

Accessibility Amid a Changing Retail Landscape

August 2022



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About Retail Council of Canada

Retail Council of Canada (RCC) is the Voice of Retail in Canada representing more than 45,000 store fronts of all retail formats, including department, specialty, discount, and independent stores, and online merchants in general merchandise, grocery and drugs. Its membership represents over two thirds of all retail sales in Canada. RCC is a strong advocate for retailing in Canada and works with all levels of government and other stakeholders to support employment growth and career opportunities in retail, to promote and sustain retail investments in communities from coast-to-coast, and to enhance consumer choice and industry competitiveness. RCC also provides its members with a full range of services and programs including education and training, benchmarking and best practices, networking, advocacy, and industry information.

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Introduction

Over the course of the past two-and-a-half years or so, retailers in every province and territory across the country have experienced more challenges and change than they ever have before. Impacts precipitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic have resulted in, among other things, an accelerated digitization of the world around us. Subsequently, consumer behaviour and preferences have been altered, highlighted most significantly by the dramatic shift toward digital channels to make purchases. It's leading to a transformation of the retail experience, both physical and online, and a reassessment by merchants concerning their offering and the ways in which they're meeting the needs of all of their customers.

As part of the transformation, and in order to meet the aforementioned mandate, many within the industry are realizing that a greater focus must be paid toward enhancing accessibility initiatives and increasing their efforts to make their physical and digital storefronts safer for and more accessible to people with disabilities. It's an increased focus that represents a meaningful step taken by retailers in recognizing the unique needs of those living with disabilities and the challenges that they encounter on a daily basis. And, it also opens up substantial opportunities to properly and effectively service a growing market in the country.

As the age of Canada's population increases, so too will the number of individuals within the country who are living with disabilities. It's a group that has traditionally faced difficulty interacting with mainstream infrastructure, and one that is often met with prejudiced attitudes and a general lack of compassion and care. It's also a group of people who, in most cases, receive a great deal of support from their family and friends who are often best able to understand the challenges they encounter. So, when retailers make enhancements to their offering in attempts to create greater accessibility around the experiences they provide, they are not only helping to meet the needs of those with disabilities. They are also increasing engagement with the people around them, engendering their loyalty and standing themselves apart from competitors that aren't willing to make the same considerations.

Given these opportunities, as well as the challenges that are inherent in meeting the needs of an ever-evolving consumer, it's clear that a retailer's ability to connect with its customers is more critical today than at any time previous. As a result, merchants have got to view their customer differently, keeping their needs at the heart of everything they do, and develop strategies and best practices that will help meet and exceed those needs while enhancing the profitability of the business.

But... how exactly do retailers make their physical and digital stores more accessible to all? This guidebook aims to help answer this question for retailers and serves as a valuable resource, offering critical information and insights to support the creation and maintenance of a safe and accessible store.



Accessibility in Canada – Why it Matters

People with disabilities, along with their friends and loved ones, represent more than half of Canada's population.

People with disabilities: facts and figures¹

- More than 1 in 10 youth in Canada have one or more disabilities.
- More than 4 in 10 Canadians with disabilities have a severe or very severe disability.
- Mental health-related and learning disabilities are the most common types of disabilities among youth.
- Youth with disabilities are at a higher risk of not attending school or becoming unemployed – a risk that increases with the severity of the disability.
- 30% of Canadians consider accessibility when looking for a place to shop².

According to the 2020 Annual Report: The Global Economics of Disability, Return on Disability³:

- 1.85 billion people have a recognized disability (a number equivalent to the population of China).
- \$3 trillion is the cumulative annual income among people with disabilities.
- \$1.9 trillion is the cumulative annual disposable income among people with disabilities.

In Canada:

- 9.1 million people have a recognized disability.
- \$171.2 billion is the cumulative annual income among people with disabilities.
- \$82.2 billion is the cumulative annual disposable income among Canadians with disabilities.

This group possesses significant purchasing power. Retailers in Canada must work to find new ways to create value for this substantial and influential community of people with disabilities.

Legislation

In Ontario, making your store accessible is law, obligating retailers to comply with legislation and provide people with disabilities with the right to customer service that allows them to access their goods, services, and facilities. Staff must also be adequately trained concerning the provision of accessible customer service. Other provinces in Canada that are following the example set by Ontario include Manitoba, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia.

In Ontario there are two branches of laws:

Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC) (enacted in 1962): This code is administered by the Ontario Human Rights Commission. The Code is an individual, complaints-based legislation that addresses discrimination. The Code requires organizations to accommodate people with disabilities to the point of undue hardship in order to demonstrate due diligence.

AODA: According to the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 \(AODA\)](#) and its [Integrated Accessibility Standards](#), Ontario's accessibility law serves as the province's primary legislative authority concerning accessibility. The law applies to all organizations with one or more employees in Ontario (public, private and not-for-profit).

For more information about Ontario Accessibility Laws, please visit:

<https://www.ontario.ca/page/accessibility-laws>

For more information about accessibility laws and legislation in other provinces, please visit the specific province's website concerning accessibility.

1. [Canadian Survey on Disability Reports, 2017](#) 2. [EnAbling Change for Retailers Accessibility and Store Design Webinar](#)

3. [2020 Annual Report: The Global Economics of Disability, Return on Disability, 2020](#)

An overview of the industry and the need to service people living with disabilities...

Retail is sometimes referred to as “the accidental profession” – a moniker referencing the two-thirds of employees who admittedly find themselves working within the industry by chance rather than by design. However, it could just as easily be referred to as “the overlooked industry” on account of the fact that so few people recognize the wide variety of career opportunities available within retail.

In addition, many people fail to appreciate the sheer size of the retail industry and its significance toward the wellbeing of the communities they operate in and contribution to the national economy. Retailers, whether they are located on Main Streets or in neighbourhood malls, represent the commercial lifeblood of their surrounding areas and are often their largest employers, too.

In fact, retail is Canada’s largest industry by employment, representing approximately 2.1 million jobs, employing 12 per cent of all eligible Canadian workers. It’s also one of the country’s most dynamic industries, frequently facing challenges to adapt quicker than any other in efforts to continuously and consistently meet and exceed the changing needs and preferences of Canadians.

The industry is also one that offers more choice and variety than any other, carrying a plethora of products that are made available to consumers in an array of different modes and formats, servicing the needs of an incredibly diverse population. And, there’s diversity in the types of merchants that help comprise the Canadian retail ecosystem, from small, independent operations to large, multinational, publicly-traded companies, and everything in between. As diverse as the industry is, however, the need to manage and develop its people is universal.

Skilled talent pool

Over the course of the past two years, store closures (temporary or permanent), staff layoffs and a general uncertainty concerning health and safety, among other forcing functions, have led a number of retail employees to leave the industry, resulting in a shortage of skilled labour available for merchants across the country to draw from.



In March 2020, store operations and the ways in which customers shopped completely changed. Retailers everywhere were forced to temporarily shut down their operations, reduce store hours and limit the number of customers in their stores as the Federal Government imposed measures and restrictions meant to reduce the spread of COVID-19. According to Statistics Canada’s “Impact of COVID-19 on businesses in retail trade, third quarter of 2021” report, retail sales fell 10.0 per cent to \$47.1 billion, representing the largest drop on record. In addition, approximately 40 per cent of retailers closed their doors to in-store shopping during the first few months of the pandemic.

As store closures persisted, staff layoffs continued, resulting in an increasing number of vacant positions to fill. In December 2021, Statistics Canada reported that the industry experienced the creation of more than 103,000 job vacancies during the month – a number that has remained over the 100,000-per-month mark, with little change, since August 2021.

There is no single solution that will remedy the current labour crisis. However, leveraging the skills of people living with disabilities – a largely untapped community of potential employees who want to work – is an excellent way to start filling the gaps. And, it also happens to be a great step to take toward making stores more accessible. People with disabilities, like everyone else, want to shop at retail brands that reflect who they are as individuals. Retailers have the opportunity to meet this growing demand while filling important roles within their stores by looking to people with disabilities and the skills that they can offer.

Statistics: People with Disabilities & Employment

	General Population	With Disability
Educational Attainment Above High-School	84.15%	54.75%
Employment Rate	80%	59%
Part Time Employment - Female	18.8%	25%
Part Time Employment - Male	7.5%	1 7%
Average Employment Income	\$44,864	\$31,035

Source: Canadian Survey on Disability Reports, 2017

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm>

Myths surrounding accessible employment practices

There are a lot of negative myths concerning the hiring of people with disabilities which prevent some businesses from developing accessible employment practices, including:

- Employees with disabilities won't perform as well at their jobs as other employees.
- People with disabilities can't be fired or disciplined.
- A person with a disability won't be reliable and will miss a lot of work.
- Employees with disabilities are more likely to get injured on the job.
- There is increased turnover among employees with disabilities.

Hiring people with disabilities can, in fact, benefit business

Employment practices that are inclusive for people with disabilities are good for business and the community. People with disabilities – along with their friends and loved ones – represent more than half of Canada's population, with purchasing power that contributes \$82 billion to the Canadian domestic economy and \$3 trillion globally.

Research indicates that retailers that invest in accessible employment practices report several business benefits, including:

- **Better job retention/lower turnover:** Statistics Canada research reveals that organizations with accessible employment practices have a 72 per cent higher retention rate among people with disabilities.
- **Higher attendance:** 86 per cent of people with disabilities rate average or better on attendance than their colleagues without disabilities.
- **Enhanced job performance and work quality:** 90 per cent of people with disabilities rate average or better on job performances compared to their colleagues without disabilities.

- **Exceeding workplace expectations:** 75 per cent of small- and medium-sized businesses in Ontario that employ people with disabilities report that they meet or exceed workplace expectations.
- **Better safety records:** 98 per cent of people with a disability rate average or better in work safety than their colleagues without disabilities⁴.

Another misconception concerning the hiring of a person with disabilities is the falsehood that the additional required resources (Braille keyboard, TTY phone, etc.) are expensive when, in fact, the cost to a retailer to obtain additional resources for a person with a disability is usually less than \$500.

Accessibility and the New Customer

The retail experience has changed dramatically over the course of the past two-and-a-half years or so. In response to government-imposed closures and in-person restrictions, merchants everywhere were forced to pivot and shift their in-store offering and service, introducing or enhancing curb-side pickup, home delivery and other digitally-enabled, touchless modes of product transfer in order to continue servicing their customers.



In doing so, retailers in communities all across the country served as a lifeline for Canadians, particularly those that sold essential goods at the height of the pandemic. As a result of these shifts and pivots, consumer behaviour has evolved as more and more of their shopping activities are conducted through digital channels.

It's a forced evolution that's requiring retailers to look at their customer differently and to focus more intently on their needs and shopping preferences. It will allow merchants to develop the best practices that are necessary to support effective engagement, enabling them to provide optimal service to their customers.

However, to properly service the needs of today's consumer, retailers must first understand their evolving behaviour and preferences. Today's consumer:

- Wants to feel safe when they shop.
- May or may not feel comfortable entering a physical store.
- Will find alternative ways to shop, such as:
 - Shopping online and using curb-side pickup.
 - Using services like Instacart or Uber to have their products delivered.
 - Shopping online and having product delivered to their home.

The savviest retailers understood this shift early on, developing and implementing alternative modes of product transfer in order to meet consumer needs. However, not all digital channels are made equal, requiring a range of offering to be provided, including enhancements to the in-store experience to ensure safety and convenience for their guests.

The Disability community is no different. Members of the community wish to feel safe when they shop. Unfortunately, some of the safety and security measures that were put in place by some retailers in efforts to maintain safety for their customers subsequently made it more difficult for a person with a disability to shop with them.

4. [A demographic, employment, and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017](#)

For example

- A person with hearing loss may need to read lips in order to understand what another person is saying. However, mask-wearing makes that incredibly difficult, resulting in the need for sales associates to be equipped with other options by which to communicate.
- As a result of physical distancing, accessing payment terminals within stores has often been difficult for some people with disabilities. For instance, an individual requiring the use of a wheelchair is not able to stand up to access the terminal. And, as a result of physical distancing, people with low vision or no vision at all need to be in close proximity to the device to use.
- At the height of the pandemic, some stores had policies that only permitted one person in their stores at a time. People requiring assistance, such as a support person, were often left unable to shop.
- The use of rope or fabric barriers to direct customers within some stores were not conducive to those who rely on the use of canes to walk. The rope or fabric barriers were often too high and should have been lowered in order to properly direct a person who uses a cane.

People with Disabilities Community

There are many kinds of disabilities, including physical, vision, hearing, mental health, developmental and learning. And, an individual's disability can be visible as well as non-visible.

Visible disabilities are disabilities that are immediately evident. For example, one is able to notice if someone is using a wheelchair, reading Braille or communicating via sign language. Individuals with visible disabilities account for less than 29 per cent of people with disabilities.

Conversely, many disabilities are non-visible, with over 70 per cent of people with disabilities living with those that are non-visible, including those with learning, mental, or cognitive disabilities.

Some individuals are born with disabilities; others will develop them over time due to accident, illness, or age. In fact, it's more than likely that we already know someone, or are working with someone, who lives with a disability - we just don't know it.

And, it's important to note that the disability community is not simply comprised of people with disabilities. It includes their family and friends as well⁵. In Canada, the family, and friends of people living with disabilities is represented by:

- 17 million people provide support for a family member or friend with a disability.
- \$538.5 billion is the cumulative annual disposable income of Canadians with disabilities.

When considering the friends and family of people living with disabilities, it's a sizeable community, representing more than half of the country population of roughly 38 million people with a combined annual disposable income of \$620.4 billion⁶.



5. 6. [Design Delight from Disability - 2020 Annual Report: The Global Economics of Disability](#)

Accessible Customer Service

Treating all customers with respect and courtesy is at the heart of excellent customer service. All customers deserve to be treated equally and with dignity and respect. As a result, it's incredibly important for retailers to understand the basics of accessible customer service.

What retailers can do to ensure that all customers are properly served:

- If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer, "May I help you?" Your customers with disabilities may know whether they need help and how you can best provide it.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability, not to their support person or companion.
- Avoid stereotypes and don't make assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities the person has. And, remember that customers are not required to tell retailers what disabilities they have.
- Take the time to get to know your customer's needs and focus on meeting those needs in the same ways you would with any customer. Remember – some disabilities are not visible.
- Be patient, optimistic and willing to find a way to communicate. Some people with disabilities may take longer to understand and respond. A good start is to listen carefully.
- If you can't understand what your customer is saying, simply politely ask again.
- Don't touch or address service animals; they're working and must always pay attention.
- Don't touch assistive devices, including wheelchairs, without permission, unless it's an emergency.
- Make sure your business has emergency procedures for customers with disabilities and that you fully understand these procedures.



Accessible Customer Service for each Disability:

People with vision disabilities

Vision disabilities reduce a person's ability to see clearly. Few people with vision disabilities are completely blind. Many have limited vision, such as tunnel vision – a condition in which a person has a loss of peripheral or side vision, or a lack of central vision, restricting their ability to see straight ahead. Some people can see the outlines of objects, while others can see the direction of light.

Vision disabilities can restrict a customers' ability to read signs and product information, locate landmarks or see hazards. Sometimes, it can be difficult to tell if a person has a vision disability. Some of your customers with vision disabilities may use a guide dog or white cane, while others may not.

Types of assistance that customers with vision disabilities might use:

- Guide dog
- White cane
- Magnifier
- Cell Phone Apps
- Large print
- Braille
- Support person

What retailers can do:

- Don't assume the individual can't see you.
- Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to them.
- Speak naturally and clearly.
- Never touch your customer without asking permission unless it's an emergency.
- Offer your elbow to guide the person. If they accept, walk slowly, but wait for permission before doing so.

If guiding a customer toward stairs:

- Let them know if they must walk up or down.
- Approach the stairs head on, not at an angle, and come to a full stop in front of the stairs.
- Make sure your customer is on the rail side and allow them to take hold of it.
- Let them find the first step and then start to climb or descend the stairs.
- Try to be one step ahead and always announce the last step.
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient your customer to the environment around them.
- If providing directions or verbal information, be precise and clear. For example, if you're approaching a door or an obstacle, let the person know.
- Don't leave your customer in the middle of a room. Guide them to a chair or to a comfortable location.
- Finally, don't walk away without saying "Goodbye."

People with hearing disabilities

People living with hearing disabilities may be deaf or experiencing a loss of hearing. Like other disabilities, those of the hearing variety have a wide range of severity.

Remember, customers who are deaf or experiencing a loss of hearing may require assistive devices while communicating, such as a hearing aid.

Types of assistive devices that customers who are deaf or experiencing loss of hearing might use:

- TTY (Telephone Teletype)
- Relay service
- Hearing loop
- Hearing aid
- Personal amplification device (e.g., Pocket Talker)
- Phone amplifier
- Sign Language interpreter
- Service animal
- Paper and pen



What retailers can do:

- Get the customer's attention before speaking. The best way is with a gentle wave of your hand.
- Always ask how you can help. Don't shout.
- Make sure you are in a well-lit area where your customer can see your face.
- Don't put your hands in front of your face while speaking as some people may understand by reading your lips.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communication would be easier, like using a pen and paper, for example.
- Be patient if you are using a pen and paper to communicate.

And remember:

- American Sign Language (ASL) may be your customer's first language. It has its own grammatical rules and sentence structure.
- Look at and speak directly to your customer. Address your customer, not their interpreter. Be clear and precise when giving directions and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you are being understood.
- If the person uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise, or move to a quieter area. Discuss any personal (e.g., financial) matters in a private setting to avoid people overhearing.

People who are deaf-blind

A person who is deaf-blind is unable to see or hear to some degree. This results in greater difficulties when it comes to accessing information and managing daily activities. People who are deaf-blind might be accompanied by an intervenor – a professional who helps with communicating.

Intervenors are trained in special Sign Language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet, or finger spelling method, and may act as a guide, interpreting for their client.

Types of assistance that customers who are deaf-blind might use include:

- TTY (Telephone Teletype)
- Large print
- Braille
- Support person, such as an intervenor
- Service animal
- Print on paper (using black felt marker on non-glossy white paper, or using portable white and black boards)
- Communication boards



What retailers can do:

- Do not assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind possess some degree of sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- A customer who is deaf-blind is likely to explain how to communicate with them, or give you an assistance card, or a note explaining how to communicate with them.
- Speak directly to your customer as you normally would, not to the intervenor.
- Identify yourself to the intervenor when you approach your customer who is deaf-blind.
- Don't touch or address service animals; they are working and must always pay attention.
- Never touch a person who is deaf-blind suddenly or without permission, unless it's an emergency.

People with physical disabilities

There are several types and degrees of physical disabilities. And, not all require a wheelchair. People who have arthritis, heart or lung conditions or amputations may also have difficulty moving freely, standing or sitting. In some instances, it may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

Types of assistance that customers with physical disabilities might use:

- Mobility device (wheelchair, scooter, walker, cane, crutches)
- Elevator
- Lift
- Support person



What retailers can do:

- Speak naturally and directly to your customer, not to their companion or support person.
- Try to put yourself at your customer's eye level by sitting, kneeling, or standing at an increased distance if you are having a long conversation.
- Ask before you help. People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things.
- Be patient. Customers will identify their needs to you.
- Respect your customer's personal space. Do not lean over them or on their assistive device.
- Don't move items or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of the person's reach.
- Don't touch assistive devices, including wheelchairs, without permission, unless it's an emergency. If you have permission to move a person in a wheelchair, remember to wait for and follow the person's instructions.
- To make sure your customer is ready to be moved, describe what you are going to do before you do it. Avoid uneven ground and objects.
- Never leave the person in an awkward, dangerous, or undignified position such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.
- Let your customer know about accessible features in the immediate environment (e.g., automatic doors, accessible washrooms, elevators, ramps, etc.).
- Remove obstacles and rearrange furniture to ensure clear passage.

People with intellectual or developmental disabilities

A person with an intellectual or developmental disability may experience difficulty doing many things that most of us take for granted. These disabilities can mildly or, at times, profoundly limit a person's ability to learn, communicate, socialize, and take care of their everyday needs on their own. You may not be able to recognize that someone has this disability unless you are told. Or, you may notice the way the person acts, asks questions or uses body language.

As much as possible, treat your customers with intellectual or developmental disabilities like anyone else. They may understand more than you think they do. And they'll appreciate you treating them with respect.

Types of assistance that customers with intellectual or developmental disabilities might use:

- Support person
- Service animal
- Communication board
- Speech generating device

What retailers can do:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- Make sure your customer understands what you've said.
- If you can't understand what's being said by your customer, don't pretend you do. Just ask again.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Be supportive and patient.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their companion or support person.

People with learning disabilities

The term “learning disability” is used to describe a range of information processing disorders that may affect how a person acquires, organizes, retains, understands, or uses verbal or non-verbal information.

Examples include dyslexia (difficulties with reading and related language-based learning), dyscalculia (difficulties with mathematics), and dysgraphia (difficulties with writing and fine motor skills).

It’s important to understand that living with a learning disability does not mean a person is incapable of learning. Rather, it means that they learn in a different way.

Learning disabilities can result in many different difficulties when it comes to communication. They can be subtle (i.e., having difficulty reading) or more pronounced. But they can interfere with a customer’s ability to receive, express or process information. You may not know that a person has a learning disability unless you are told. Be supportive and patient.



Types of assistance that customers with learning disabilities might use:

- Support person
- Tape recorders/mini pocket recorders
- Large print
- Communication board
- Speech generating device

What retailers can do:

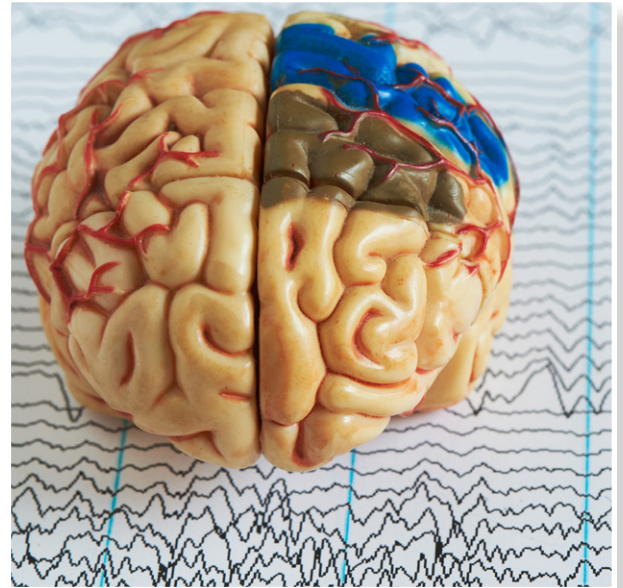
- When recognizing that a customer with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can help them.
- Speak naturally and clearly, and directly to your customer.
- Take some time. People with learning disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Try to provide information in a way that works best for your customer. For example, have a paper and pen handy.
- Be patient and willing to explain something again if needed.

People with mental health disabilities

It's likely that you won't be able to recognize that a customer has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it. Examples of mental health disabilities include schizophrenia, depression and phobias, as well as bipolar, anxiety and mood disorders.

Some of the most common characteristics of a mental health disability are listed below. An individual may have difficulty with one, several or none of these:

- Inability to think clearly.
- Hallucinations (e.g., hearing voices, seeing, or feeling things that aren't there).
- Depression or acute mood swings (e.g., from feelings of happiness to becoming depressed with no indication of the change).
- Poor concentration and difficulty remembering.
- Apparent lack of motivation.



If someone is experiencing difficulty controlling their symptoms or is in a crisis, you may need to help them. Be calm and professional and let the customer tell you how you can help.

Types of assistance that customers with mental health disabilities might use:

- Support person
- Service animal

What retailers can do:

- Treat a person with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you show everyone else.
- Be confident and reassuring. Listen carefully and work with your customer to meet their needs.
- If someone appears to be in a crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

People with speech or language disabilities

Some people experience difficulty communicating as a result of their disability. Cerebral palsy, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult to pronounce words or may cause slurring or stuttering. These types of disabilities may also prevent a person from expressing themselves effectively or from understanding written or spoken language. Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards or other assistive devices.

Types of assistance that customers with speech or language impairments might use:

- Communication board
- Speech-generating device
- Support person
- Pen and paper

What retailers can do:

- Don't assume that just because a person has one disability, they also have another. For example, if a customer has difficulty speaking, it doesn't mean they have an intellectual or developmental disability as well.
- Ask your customer to repeat the information if you don't understand what they've said.
- Ask questions that can be answered by a "yes" or "no" response, if possible.
- Be patient and polite. Give your customer the time they need to get their point across. Don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences. Wait for them to finish.
- Be patient, respectful and willing to find a way to communicate.

Support persons

A customer who enters a store may have either a support person or service animal with them. Here are a few guidelines concerning ways to service people with disabilities who use support persons or animals.

What does Ontario's Customer Service Standard say about support persons?

The Ontario Customer Service Standard states that providers must allow people with disabilities who use a support person to bring their support person into the store with them. If an admission fee is usually charged for the support person, the provider must give notice ahead of time.

Support people help those who are living with various types of disabilities and are trusted individuals who assist with communication, mobility, personal care, medical needs and accessing goods and services. Personal care needs may include physically transferring the individual from one location to another or assisting with eating or using the washroom. Medical needs may include monitoring someone's health or providing injections.

The support person could be a paid personal support worker, a friend, or a family member. They do not necessarily need to have special training or qualifications.

Types of support persons:

- **Communication Support Attendant:** Communication support attendants help people with intellectual disabilities access information presented orally at meetings, conferences, and public events.
- **Intervenor:** Intervenor are trained in special Sign Language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet, or finger spelling method, and may guide and interpret for their client.
- **Personal care attendant:** A personal care attendant accompanies a person with a disability who cannot travel independently and may also provide services and assistance to a person with a disability.
- **Sign Language Interpreter:** A Sign Language interpreter facilitates communication between people who can hear and people who are deaf, deafened, or experiencing loss of hearing.

What retailers can do:

- A customer with a disability might not introduce their support person. If you are not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting your goods or services, or simply ask.
- Once you have determined who your customer is, speak directly to them, not to their support person.
- Remember that under Ontario's Customer Service Standard, all stores are required to have policies, practices, and procedures in place concerning the provision of accessible customer service. Make sure you know what they are.
- Remember that customers with disabilities who have support persons must be permitted to use them while accessing your goods or services. Make sure you know what your store's policy is regarding admission fees for the support person.

Guide dogs and other service animals

What Does the Ontario Customer Service Standard Say?

The Ontario Customer Service Standard states that a person with a disability must be allowed to enter the public areas of a provider's premises with their guide dog or service animal, except when another law specifically states animals must be excluded.

Service animals are used by people with many different kinds of disabilities. Examples of service animals include dogs used by people who are blind, hearing alert animals for people who are deaf, deafened, or experiencing loss of hearing, and animals trained to alert an individual to an oncoming seizure and lead them to safety. According to Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides, people may also use service animals to assist with Autism assistance, Diabetes, and other issues.

How do retailers serve customers with service animals?

- Speak directly to your customer and don't treat the animal as a pet.
- Don't touch or address service animals; they are working and must pay attention at all times.
- Don't make assumptions about the animal. Not all service animals wear special collars or harnesses. If you're not sure whether the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer.
- Remember that your customer is responsible for the care and supervision of their service animal. You are not expected to provide care or food for the animal. However, you should be willing to provide water for the animal if your customer requests it.
- Be prepared to let your customer know where to walk the service animal. Know your local regulations about picking up after the animal and offer a garbage bag if necessary.



How does a retailer serve a customer if law restricts them from bringing their animal into the store?

- If an animal is not allowed on a retailer's premises due to law, a retailer must still make sure that it provides the goods or services to the person with a disability.
- Explain to the person why the animal is not allowed to enter and offer another way to provide them with the goods or services.
- If the person with the service animal agrees, this might mean leaving the animal in a secure area where it is allowed by law. It might also mean offering to serve the person outside or in another location where the animal is allowed.
- The sales associate needs to consider the needs of the person with a disability if his or her service animal is not allowed to enter the store. For example, a person with a vision disability might need someone to guide them if their service animal is not allowed to enter.
- The most important thing is to explore other ways to serve the customer when their service animal cannot enter with them.

Assistive devices

The Ontario Customer Service Standard states that a retailer must provide instructions concerning the proper use of assistive equipment or devices located on the premises in order to help customers with disabilities access goods or services.

An assistive device is anything that enables a person with a disability to do everyday tasks and activities such as moving, communicating, and lifting. It helps the person maintain his or her independence at home, at work and at play.

Accessibility and Store Design

Beginning to make a store accessible is simple. To start, you need to identify aspects of the store that act as barriers to accessibility.

Barriers to an accessible store

When you think about making a retail store's services accessible, it's important to be aware of both the visible and invisible barriers that are present. A barrier is anything that prevents or limits someone with a disability from fully participating in the social or economic life of their communities within a store.

The following are barriers that prevent store accessibility:

- Architectural or structural barriers may result from the design of a building, such as stairs, doorways, hallway widths and even room layout.
- Information and communications barriers can make it difficult for people to receive or convey information. Small print, low-colour contrast between text and background, confusing design of printed materials and the use of language that is not clear or easy to understand can all cause difficulty and complications.
- Technology, or the lack of it, can prevent people from accessing information. Everyday tools like computers, telephones and other aids that are not accessible to those with disabilities can present barriers.
- Systemic barriers can occur through policies and procedures, including any practices or rules that restrict people with disabilities in any way, such as denying access to a person with a service animal.
- Misinformation, misconceptions and stereotypes can also prop up barriers to accessibility, leading some to communicate ineffectively with the person with disabilities, ignore them or avoid them altogether.

Once a retailer has identified and accessed the barriers that are preventing a more accessible store, they should start with the aspects of their store that they can most easily change.

In some cases, there may be things that are out of the retailer's control, such as those who operate locations in shopping centres mall, as enhancements to accessibility features are the responsibility of the landlord or property manager. In addition, many older buildings were not designed to be accessible. However, newer buildings are being designed and built according to community building codes and universal design principles, meaning the design and composition of buildings today are developed with accessibility in mind and with the intention of meeting the needs of all people who wish to use it⁷.

7. [Centre for Excellence in Universal Design](#)

Here are 10 simple things retailers can do to make their stores accessible, despite the type of building they are located in:



1. Greet each customer within one minute after they enter your store. If a customer has a disability, this will let them know that there is someone to assist them if required.
2. Accept the differences in each of your customers. Each customer looks different. Some customers' disabilities will include characteristics such as:
 - Lack of eye contact
 - Monosyllabic responses
 - Not smiling or laughing
 - Direct statements
 - Uncertain communication
 - Hearing impairments
3. Accommodate your customers.
 - Be patient. Don't ask for more information than is needed from a customer.
 - Don't be offended by lack of social 'niceties', or lack of eye contact, smiling, laughing, etc.
 - Develop other ways to communicate with them, such as using visuals, white boards, pads of paper, text, or gestures.
 - Don't try to finish other's sentences and repeat information or rephrase, if necessary.
 - Speak up, speak clearly and be alert to recognize understanding.

4. Check out/payment terminals should be secure and easily accessed by all.

- Ensure an accessible check out desk with a payment terminal that is lower for people who require it.
- Payment terminal should not be fixed, nonadjustable and/or locked down and should be easily accessed by all.

5. Accessible Washrooms should be available.

- Accessible washrooms should be used as accessible washrooms not storage rooms.

6. Access to all facilities and displays.

- Ensure that there is an accessible path of travel within the store and that it's clean and clear of obstacles that could become barriers.
- Floor should be smooth not uneven. A person who uses a walker or wheelchair may have issues on uneven flooring.
- Ensure that automatic door openers work.
- The store should be checked on a regular basis for any barriers to the accessible path of travel.

7. Low countertops and displays.

- Display units should be solid, stable and have rounded edges.
- Clothes racks should be within accessible reach.
- Products should be clearly visible and within reach.
- Prices should be clearly displayed and as large as possible for everyone to see.

8. Well-lit areas.

- There should not be areas of low lighting within the store. For a person with low vision, shadows can become a tripping hazard.
- Well-lit areas allow all customers to see the products and price.

9. Store signage and wayfinding.

- Use simple language and signage that is easily understood.
- Important signage directing toward washrooms, elevators, stairs, etc., should be available in Braille and raised letters for those who have low vision.

10. Reduce environmental stimuli. This includes:

- Glaringly bright lights
- Loud music and competing audio sources
- Strong scents
- Crowded spaces

Here are a few things you can do to reduce environmental stimuli:

- Use dimmed or covered/shaded lights
- Use low-volume and non-intrusive music
- Introduce 'no scent' policies for staff

Accessibility and the Online Store

In today's online retail environment, competition is intense with so much at stake. The pandemic accelerated a digitization of the world around us and precipitated a shift toward online channels to make purchases. As a result of this shift, retailers need to ensure that their websites and online stores are accessible to all.

Accessible website guidelines

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are part of a series of web accessibility guidelines published by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) - the authority concerning international standards for the Internet. They are a set of recommendations for making Web content more accessible for people with disabilities as well as all other user agents, including highly limited devices, such as mobile phones.

Four Principles of WCAG⁸:

1. Perceivable
2. Operable
3. Understandable
4. Robust

WCAG Guidelines⁹:

1. Provide text alternatives
2. Alternatives for time-based media
3. Content that can be presented in different ways
4. Easier for users to see/hear/experience content
5. Functionality keyboard-available
6. Enough time to read/use
7. Does not cause seizures
8. Helps users navigate
9. Readable, understandable
10. Work in predictable ways
11. Help users avoid mistakes
12. Assistive tech

Following these guidelines should make it easier for customers to access a retailer's store website and content.

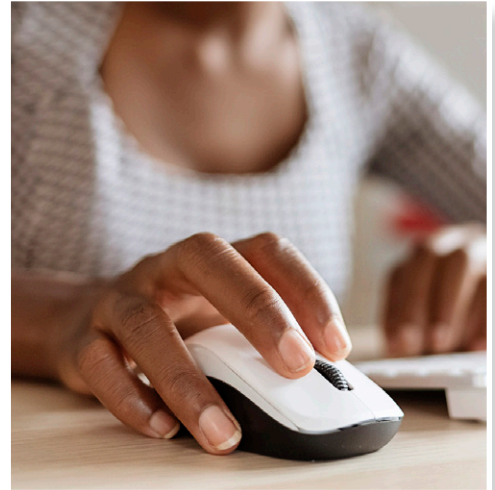


8. [Introduction to Understanding WCAG 2.0 | Understanding WCAG 2.0 \(w3.org\)](#)

9. [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.0 \(w3.org\)](#)

What retailers need to know about website accessibility

- Each guideline has three standards of accessibility, including A, AA and AAA.
- Newly created or refreshed websites must meet level A standards. Once met, websites will need to meet Level AA standards. In most cases, retailers must meet the Level A criteria before you can meet the Level AA criteria.
- Level AAA standards will come into effect in the near future and are not enforceable at present time.
- A retailer's website and its content must meet WCAG 2.0 standards as outlined in the [Accessibility Standard for Information and Communications Act](#). The Canadian government is currently phasing in WCAG 2.0 requirements to make it easier to build accessibility into an organization's website.
- According to Ontario's accessibility laws, new and significantly refreshed websites must meet the following standards for each level.



Accessible Online Store

An accessible online store should be capable of being viewed by everyone, regardless of disability. While designing accessible online stores, retailers should keep the following standards in mind:

- Content should be functionally available using a keyboard.
- Users should be able to navigate, find and view content easily.
- Provide clear and easy to find weblinks.
- Make text content readable and accessible.
- Ensure that store content is compatible with current and future user tools, e.g., screen reading software, screen magnification software, speech recognition software, etc.
- Online stores should be mobile-friendly. Accessible websites should be built to WCAG accessibility standards and primed for responsive layout displays.
- Content layout is well structured for search engine optimisation (SEO).

Assistive technology

In general, technology aims to make things easier for us. For people with disabilities, technology can help make independent living, social interactions, and pursuing education easier. Assistive technologies are specifically designed to enable and support users who have some of the impairments, disabilities and conditions mentioned in the previous sections. Adaptive and rehabilitative devices include assistive equipment, software programs, and/or product systems.

Examples Include:

- Screen reader software
- Screen magnification software
- Speech recognition software
- Braille keyboards
- Braille terminals
- Keyboard overlays
- Mouth sticks

Accessible digital content Images

Images can help enhance the visual appeal an online store. In fact, when used correctly, images with text can also assist a person with a disability access a retailer's website. According to Access Ability's A Practical Handbook on Accessible Graphic Design, here are some general guidelines to keep in mind when using images on websites:

- Images must be presented in ways that all users can perceive, even if users have impaired vision or hearing¹⁰.
- Always use high contrast images. These types of images differentiate between foreground from background elements. Use a contrast analyser to ensure there is enough differentiation between the text and background colours. Ensure at least a 70 per cent difference in colour value between onscreen text and background elements. And, optimize contrast between hues by pairing complementary colours (e.g., red with green, orange with blue, or violet with yellow).
- Images should not be displayed without text. People who can't see images and other visual elements must be provided with text alternatives ("alt text") that can be converted via software into speech, symbols, large print, Braille, or simpler language. And, ensure that text alternatives clearly describe what the image is.
- Use colour combinations in images that are easily seen¹¹: Many users believe that black text on a beige background is best, while others prefer off-white text on black.
- Don't rely on colour to symbolize something as some users may have difficulty distinguishing between red and green, others between yellow and blue, while some users won't be able to see the colours you've chosen at all.
- Online stores must allow the user to alter the author's intended website design using their computer's own assistive technology in order to customize colour, size, and typeface preferences.
- Provide an alternative, text-based format for audio and video content. Transcripts, captions, and descriptive video all ensure a more accessible experience.



Text

Online content that is easier to read can increase user retention and reduce eye fatigue. For most people, reading content onscreen can be tiring and a strain on their eyes. Many people may read text 25 per cent slower than they would while reading from a piece of paper. In addition, most online content users read only 20 per cent of the words on a page.

To ease the burden on the reader, here are some best practices that can help inform accessible webpage design:

- Communicate one idea per paragraph and highlight keywords.
- Use plain language. Write simple, concise text that uses short paragraphs, short sentences, and short words. Cognitive limitations can be associated with learning disabilities, low literacy, or numeracy skills.
- Do not use "slang", figures of speech or short forms of words.

10. 11. [The Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario, 2010](#)

- Use an “inverted pyramid” writing style by communicating the most important information first at the top of the written content.
- Break the content into bulleted lists, if possible.
- Spell out requirements ahead of time. For example: “Passwords must be at least 6 characters with no spaces”. And write clear, simple error messages.
- It’s important to note that people with disabilities related to hearing loss may have a different understanding of language than people who have become hearing impaired later in their lives. Their first language might be American Sign Language. A standard sign language system may have an identifiable “grammar” that is distinct from the grammar of spoken language.

Fonts¹²

Always use standard fonts with easily recognizable upper- and lower-case characters. Arial and Verdana are good choices. You can use any font from the “sans-serif” group of fonts as they do not have extending features called “serifs” at the end of strokes¹³. The “serifs” make it harder for a screen reader to work.

Keep your text size large, preferably between 12 and 18 points depending on the font (point size varies between fonts). And, consider your audience when choosing font size. If possible, provide options of sizes.

Finally, keep the letter spacing between the letters and sentences wide enough so that they do not touch or overlap.

If you are unsure about the ways in which to make a document accessible, refer to CNIB’s Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines.

Videos

To ensure that a retailers’ videos are accessible, they should be produced and uploaded to the webs in a way that ensures that all members of the audience can access their content. An accessible video includes:

- **Captions:** A technology that is built into the video which enables users to convert its audio content into text. Including captions in video communications can enable comprehension for all users, especially users with varying hearing disabilities. There are two types of captioning options:
 - Closed captions which allow viewers the ability to turn the captions on or off.
 - Open captions which remain fixed to the video and are always visible.
 - Closed captions are preferable because open captions can overwhelm some viewers and can be difficult for those with cognitive processing challenges to understand.
 - The difference between subtitles and closed captions is in the fact that subtitles only transcribe into text the verbal/spoken portions of a video, while captions convey the significant sounds from a video as well. Captions usually display the non-verbal information in square brackets, for example: [sound of sirens and car horns]; [instrumental music]; [background music fades out]
- **Transcripts:** A transcript is a text-version of a video, which includes a meaningful description of narration, dialogue, and sound effects. When captioning options are not available, attaching an accessible text-based transcript document to the video might be possible.

Social media

Retailers regularly use social media to market and advertise their stores and products to various audiences in these online communities. And, social media is also a way in which people today shop, gather information and interact with one another. traditionally, for people with disabilities have found social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram difficult to use. For example, people who use a screen reader to read online content experience difficulty navigating social media due to poor colour contrasts and a lack of headers, keyboard shortcuts, or alternate text for images, and as a result of videos that don’t include captioning.

12. [CNIB’s Clear Print Accessibility Guidelines](#) 13. [FWikipedia Sans-serif](#)

Today, most social media platforms are making it easier for people with disabilities to access.

- **Instagram** allows users to post photos and send them to their network. Users are also able to create very short videos and include them in posts. Instagram now offers features and technologies that help people with disabilities, such as vision loss and deafness, get the most out of Instagram. Instagram is now providing users with instructions concerning the ways to use their platform with accessibility tools. Instagram is also becoming another shopping channel for retailers to connect with customers. <https://help.instagram.com/308605337351503>
- **TikTok** allows users to post short videos and send them to their network. TikTok offers features and technologies that help people with disabilities, such as vision loss and deafness, get the most out of software. TikTok is also becoming another shopping channel for retailers to connect with customers <https://www.tiktok.com/accessibility/>
- **Facebook** is a popular website that provides retailers with the capability to connect directly with customers and promote products to connected communities and wider audiences. Facebook posts can include text, photos, video, and links to content on other websites. <https://www.facebook.com/help/273947702950567>
- **Twitter** allows users to send a short text-based message up to 280 characters long (also known as a “tweet”) to their networks. These tweets are published online to a Twitter profile page and can be viewed publicly. When writing a tweet, place hashtags (#) or mentions (@) at the end of the tweet. This allows a screen reader to voice the main content of the tweet more clearly at the beginning. Avoid using unfamiliar acronyms or “text-speak” that could be difficult to understand for users who are listening to tweets while being read by a screen reader.
- **YouTube** is a video-sharing website that allows retailers to post user-generated videos in addition to professionally created video content. For people with disabilities related to vision impairments, YouTube may be difficult to use. However, for people with disabilities related to hearing loss, YouTube features closed captioning and described video settings for most of the videos posted on the platform. Please note, that due to a video’s audio quality, background noise, and/or the number of speakers, the resulting captions may not always be accurate. To ensure that everyone can view a retailer’s YouTube video, add a copy of the video’s transcript with the descriptive action within a video’s description box.

Considering the fact that social media is becoming an extremely viable way by which customers can purchase products, here are few general tips to help improve the accessibility of a retailer’s social media profile:

- Ensure that your store’s website URL is listed in the “About” section of your timeline/page to provide an easy point of entry to learn more information.
- Include other ways by which to contact your store, such as a phone number, an online “Contact Us” form, and/or a general contact email address.
- After posting a photo, video, or audio file, be sure to include a comment that directs users to the full caption or the full transcript in the post.
- Any videos uploaded on YouTube should have closed caption enabled and the transcripts posted in the comments.
- If adding photos, compose a description of the images so the content is accessible to people who are visually impaired.

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