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12 TIPS TO MAKE MEETINGS ACCESSIBLE

By David Berman, FGD, FGDC

Successfully running an event that doesn't just accommodate but delights everyone, including people with disabilities, starts long before the day the participants arrive.

Take it from me. I was involved in planning, promoting, keynoting, moderating a town hall and wrapping up the largest conference on accessibility ever held in Canada, the International Summit on Accessibility 2014. The conference welcomed more than 500 participants, many with substantial mobility, visual, auditory and cognitive challenges, to our shiny new Ottawa Convention Centre in July, and provided valuable insights into running accessible events.

If you've never heard anything about dealing with service dogs and accessible PowerPoints, following these tips should help you avoid surprises, disappointments or embarrassment. And, you can do it all without having to trade off the quality of the event for your typical audience members while keeping your additional costs to a minimum.

AIM TO DELIGHT ALL

When we design for the extremes, everyone benefits.

So much technology we all enjoy every day resulted from attempts to accommodate an extreme disability: telephones, microphones, amplifiers, transistors, talking ATMs, speech recognition... Although cuts in the curbs and buttons that open doors were originally for wheelchair access, anyone struggling with suitcases appreciates them.

Don't assume you must make tradeoffs, with everyone giving up a little convenience to make an event comfortable for people with challenges. Instead, by fully understanding what people need, you can ensure that most accommodations are either neutral to other guests or actually enhance their experience. Planning for the extremes will also delight the person who happened to sprain a finger the night before, the guy who forgot his glasses, or the presenter whose audio won't work on her video presentation.

Every special need is also a precious opportunity to create memorable customer service that everyone will talk about.

FEAR NOT

If you don't have a lot of experience working with people with substantial disabilities, you may be afraid to do or say the wrong thing, most of all on stage in front of 500 people.

Though a tablespoon of fear of failure or embarrassment drives excellent preparation, you're going to do fine... as long as you do a bit of homework and recognize that you don't have to be perfect.

From the moment you start communicating an accessible event you are sending a strong message that you intend to respect and include everyone. That message earns you the liberty to make a few mistakes; people are going to want to help you succeed.

Should you offer to help push that wheelchair up that ramp? Should that blind person head to the cafeteria alone? Whenever you're not sure how to interact, simply ask, "Would

you like some help?" You have professional advice available at all times: people with disabilities are expert in telling you what they need.

CHOOSE THE VENUE FOR ACCESSIBILITY

As you choose your venue, make accessibility a key criterion. Find out how accessible the building, the meeting rooms and the washrooms are. Are there lots of elevators? What about getting in from the parking lot or the public transit?

Older buildings can be challenging to remediate for universal access while modern buildings are more likely to have built-in features such as convenient ramps and curb cuts, accessible elevators, parking and washrooms and braille signage.

The designers of the Ottawa Convention Centre, reopened in 2011, went out of their way to exceed accessibility regulations. Learn how they did it at http://ottawaconventioncentre.com/en/about-us/accessibility-for-ontarians-with-disabilities-act-aoda.

When considering the layout of meeting rooms, start with mobility and lines of sight. Visualize how someone in a wheelchair or with difficulty seeing or hearing would enter and leave the room, take in the presentations, participate in the group, reach the mic, or access the presenter during breaks or after a speech.

Those with wheelchairs, scooters or service animals will always favour a position with the clearest path to the door, so they can be least disruptive when entering or exiting. Some won't use regular chairs and will require enough space to manoeuvre. A person with hearing challenges may need to establish a direct line of sight to the speaker to be able to read lips.

Disabilities or not, most people at your event will need to plug in a tablet, laptop or mobile phone. Arrange power outlets and power bars and tape all wires religiously so they don't cause someone to trip or serve as a barrier to a wheeled vehicle.

IMAGINE EACH SENSE NOT AVAILABLE

Ontario's world-leading *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* lays out guidelines that go far beyond handicapped stalls in washrooms. For example, the rules state how Web content and documents must adhere to international guidelines for accessibility.

Consider every step of the experience for both users and presenters with each of these permanent or temporary deficits.

- You can't see at all;
- You can't see colour;
- You can't hear;
- You don't easily know left from right;
- You can't walk; and
- You can't raise your hands.

Imagine how a participant who can't see will overcome the deficit by hearing instead of seeing, perhaps with devices that read documents out loud, and navigate with assistance from sound, a cane, a service dog or an attendant.

Every special need is also a precious opportunity to create

Imagine how a participant who can't hear is going to see instead, by studying transcripts, watching sign language or reading lips.

Imagine how participants who can't move easily will access meeting rooms and washrooms in a wheelchair or scooter, or get noticed perhaps without raising their hand.

Imagine how a participant who doesn't "get" left and right or can't discern colours will rely on instructions with directions, colour or something like "beneath the dotted line." That user experience includes:

- Every promotion and reminder you send (in print, online, email or social media);
- Registration (online or in person);
- Interacting with Web-based materials;
- Transportation and directions to the building, the room, and to the seat;
- Perceiving and understanding all presented content;
- Enjoying meals, refreshments, activities and facilities; and
- Participating in post-event engagement.

CONSIDER ANYONE JOINING FROM A DISTANCE

For anyone joining your event remotely, the distance learning experience will need to be accessible, too.

You can think of distance participation as a basket of temporary disabilities: not being able to see or be seen, hear or be heard, or otherwise interact in ways that are easy to do in person and when fully abled. You need to provide appropriate technologies so that people can participate remotely without missing anything critical.

Accessible distance learning is a big topic, involving careful selection of software, hardware, techniques and skilled technicians… so much that we have courses and manuals on just this topic alone. Seek out an expert if you wish to get this right.

MAKE WEBSITES AND REGISTRATION ACCESSIBLE

Make sure your Web presence, electronic documents and emails conform to international standards for accessible publishing (WCAG 2.0 Level A or, better yet, Level AA for websites, email, Word and PowerPoint files and PDF/UA for PDF files). Accessible Web and documents will ensure that no matter what assistive technologies your participants use (such as screen readers that read pages out loud), they should be able to perceive and interact with your pages. It will also improve your search results!

Most importantly, any online forms need to be accessible so everyone can register without frustration. Even your paper registration form should identify where to find online accessible equivalents. (Tip: add a QR code to the online equivalent.)

Your registration form must capture information about any special needs people have. This is how you'll know which disabilities to be proactive about accommodating. The trick is to ask in a way that respects privacy, while providing legal coverage for not necessarily accommodating every allergy or disability under the sun.

See our registration form at www.davidberman.com/courses/seminarregistration/) for an example of how we capture this information.

Based on how people answer, a personal follow-up may be in order. For example, if someone identifies as hearing impaired, you could explore some options:

- Bringing in a sign language interpreter;
- Briefing presenters regarding lip reading;
- Providing captions/transcripts for audio/multimedia files;
- Provide speaker support in advance.

For those who identify as visually impaired, discuss with them:

- Whether they would like to receive speaker support and handouts in advance, and if so, in what file format;
- If they are bringing a service dog; and
- If they need any navigational assistance from the public transit system.

PREPARE FOR SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION

A sign language interpreter can generally handle up to an hour of presentations. For a day-long event, count on hiring two interpreters, who spell each other off every 20 to 30 minutes.

Plan where the signers will stand. If you're videoing or have distance participation, the signers may be best in the frame with the presenter. Otherwise, it may be best to position signers off to the side. Either way, group the signers and participants who will make use of their service close enough to be able to have continuous eye contact.

Have the signers connect with the presenters beforehand. Signers will often ask for a transcript ahead of time so they can understand unfamiliar terms. They may also coach the presenters to avoid speaking too quickly or relying on unfamiliar acronyms.

CHECK YOUR TOOLS

Unfortunately, most popular conferencing software – including Adobe Connect and WebEx – doesn't yet properly support people with disabilities. Some tools may even undermine your efforts.

For example, you may laboriously prepare a fully accessible presentation in PowerPoint, complete with text alternatives for every image. But when you share it via WebEx, WebEx only shows an old-fashioned flat slideshow of your slides: all of the accessibility features are lost.

One way to avoid losing the accessibility of a properly pre-

memorable customer service that everyone will talk about

pared PowerPoint deck is to send the file ahead to any participants who wish to use it with their assistive technologies. They can then follow along using PowerPoint and their assistive technology (such as a screen reader) during the presentation, benefiting from all the built-in accessibility.

Choosing the right conferencing tool and strategies to support accessible presentations is complex but can save weeks of pain and expense for you and your presenters. It's a start to realize that your regular conferencing system might not support a truly accessible meeting. You may need to combine several techniques to take care of everyone in a given situation, such as ASL interpretation or real-time transcription in a separately broadcast window.

CREATE ACCESSIBLE SPEAKER SUPPORT / HANDOUTS

Your presenters may need to adjust what and how they present, so you should include specific instructions and requirements in your speaker agreements well in advance.

Presenters who present a speech with no speaker support may simply need to provide a rough transcript of what they plan to say in advance (either for distribution to specific audience members or as an assist for interpreters).

Speakers providing handouts will need to submit them as digital accessible documents. Remember that some people with visual impairments can still read large print, so have your speakers prepare five copies of each handout as large print. Large print can be as simple as printing the existing handout on oversized paper: all wording should be in at least 18-point type and preferably in a sans serif typeface such as Arial.

PROVIDE AUDIO DESCRIPTION

An accessible speaker who has people with sight impairments in the audience knows how to balance describing what's going on without overburdening the sighted audience members. This balance can often eliminate the need to distribute speaker support in accessible format, or for any video of the presentation to require the work of adding audio descriptions.

These types of things might need description:
- Something that is essential to understanding.
  "I'm holding in my hands a Tasmanian tiger."
- Slides or pictures that contain essential information.
  "The graph I'm showing demonstrates that the percentage of tiger kitten videos on YouTube has risen from 23 per cent to 46 per cent, from 2010 till today."
  "I'm showing a picture of the service dog station at the conference. There are two bowls for drinking, as well as a dog-friendly touchpad for pooches to post on Twitter!"
- Scenes in a video or movie.

To determine what deserves audio description in a movie or video, simply close your eyes while previewing and decide what significant parts of the story are missing.

Remember that saying, "Notice how the blue line shows…" is not useful for those with colour deficits. Instead say something like, "The thickest line – that's the blue one…"

ACCOMMODATE SERVICE DOGS

Service dogs are specially trained to help people deal with visual or hearing challenges, autism, diabetes, epilepsy or post-traumatic stress.

Legally, we can't refuse entry to service dogs and the etiquette pretty well boils down to this: If the animal is wearing a harness, it's on the job and not a pet. The well-being of the owner depends on the dog staying focused. Don't pet or play with the dog unless the owner invites you to.

After guiding an attendee safely to a seat, the dog may simply curl up beside the chair for a nap. Because service dogs such as Labrador retrievers or German shepherds are often quite large, make sure to reserve them enough space.

During a long event, dogs might need to go outdoors to follow the call of nature. Anticipate this, especially if they will have to pass through security all over again to get back in. In a large conference, consider setting up a canine comfort station with water and possibly snacks. Let the owners know what is available for their dogs.

CONSIDER WHAT YOU'LL BE SHARING

To round out the accessibility of your event, think ahead to what will happen after it's over.

The key question: Will anyone need to review proceedings, minutes or a recording of your sessions or download slides after the event?

If so, plan early to make all aspects of the experience inclusive, including presentations, minutes, recordings, and the like. You may also need to recreate certain manuals, handouts, and learning guides to make them accessible. Multimedia will need captions, audio descriptions or transcripts.

WHEN WE PLAN FOR EXTREMES, EVERYONE BENEFITS

There you have it. A lot to think about, because there's no limit to how far we can go to delight everyone, whether in reaching a broader audience, attracting and retaining the best community, conforming to regulations, or creating more social justice.

And, as our society proudly moves forward, you can seize your opportunity to help prove that no one ever needs to feel left out or left behind. **SOI**

For deeper tips on accessible events, visit davidberman.com/accessible-event-tips or consider David's manuals and courses.