Customer Service Standard

The Customer Service Standard requires organizations and businesses to provide accessible customer service to people with disabilities. Training on providing accessible customer service and how to interact with people with disabilities is a key requirement of the standard.

This module is designed to support organizations and businesses in meeting the training requirements of the standard.

Watch this video for an introduction to accessible customer service and why it’s important.

Module Topics

- Who Must Be Trained and When
- What the Accessible Customer Service Training Must Cover
- Purpose of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005
- Customer Service Standard – The Requirements
- Serving People with Disabilities - Introduction
- Serving People Who Have Various Types of Disabilities
- Serving People Who Use Service Animals
- Serving People with a Support Person
- Serving People Who Use Assistive Devices
- Serving People with Disabilities – At Home or Over the Phone
- If There Are Difficulties Accessing Your Goods, Services or Facilities
- Summary

This module will take you approximately 30-40 minutes to complete.

Who Must Be Trained and When

The following people must be trained on serving customers with disabilities:

- all employees and volunteers (paid and unpaid, full-time, part-time and contract positions)
- anyone involved in developing your organization's policies (including managers, senior leaders, directors, board members and owners)
- anyone who provides goods, services or facilities to customers on your organization's behalf (such as external contact centres or facilities management companies)

Training must be completed as soon as possible after an employee or volunteer joins your organization.

Training must also be provided when there are any changes to your organization's accessible customer service policies.

What the Accessible Customer Service Training Must Cover

This module covers these required training topics:

- purpose of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005
- overview of the requirements of the Customer Service Standard
- how to interact with people with various types of disabilities
- how to interact with people with disabilities who use an assistive device or require the assistance of a service animal or support person
- what to do if a person with a disability is having difficulty accessing your organization's goods, services or facilities

These required training topics are unique to each organization and are **not** covered in this module, but you need to know about:

- your organization's policies on providing accessible customer service
- how to use any equipment or devices available in your organization that can help to provide goods, services or facilities to people with disabilities

Purpose of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (or “the Act”) is a provincial law. Its goal is to make Ontario accessible for people with disabilities by 2025 by developing and enforcing accessibility standards.

Accessibility standards

The accessibility standards are the legal requirements that organizations in Ontario must follow to become more accessible to people with disabilities. They address key areas of daily life, including:

- customer service
- information and communications
- employment
- transportation
- design of public spaces

The standards are found in the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation which was established under the Act.

Who must comply

The standards must be followed by:

- the Ontario government and Legislative Assembly
- all designated public sector organizations, which include municipalities, universities, colleges, hospitals, school boards and public transportation organizations
- private businesses and not-for-profit organizations that have one or more employees in Ontario

Who is a customer?

A customer can be anyone who is accessing your organization’s goods, services or facilities. They may include paying and non-paying members of the public, and individuals your organization might call customers, such as clients, members, patrons or patients.

Customers can also be other businesses or organizations (also referred to as third parties).

Definition of Disability and Being Alert to Barriers

Did you know that 1 in 7 people in Ontario have a disability? And that number is expected to increase as the population ages, as will the need for accessibility.

Who are people with disabilities?
When we think of disabilities, we tend to think of people who use wheelchairs and who have physical disabilities that are visible and obvious. But disabilities can also be non-visible. We can't always tell who has a disability. A disability can be temporary or permanent, and many of us will experience a disability at some point in our lives.

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 uses the same definition of disability as the Ontario Human Rights Code, which includes physical disabilities as well as vision, hearing, speech, developmental, learning and mental health disabilities.

Be alert to barriers to accessibility
Some people see disabilities as the barrier, but actually it's the environment that presents barriers.

Knowledge Check #4

Which of the following should you **not** do when serving a customer with a disability?

Choose the best response and select Submit.

a) Think ahead and remove any items that may cause a physical barrier, such as boxes left in an aisle.

b) When providing directions to a person with vision loss, be precise and descriptive. Don’t say “over there” or just point in the direction.

c) Ask before you help. Don’t assume the person needs it.

d) If you don’t understand what your customer is saying, pretend that you do, so that you don’t offend them.

e) Allow extra time if necessary. People with some types of disabilities may take a little longer to do things or to communicate.

The correct answer is d). If you’re not sure you have understood what your customer said, don’t pretend that you did. Confirm by summarizing or repeating what you’ve understood, and allow the person to respond. If appropriate, provide other ways for customers to contact you, such as email.

People Who Use Service Animals

There are various types of service animals who support people with various types of disabilities.

- A person with vision loss may use a guide dog.
- Hearing alert animals help people with hearing loss.
- Other service animals are trained to alert a person to an oncoming seizure, or to assist people with autism, mental health disabilities, physical disabilities and other disabilities.

Under the Customer Service Standard, there are no restrictions on what type of animal can be used as a service animal.

An animal is considered a service animal if:

- you can easily identify it's a service animal through visual indicators, such as when it wears a harness or vest, or
- the person with a disability provides documentation from a regulated health professional that confirms they need the service animal for reasons relating to their disability.

Tips:

- Don't touch or distract a service animal. It's not a pet, it's a working animal and has to pay attention at all times.
- If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer. You may ask to see their documentation from a regulated health professional.
- The customer is responsible for the care and supervision of their service animal. However, you can provide water for the animal if your customer requests it.

If another person's health or safety could be seriously impacted by the presence of a service animal, such as a severe allergy: [expand to show following text]
Consider all options and try to find a solution that meets the needs of both people. For example:

- creating distance between the two people
- eliminating in-person contact
- changing the time the two receive service
- any other way that would allow the person to use their service animal on the premises

If you can't easily identify that it's a service animal: [expand to show bullets]

- Don't make assumptions. You can ask the person to provide documentation (such as a letter, note or form) from a regulated health professional that states that they require the animal because of their disability.

- If the person shows you the documentation, then they must be allowed to be accompanied by their service animal.
- The person is not required to disclose their disability or demonstrate how the animal assists them.

When a Service Animal is Prohibited by Another Law

The law requires you to allow a person to bring their service animal with them into areas of your premises open to the public or to third parties.

Areas are considered open to the public even if they are only open to those people who have paid an admission fee, are members or have met certain eligibility or entrance requirements. These may include, for example, a fitness club, hotel, taxicab or school.

In cases where another law prohibits a service animal from entering certain areas (for example, a service animal would not be allowed in the kitchen of a cooking school), provide another way for the person to access your services.

While a service animal may be prohibited from certain areas (for example, areas where food is prepared) service dogs are allowed in areas where food is sold, served or offered for sale. This includes a restaurant's public dining area.

An example of a law that specifically prohibits animals:

Ontario Regulation 562 under the Health Protection and Promotion Act states that animals are not allowed in places where food is manufactured, prepared, processed, handled, served, displayed, stored, sold or offered for sale. However, it **does make an exception for service dogs** to allow them in areas where food is normally sold, served or offered for sale.

Tips if the service animal is prohibited by another law:

- Explain why to your customer, and discuss other ways to serve them, for example:
  - leaving the service animal in a safe area where it's allowed, and offering assistance to the person while they're separated from the animal, or
  - serving the customer in another area where the animal is allowed

Tips for decision makers – When an animal is prohibited by law

- Identify if there are any areas of your premises where a service animal would be prohibited by law, and if so, identify the law in your accessible customer service policy and the area(s) where service animals are prohibited.
- Consider options ahead of time that you or your staff could offer when a service animal is prohibited.

Knowledge Check #5

Daphne met her friend Justin for lunch at a small neighbourhood restaurant. When the waitress noticed Justin's service dog, she said: "I'm sorry, but because we serve food, your dog will have to stay outside."

Which of the following statements is **true**?

Choose the best response and select Submit.

a) The waitress was right. Service dogs are not allowed where food is served.

b) The waitress must let Justin keep his service dog with him in the restaurant.

c) The waitress was just following her restaurant's policy that dogs are not permitted.

The correct answer is b). Although another law prevents animals from going where food is prepared, served or sold, it makes an exception for service dogs to allow them in areas where food is served or sold.

People with a Support Person

A support person can be a paid personal support worker, an intervenor, volunteer, family member or friend. A support person might help your customer with communication, mobility, personal care or with accessing your services.

A person with a disability is permitted to bring their support person with them to any area of your premises that is open to the public or to third parties.

If your organization charges for admission, such as a movie theatre, it must provide advance notice of what admission fee or fare, if any, will be charged for a support person, for example, through a prominently placed sign or a notice on your website.

If your organization is a public transportation provider…
...then fares for a support person must be waived when they are accompanying a person with a disability who relies on their support. This requirement is specified under the Transportation Standard. It is the responsibility of the person with a disability to demonstrate their need for a support person to the public transportation provider.

Tips:

- If you're not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting service, or simply ask.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their support person.
- If your organization charges an admission fee or fare, be familiar with its policy on fees or fares for support persons.
- It's good practice to confirm with your customer whether they want the support person to be present while confidential matters are being discussed.

For decision makers – When it may be necessary to require a support person

In limited situations, you may require a person with a disability to be accompanied by a support person for health or safety reasons. You must first consult with the person with a disability and consider available evidence before you determine that:

- a support person is necessary to protect the health or safety of the person with a disability or the health or safety of others on the premises; and
- there is no other reasonable way to protect the health or safety of the person with a disability and the health or safety of others on the premises.

In such a situation, you must waive the admission fee or fare for the support person, if one exists.

Tip:

Identify ahead of time if there are situations where a support person might be required to accompany a person with a disability for health or safety reasons, and consider how you and your staff will handle such situations.

People Who Use Assistive Devices

An assistive device is a piece of equipment a person with a disability uses to help with daily living.

Most assistive devices are “personal assistive devices,” such as a wheelchair or walker, white cane, hearing aid, oxygen tank or communication board. They belong to the person using them and are part of their personal space.

Tips for serving a customer with a personal assistive device:

- Don’t touch or handle any assistive device without permission.
- Don’t move assistive devices or equipment (such as canes or walkers) out of the person’s reach.

Devices Offered by Your Organization

If your organization offers equipment or devices that can help customers with disabilities access your services, make sure you know how to use them. It may be helpful to have instruction manuals handy or an instruction sheet posted where the device is located or stored.

Some examples of devices that your organization might offer include:

- mobility devices, such as a manual wheelchair or motorized scooter
- lift, which raises or lowers people who use mobility devices
- technology that makes it easier for people with disabilities to communicate or access information, such as certain computer software, an amplification system or a TTY phone line
- adjustable desk or workstation, which changes the height or tilt of a writing surface
- accessible interactive kiosk, which might offer information or services in braille or through audio headsets

Knowledge Check #6

Which of the following should you **not** do when serving a customer who uses an assistive device or service animal, or is accompanied by a support person?

Choose the best response and select Submit.

a) Speak directly to the customer, not to their support person or companion.

b) Avoid touching or distracting a service animal. The animal is working and must pay attention at all times.

c) Don’t touch assistive devices without permission, and don’t move these items out of the person’s reach.

d) If you’re not sure it’s a service animal, you may ask the customer to provide documentation to confirm they require the animal because of a disability.

e) If you’ll be discussing confidential matters with your customer, have their support person wait in another area while you serve them.

The correct answer is e). The customer must be allowed to have their support person accompany them. However, if confidential matters will be discussed, it’s a good practice to first confirm with your customer whether they want the support person to be present.

Serving People with Disabilities – At Home or Over the Phone

The following are good practices that can apply to all customers.

Tips for providing at-home service:

- Don’t arrive unexpectedly. Confirm your arrival time in advance.
- Respect requests made by a customer with a disability to accommodate their needs. For example, a person with an environmental sensitivity may require that you refrain from wearing scented products in their home.
- Be patient. You may need to wait a few moments for your customer to open the door.
- Introduce yourself. Some customers may not be able to read identification cards and may want you to use a password. Check before you visit.
- Keep your customer informed of what you’re doing.
- Make sure that you leave the home exactly as it was when you arrived. For example, someone with vision loss will expect that their furniture is in the same place and could trip if you’ve moved the sofa.

Tips for providing over-the-phone service:

- Speak naturally, clearly and directly.
- Focus on what the customer is saying. Don’t interrupt or finish your customer’s sentences. Give your customer time to explain or respond.
- If you’re not sure what is being said to you, politely ask the customer to repeat what they said, or repeat or rephrase what you heard them say and ask if you have understood correctly.
- If the customer is using an interpreter or a telephone relay service, speak naturally to the customer, not to the interpreter.
- If you encounter a situation where, after numerous attempts, you and your customer cannot communicate with each other, consider making alternate arrangements that may work best for them.

If There Are Difficulties Accessing Your Goods, Services or Facilities

If you notice that your customer is having difficulty accessing your goods, services or facilities, a good starting point is to ask “How can I help you?”

Often, there are simple solutions. For example,

- **Your customer uses a wheelchair and cannot enter your shop because of a step at the front door.**
  You could offer to serve the customer at the door, at another more convenient location, by phone, or by delivery to their home. You might also consider low-cost solutions such as a portable ramp that can be set out at your shop entrance on request and if suitable to the situation.

- **Your customer with hearing loss has a question.**
  Ask the customer in writing if using a pen and paper to communicate would be a good way to serve him. Remember, if you’re discussing confidential information, offer to return the notes to the customer or to destroy them.

- **Your customer can’t reach some of your products because the displays or shelves are too high to reach from their scooter.**
  Offer to bring the products to the customer.

- **The menu cannot be read by a customer with low vision or a learning disability.**
  Offer to read the menu out loud, or post the menu online so they can access it beforehand.

- **Your customer has a mental health disability that makes it difficult for her to be in crowded spaces with other people. She explains her disability-related needs when she enters your reception area.**
  Offer her a place to wait her turn for service in an area apart from other customers.

- **Your organization doesn’t have automatic door openers.**
  Be prepared to help open the door.

Your customers are your best source for information about their needs. Being flexible and open to suggestions will help to create a good customer experience. A solution can be simple and the customer will likely appreciate your attention and consideration.

Recap – General Tips

Here are some general tips to keep in mind when serving people with disabilities:

- Ask before you help. Don’t assume the person needs it.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer, “How can I help you?” Your customer knows if they need help and how you can provide it.
- Don’t make assumptions about the type of disability a person has or about what accommodation needs they may have. Your assumptions may be wrong.
- Some disabilities are not visible and customers are not required to tell you about their disabilities.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their support person or companion.
- Take the time to get to know your customer’s needs and focus on meeting those needs just as you would with any other customer.
- Listen carefully. If you’re not sure what your customer is saying, confirm by summarizing or repeating what was said to you, or politely ask them to repeat it.
- Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to respond or do things.
- Use appropriate language and terminology when referring to people with disabilities.

Knowledge Check #7

What should you do if you are unsure if a customer with a disability needs help?

Choose the best response and select Submit.

a) Go ahead and help them. If they don't want help, they'll say so.

b) Don't attend to them until you have time for them. Serve the easiest customers first.

c) Always serve a customer with a disability away from other customers.

d) Wait and see if they really are a customer. Maybe they'll change their mind and go someplace else.

e) Ask, "May I help you?"

The correct answer is e). Asking "May I help you?" or "How may I help you?" invites individuals to work with you on how you can best serve them.

Summary

You have now completed the Customer Service Standard module.

Module Topics

You have learned about:

- the purpose of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005
- the requirements of the Customer Service Standard
- tips on interacting with people with various types of disabilities
- tips on interacting with people who use an assistive device or require the assistance of a service animal or support person
- what to do if a customer with a disability is having difficulty accessing your organization's goods, services or facilities

If there are any areas that you need to repeat, take the time now to review and ask yourself:

- What have I learned about serving customers with disabilities?
- What will I do differently from now on?

If you are required to provide confirmation of your training covered in this module, a sample completion certificate which you can sign and date is provided on the AccessForward.ca website.

AccessForward cannot certify completion. It is the responsibility of the individual to certify that they have completed the module content.

Certificate