

CHAPTER FIVE: STAFF TRAINING AND MARKETING

1. STAFF TRAINING

Very often service providers are uncomfortable in direct contact situations with persons with disabilities because they do not know what is required of them. There is a range of disabilities, which may have different implications. Usually, these customers require no additional assistance, though many of them would certainly appreciate it.

Staff training is important at all levels in the organizational framework of tourism – hence, all levels from those employees in direct contact with clients, to those employees dealing with housekeeping and support staff who might come into contact with clients in the performance of their duties. Often, simply increased awareness and good communication will be even more important than assistance techniques. Helpful and friendly staff can insure an enjoyable holiday when, for example, the physical design of the hotel is not ideal. Problems and distress are caused when communication has broken down or where staff (presumably untrained) does not think.

Providing high standards of customer care for disabled people should always be seen as an integral part of the standard training procedures that insure guests have an enjoyable stay. It is important that staff start with the attitude that all guests, whatever their particular needs, are important and valued customers. This positive attitude will help make a visitor a genuinely happy and rewarding occasion for everyone.

All tourism businesses should develop customer care programmes and these should automatically cover the full range of potential customers. All in-house courses, carried out at the accommodation establishment at a time, which causes least interruption to normal working, should provide staff with the

necessary skills to respond to the needs of guests with a wide range of disabilities. They should cover mobility or dexterity impairment, sight or hearing loss, problems of mental health or mental illness, difficulties with speech, or special dietary requirements. High quality service should always be directed to the satisfaction of the customer, on the understanding that clients are different, varying in age, interests, level of demand, disability etc. Training should always take into account the heterogeneity of profiles.

When planning such training it is often very helpful to consult an appropriate organization for advice. Training methods should be arranged so that staffs are learning through problem solving and role-playing and by discussion. This promotes an active learning role rather than a passive attitude to the training being received.

During training, staff can and should be encouraged to examine the special facilities available e.g. portable ramps, bathroom facilities, an induction loop system etc. and receive instructions on the correct procedures for their use. They can then adapt their work practices as necessary and can develop their sphere or work with this extra knowledge. They may then be able to identify potentially hazardous situations and suggest improvements. This will assist management in updating their facilities as new equipment becomes available.

It is important that any training undertaken should consider the person in his/her entirety, not only to attend to the characteristic of the disability. It is conventional to approach the attention to a guest in a normalized way, with some habitual assumptions about their situation and their problems. Instead, a service provider should be open to the possibility that the guest will actually tell what he/she needs and what can or cannot be done by him or her. This respect to a person, with or without disability, can seem obvious but it is appropriate to recall it, since the overprotective attitudes are more present than they have to be and it causes situations in which the person with disability is ignored, often due to erroneous

understanding that communication should be established with the companion. Throughout our life, we can, by accident or another circumstance, suffer a disability. This awareness should help us to feel closer to the concept, and to understand that it is not by having disability that we change or we are different; on the contrary, we continue to aspire to the enjoyment of goods and services and we demand a normal and respectful deal. The following guidelines should be adopted:

1. **Naturalness:** avoiding prejudices, because the person with disability will know to orient to the person who attends him/her, for the best way to satisfy his/her concrete needs.
2. **Flexibility:** recognizing the diversity of people that despite having common characteristics, they can have, according to their level of autonomy or by other personal circumstances, different subjective needs.
3. **Respect for the person:** the person with disability is the main actor in the relation of attention that belongs to him/her, like any other person without a disability, for which the communication with him/her should begin directly and personally, respecting his/her capacity to decide for himself/herself.

Management and owners of hotels and other places of accommodation should consider adopting a policy statement, which can lead to a greater involvement of staff in customer care generally.

External training courses are often available, however, training arranged by managers on the spot will often meet the needs of staff more directly, and be particularly related to the establishment's own facilities for disabled guests.

Tact, patience, inventiveness, the capacity to learn from experience and a real knowledge of the facilities which are available, are essential attributes of anyone whose work involves contact with customers.

2. MARKETING ACCESSIBILITY

A simple question enquiring about any special needs should be included on all hotel booking and registration forms e.g. “Do you have any special requirements relating to a disability?” is a suggested question. The availability of facilities for those with disabilities is increasingly seen as a marketing plus point, and is best featured in an establishment’s standard literature, and such literature should include information relating to accessible information on what equipment and services are available. A mixture of information can be a good procedure, for example, listing the availability of 24-hour portering, ramped access, baby listening services, an induction loop installation, the number of rooms specially adapted for wheelchair access, tea and coffee making facilities in bedrooms and the availability of special arrangements for guests with hearing or mobility difficulty in the event of fire.

Establishments should provide text phone or e-mail services for guests to book accommodation.

With the increasing importance of the active retired market, with many more people with disabilities in paid employment, and with the greater mobility afforded by special transport arrangements and sophisticated car adaptations, there is an important and growing market to be tapped. Many people with restricted mobility may travel with a carer, or as part of a family unit, or a business team, so that the loss of one may mean the loss of others.

For a policy of accessibility to be successful, commitment to it must be clearly demonstrated and supported by all staff. The policy will only be successful if

continually expressed by the Chair and Chief Executive of any large organization, or by any individual or family who manages a bed and breakfast establishment or a small hotel. Insure therefore that a policy to welcome all your guests is advocated by all managers to all staff on a regular basis.

When marketing, the following guidelines should be kept in mind:

1. Use standard text – printed information should be in a simple, straightforward non-technical language. Alternatives should be provided for people with visual impairments or reading difficulties.
2. A website should be operable by keyboard only and provide meaningful text descriptions in place of pictures.
3. Owners and management of a place of accommodation should understand that e-mail fax and text-phones are a means of communication for many people
4. Large print should be used wherever possible. Most people prefer large print in the range of 16 to 22 point and in a sans serif font. Simple large print documents can be produced using photocopiers or P.C.'s.

The T.G.C.S.A.'s increasing use of objectively assessed symbols to denote a range of special facilities or a standard accessibility is welcomed, but it is also important to be aware of the fact that the wheelchair symbol with its associated imagery of dependence may be disliked. A service industry must focus on the quality of provision, and quality is good for business. Hotels and other stakeholders need to continually review their in-house policies, practices and procedures in relation to the on-going legislative requirements.