telecommunication-Solutions.pdf
8. **Written handouts:** Provide a written overview of instructions before coming to an appointment so people know what is required before coming to your reception area. Also provide any instructions in writing for future meetings.
9. **Multiple ways to contact:** Provide multiple ways for your customers to contact the reception area (e.g., text, e-mail, video relay system, TTY machine). Make sure staff training includes how to use accessible technologies.
10. **Create a feedback method to ensure ongoing accessibility needs are being met:** Your customers need a way to let you know when they experience an accessibility barrier. If you receive a complaint, make sure you take it seriously. If one person notices a barrier, chances are others notice it too. If you are not sure of a solution, consult with local audiologists, accessibility organizations, non-profits, and support groups in your area who advocate for people living with hearing loss. By looking to people with a lived experience, you can find solutions to accessibility barriers that could enhance your services.
11. **Check with your provincial building codes, provincial and federal accessibility laws, government accessibility directorates, and disability councils:** You need to make sure you comply with the law with all your services and are not creating physical barriers. Since hearing access is a basic human right, it is important to know customers can lodge an official accessibility complaint if you are creating barriers to your service (e.g., under the Accessible Canada Act, Charter of Rights and Freedoms Act, Canadian Human Rights Act).
12. **Consider Applying for an Accessibility Grant:** There are many grants available for businesses and organizations to cover the costs of part or all of the expenses that might be involved. To look for a list of grants and how to create an accessibility project, click on the following link: <https://canadianaudiologist.ca/issues-in-accessibility-6-5/>
13. **Create a culture of equality, diversity, and inclusivity for your business or organization:** Providing ongoing staff training on EDI principles is essential for understanding why reducing all barriers is important to your customers and society.
14. **Create an accessibility plan:** Whether you are developing an accessibility plan or already have one, make sure it includes information on how to reduce barriers for people who are deaf, Deaf, late-deafened, and hard of hearing. Although some accessibility solutions can be helpful to several of these communities, they do have different needs that should be addressed separately.

Here are some definitions to help you understand different communities from the Canadian Association of the Deaf

<http://cad.ca/issues-positions/terminology/>

deaf:

A medical/audiological term referring to those people who have little or no functional hearing. May also be used as a collective noun (“the deaf”) to refer to people who are medically deaf but who do not necessarily identify with the Deaf community.

Deaf (with capital D):

A sociological term referring to those individuals who are medically deaf or hard of hearing who identify with and participate in the culture, society, and language of Deaf people, which is based on Sign language. Their preferred mode of communication is Sign.

deafened (Also known as late-deafened):

This is both a medical and a sociological term referring to individuals who have become deaf later in life and who may not be able to identify with either the Deaf or the hard of hearing communities.

hard of hearing:

A person whose hearing loss ranges from mild to profound and whose usual means of communication is speech. It is both a medical and a sociological term.

Overall, it is important to remember quality customer service includes reducing physical barriers at reception and counter service areas for people living with hearing loss. This is an important step in making your customers living with hearing loss have a good customer experience, make them feel valued, and doing your part in creating accessible communities.

Resources

- **Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification (RHFAC 3.0) Professional Handbook:**
<https://www.rickhansen.com/become-accessible/rating-certification/rhfac-v30>
- **National Building Code of Canada 2015:**
<https://nrc.canada.ca/en/certifications-evaluations-standards/codes-canada/codes-canada-publications/national-building-code-canada-2015>
- **The Business Case to Build Physically Accessible Environments:**
<https://www.rickhansen.com/sites/default/files/2018-08/cboc-final-report-feb2018-accessible-1.pdf>