Customer service

1. Disability and appropriate language

Language reflects and shapes the way we view the world. The words we use can influence community attitudes, both positively and negatively, and impact on the lives of others.

How we write and speak about people with disability can have a profound effect on the way they are viewed by the community. Some words, by their very nature, degrade and diminish people with disability. Others perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes, removing entirely a person’s individuality and humanity.

Over the years, people with disability have had to endure a variety of labels that serve to set them apart from the rest of the community. Even today, people with disability are still identified by their disabling condition – all too often, we hear ‘a paraplegic’ for a person who has a paraplegia; ‘a cerebral palsy sufferer’ for a person with cerebral palsy or ‘a Down syndrome baby’ for a baby with Down syndrome.

This labelling influences our perceptions by focusing only on one aspect of a person – their disability – and ignores their other roles and attributes, for example they may be also a parent, a lawyer, a musician or a sportsperson.

‘Putting People First’ is a simple rule of thumb – acknowledging the person before their disability.

2. Communicating with people with disability

When communicating with a person with a disability, rely on your common sense. Ask yourself how you would want to be treated and always be willing to adapt to a person’s individual preference. The fundamental principle is to put the person before the disability.

Communication skills are vital in developing relationships with people with and without disabilities. Common sense and courtesy tells us:

- Treat people with respect – be patient and listen attentively.
- Speak directly to a person with a disability even if accompanied by an interpreter or companion.
- Never make assumptions about what people can do.
- Don’t attempt to speak, or finish a sentence for the person you are speaking to.
- Never ask, “What happened to you?”
3. Communication about people with disability

Language plays a critical role in shaping and reflecting our thoughts, beliefs and feelings. The way in which we refer to people can affect the way they are seen by others and, indeed, the way in which they feel about themselves.

Some prefer the term ‘people with disability’ because it puts the person first. Others, such as some people who are Deaf or those that have a long-term medical condition may not see themselves as ‘disabled’.

A person with a disability is not defined by their impairment. Nobody wants to be given a medical label.

References such as ‘an epileptic’ or a ‘diabetic’ are dehumanising. Instead, if you need to refer to a person’s condition, say a person who has epilepsy or a person who has diabetes.

Avoid using language that suggests people with disability are frail or dependent on others, or which could make people with disability objects of pity, such as ‘suffers from’ or ‘a victim of’.

Do not use collective nouns such as ‘the disabled’ or ‘the blind’. These terms imply people are part of a group which is somehow separate from the rest of society. However, there is one exception and that is ‘the Deaf’. This is the preferred term for many people who are Deaf who use AUSLAN and see themselves as a cultural minority rather than part of the disability community.

General guidelines

- Don’t define a person by their disability. We are all individuals with abilities, desires, interests and problems – some of us happen to have a disability.
- Avoid focussing unnecessarily on a person’s disability. If it is not necessary to acknowledge that a person has a disability, then don’t mention it.
- Portray people with disability positively by recognising what a person can do rather than focussing on their limitations, for example, the person walks with an aid, not that he or she has limited mobility.
- Recognise that many of the difficulties facing people with a disability are barriers created by community attitudes and the physical environment. We can all help to break down these barriers by using appropriate language – to be labelled in a derogatory way serves only to perpetuate these barriers.
- Be specific about a person’s circumstances and avoid stereotypes, generalisations and assumptions based on limited information.
- Avoid any word or phrase that has a negative connotation – for example, ‘confined to a wheelchair’ instead of ‘uses a wheelchair’ – or that implies people with a disability are suffering.
- Avoid labels; say person with a disability; put the person first and be specific.
### 4. Positive language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words not to use</th>
<th>Words to use</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Abnormal; cripple or crippled; mentally retarded</td>
<td>• Put the person first and specify the need or disability, for example, a person who uses a wheelchair, person with a cerebral palsy/a disability.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Defect (as in birth defect, congenital defect)</td>
<td>• Say the ‘person with a disability since birth’, ‘person with a congenital disability’.</td>
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| • Unfortunate; victim; suffer or suffering from; afflicted with; disease; illness; patient; in a vegetative state, invalid | • Put the person first and be specific, for example, a person with Down syndrome.  
**Note:** Patient is appropriate when referring to a doctor/patient relationship. |
| • Dwarf | • Person who is little or of short stature. |
| • Paraplegic | • Person with paraplegia. |
| • Epileptic | • Person with epilepsy |
| • Fit/attack/spell | • Seizure |
| • Deaf and dumb | • Deaf/hearing impaired and cannot speak/has difficulty with speech. |
| • Brain damaged | • Person with an acquired brain injury. |
| • Handicapped | • Handicapped is appropriate only if referring to a barrier facing people with a disability, for example, “…are handicapped by a lack of access.” |
| • Insane; lunatic; maniac; mental patient; neurotic; psycho; psychotic; schizophrenic; unsound mind; crazy; mad | • Put the person first and be specific, for example, say ‘a person with a psychiatric illness.’ |
| • Terms beginning with ‘the’, such as ‘the disabled’ or ‘the blind’ | • Put the person first and be specific, for example, people who are blind. |
| • Cerebral palsy sufferer | • Person with cerebral palsy. |
| • Confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair-bound | • Is a wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair. |
| • Disabled toilets/parking | • Accessible toilets/parking. |
5. Disability etiquette

- Never assume you know what assistance, if any, a person with a disability requires. Ask if, and what, assistance may be needed.
- Treat a person with a disability in the same manner and with the same respect and courtesy as you would anyone else.
- Speak directly to the person rather than through the companion, attendant or sign-language interpreter who may also be present.
- Never speak about the person as if they are invisible, can’t understand what is being said or can’t speak for themselves.
- Do not put people with a disability on a pedestal or talk to them in patronising terms as if their performing normal, everyday activities were exceptional.
- Always respect the person’s dignity, individuality and desire for independence. If help is required in a given situation, do not assist without asking first.