Transcript: Best Practices in Effective Communication (And Its Impact on the Customer Relationship), Emily Shuman. AccessibilityPlus 2022.

All right, well, welcome everyone. My name is Emily Shuman, and I'm the Director of the Rocky Mountain ADA Center. So for access purposes, I'll describe myself. I am a white woman in her thirties with her curled brown hair that's shoulder length. I'm wearing a tan cardigan over a dark blouse, and I'm against a background showing a large office with a big, a big window. So I'm so pleased to be here today to talk to you all about best practices and effective communication and the impact on the customer relationship.

So with that, let's just jump into it. So any time that the Rocky Mountain ADA Center gives a training, we do have to include this little bit of a disclaimer, which is just to say that the information you get here today should be intended as just informal guidance, and it's not a determination of your legal rights or responsibilities. I'm not a lawyer, so don't take this as legal advice. But the Rocky Mountain ADA Center is operated under a grant by the National Institute on Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research. And so just to give you a little bit more information about the ADA National Network and the Rocky Mountain ADA Center, so the Rocky Mountain ADA Center is just one of ten federally funded ADA centers in the nation, and our mission is really to provide information, guidance and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act throughout our region, which is Colorado, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota and Utah.

But again, we are just one of ten centers in the country. Each state in our country is attached to one of these regional centers, and we all operate and provide all of the same services. So I just want to give you a little bit of information about what those services are.

So the ADA National Network through these these regional ADA centers, we're really able to help individuals and organizations understand their rights and responsibilities under the ADA. And we do that through a number of services. The main service being through technical assistance, which is just those answers to questions.

So, so any one of you can contact the ADA National Network through the 800 number, which is 1-800-949-4232, and you'll be connected with your regional center based on your phone number. When we get those technical assistance calls, we get questions on all kinds of things from individuals with disabilities, from businesses.

And it's always confidential and it's always free for us to provide that guidance. So please do take advantage of that wherever you are in the country. You do have an ADA center that serves you. All of the ADA centers also do a lot of referrals and networking, so we're able to collaborate with other federal entities.

And, you know, some of the enforcing agencies for this law, for the ADA, as well as other laws, other disability-related resources we refer and network with. So, you know, if we're not the right agency to help you, we can certainly put you in touch with the agency that you need to work with.

All of the centers also conduct some research on the implementation of the ADA or barriers to implementation. So if you're kind of a research person, you might want to check that out. We, of course, provide training like this.

We publish and share a lot of materials and we have a robust social media presence. All of the centers in the ADA National Network can be found and connected with on social media, so we certainly recommend checking us out there too, as a way to stay in touch.

OK, so one last thing here about the ADA Center. The Rocky Mountain ADA Center's operated by Meeting the Challenge, which is a full-service compliance consulting firm based here in Colorado Springs, but really serving the whole country.

And so, you know, some of the services that they offer is, you know, those more hands on compliance services that could be helping with self-evaluation and transition planning, conducting facility audits, providing those architectural plan reviews, reviewing policies and procedures, helping with public right-of-way websites.

And even if you do happen to find yourself in an ADA-related lawsuit, they can help with that as well. So I just wanted to make sure everybody is aware of that resource in case that's something that your business needs or might need in the future.

OK, so our learning objectives for this session are going to be really to understand the prevalence of disability in America, define this concept of effective communication., learn why we say good access is good business, why is it important to facilitate that effective communication and then discuss some of the really helpful tools that you can get started with to improve your communication with people with disabilities. So starting here with disability statistics. The numbers are always going to vary depending on who conducted the study, but it's generally accepted that somewhere between 20 to 26% of Americans have disabilities, or somewhere between 56 to 61 million individuals.

So this image on the screen here comes from the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These are the numbers that they have published saying that 61 million adults in the United States live with a disability, and that would be 26% of our population or around one in four people.

And they also include a little interesting factoid, which is that the percentage of people living with disabilities is highest in the South. So that might be something that you didn't know before. All right, so then we can further break this down, so again, this graphic comes from the CDC.

And this is the percentage of adults with different functional disability types. So you can see 13.7% of adults have mobility disabilities, which cause issues with or difficulty with walking or climbing stairs. 10.8% have cognition disabilities that affect their ability to concentrate or remember or make decisions.

6.8% have difficulty doing errands alone or what's known as independent living. 5.9% have some sort of hearing disability, so that could be, you know, being deaf or having just just having a hard of hearing disability. 4.6% have vision disabilities, so perhaps being blind or just being low vision and then 3.7% have some self self-care related disabilities, so maybe they have difficulty dressing or bathing. So when we're talking about effective communication, we're often talking about people in those categories of hearing and vision functional types. So those are what you would think of as communication disabilities. People who have issues with their vision or their hearing.

But effective communication can also be really helpful for people who have cognitive disabilities as well. And so that's another group that, you know, this is really going to improve your reach and effectiveness in communication. And you know, another thing to note is that a lot of the tools that can be implemented to facilitate effective communication with people with disabilities are actually widely appreciated by everyone. So, you know, for example, maybe you're the kind of person who always has the subtitles on when you're watching a movie on Netflix or on YouTube, right? So I know that I'm that type of person.

So those types of accessibility communication tools can actually benefit all of your customers or all of your stakeholders. So let's get into what is effective communication, right? So before we get into those tools for effective communication, it's important to understand what this phrase actually means and why it's important to facilitate with customers.

So, you know, of course, we know that people who have those vision hearing and speech disabilities are going to have to use different ways to communicate. So for example, of course, we know that people who are blind are going to give and receive information audibly rather than in writing primarily.

And then, of course, deaf people may give and receive information through writing or sign language rather than through verbal speech. So the main purpose of your effective communication efforts is to is going to be to ensure that communication with people with disabilities, so people with those vision, hearing, or speech disabilities is equally effective as communication with people without disabilities. So that's kind of the bottom line with effective communication. There are two large elements that go into any communication. So we start with what is communication? And the first element is the transfer of the message that's going to be conveyed in a form that can be interpreted by the receiver, right?

And then the second element is the comprehension of the message. So making sure that we're attaining an understanding of our message as well. So then the

term effective communication is defined as a communication between two or more people where the intended message is successfully delivered, received, and understood.

So that's that's your definition of effective communication. And this means at the end of the communication, all people included in the communication are going to assign a similar meaning to the communication, and they're going to be able to listen to make sure everyone is heard and understood.

So that kind of gives you that foundational perspective of what is an effective communication, right? So now let's discuss a little bit more about why providing for good effective communication access is good for your bottom line.

So let's look at the disability market. So with an estimated population of 1.85 billion people, people with disabilities constitute a market the size of China, plus the European Union. So that's a huge, huge group of people. And then if you add their friends and family, that's another 3.4 billion potential customers who are going to act on their emotional connection to their loved ones with disabilities. Right? So people with disabilities and their friends and family, together they control over $13 trillion of annual disposable income. That's trillion with a T. We know that over $1 trillion of those dollars are controlled by Americans alone.

So if that doesn't motivate you to have good effective communication with people with disabilities, I don't know what will, right? Like, there's a lot of money to be made here with these groups. And then, of course, we know that the aging population is going to also add to the number of people with disabilities pretty much on a daily basis. So, you know, of course, people's physical and cognitive realities change. We all tend to acquire different abilities or have a change in ability as we age. But we still are going to have the need and desire to remain active in our societies and in our communities, right?

So those things are going to dovetail. You're going to have people who want to remain active in society, dovetailing with the demands of people who have disabilities. So customers that care about the disability market are also going to direct their loyalty and therefore their customer spend to companies that demonstrate inclusivity and deliberate consideration of people with disabilities, both as employees and customers. So, you know, if you're doing a good job of being inclusive of people with disabilities, you're going to gain the loyalty of not only those people with disabilities, but their friends and family, too.

You know, of course, we know that the friends and family are going to react strongly and emotionally to your either your direct cues or your subtle cues that connect your brand to people with disabilities. So, you know, we see this all the time where people do change their buying behavior and preach their loyalty passionately about companies that are tied to something that is is emotional and you know that they're passionate about, right? So these people are going to become your brand ambassadors and lifelong customers. So when we can weave in

a disability inclusive message into our brand experiences that customers are experiencing, you have the opportunity to engage people at a more basic and powerful emotional level to again generate that loyalty and that lifelong ambassadorship. OK, so let's look at some tools that every business needs to know to facilitate effective communication with customers with disabilities.

So first up, we have this kind of broad category of auxiliary aids and services. So what are these? You know, generally speaking, auxiliary aids and services are going to include a wide range of services and devices that promote effective communication.

So these are just things that you can add to your your communication with a person with a disability that's really going to help make sure that communication is as effective with them as it is for your customers without disabilities, right?

So examples of auxiliary aids and services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing include things like qualified interpreters, note takers, computer-aided transcription services, written materials, telephone handset amplifiers, assisted listening systems, telephones that are compatible with hearing aids, closed caption decoders.

Any type of captioning is going to be beneficial here. You know, even exchange of written notes could be one example of an auxiliary, you know, sort of an alternate way of communicating with someone who has a hearing disability. Then for the category of people who are who are blind or have visual disabilities, you know, this could include things like qualified readers, taped texts, audio recordings of information, braille materials, information in large print, or even just general assistance in locating items, documents provided electronically could be an example. So really, that you know, the list is endless.

The options are endless, but these are just some of the most common examples of these types of auxiliary aids and services. So, you know, some things I really recommend thinking about here is, you know, in your communications with people with disabilities, do you have a request process?

So is there a way for a person with a disability to let you know that, hey, you know, I would love to come to your webinar, but I but I need there to be a sign language interpreter there for me to enjoy, for that to be effectively communicated to me.

So is there a way for you to gather information from your customers that they need some sort of, they have an access need that would require the use of an auxiliary aid or service? Which of these things do you have on hand?

You know, have you considered investing in an assisted listening device or do you have some of your most popular materials available and ready to go in large print or braille? You know, so think through some of those things that you might be able to just put in place so that when the need arises, you already have that ready to go. You know, have you engaged with any vendors to provide these services? So do

you know if you who you would go to if you had a need for a CART service and a CART services are captioned access real time translation.

So this is basically live captioning. Well, sometimes people ask for live captioning, you know, in meetings or in events. And do you have a vendor ready to go? So I would always recommend some of these popular services, investigate who you would use for a vendor for the for those types of services so that you're not scrambling when the need arises to try to figure it out, it's going to make things go a lot smoother. Is your kind of philosophy to be reactive with auxiliary aids or services?

Or are you taking some steps to be proactive with these auxiliary aids and services? So again, have you considered perhaps if we just caption all of the videos that we put out on social media, we're going to be able to increase the reach for people who need that have that access need.

So maybe instead of being asked by someone who says, "Hey, I need your video, I need this video with captions," maybe you just caption all your videos. And then you just increase the number of people who can access that video.

OK, so next up, we have websites, right? So your company's website is probably well within the top three ways that your customers engage or attempt to engage with you. So if your website isn't accessible, you're definitely excluding the large population of people with disabilities that we just quantified a few slides ago, right?

So the best practice for web accessibility is going to be the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, also known as WCAG 2.1. If you're not familiar with this standard, I would highly recommend that you spend some time researching it and getting to be a little bit more familiar with it.

Depending on the nature of your organization, you probably have some legal responsibilities to comply with website accessibility standards based on federal law. So, you know, again, depending on how your organization is funded or structured, you know your legal responsibilities will vary.

But I would be willing to bet that most businesses and certainly state and local government organizations, anyone who's receiving federal funding, you all have some legal responsibilities. I really highly recommend making sure that your websites are accessible. It's also important that you get familiar with your state's specific website accessibility laws.

So, for example, here in Colorado, we have a new law that actually compels state and local government agencies to comply with that web content accessibility guidelines or else face liability for damages and really be kind of in trouble.

So I always recommend get to know your state laws as well. OK, so next, let's talk about digital documents, right? So especially in a post-COVID world where there's so much business taking place in digital spaces. It's really critical that any digital

documents that your organization uses to communicate with customers are authored in a way that makes them accessible to screen readers and other types of assistive technology. So this could be things like your electronic fliers, forms for collecting information, marketing documents, perhaps annual reports, and the list goes on and on, right? So just some of the fundamentals for document accessibility include things like using the built-in styles, making sure that you're putting an alt text for your images and graphics, making sure that you're having your proper color contrast and font sizing. But there's a lot more to know about document accessibility. So some options that you have to improve your document accessibility practices would be, of course, to first get training for you and your staff.

There are lots of organizations that provide training on document accessibility and creating accessible digital digital documents. The ADA Centers, I will say offer some of this training. The Rocky Mountain ADA Center does and some of the other ADA centers do as well.

You can also develop and roll out sort of an organizational document accessibility policy, which you know you can roll out to everyone who is involved in creating documents and use that as sort of the gold standard.

And of course, you can also choose to contract with an organization that remediates documents that are inaccessible, but that can be costly. So, you know, each organization's resources for that type of thing are going to vary.

But if you do have a lot of documents that you think were created in an inaccessible manner that are being used regularly, I would suggest definitely looking into remediating or recreating those documents. You know, that's certainly an option.

So once again, here, depending on the nature of your organization, you probably have some legal responsibilities to comply with document accessibility standards based on on the federal law. So, for example, if you receive any federal funding to operate, you have to comply with digital accessibility requirements under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which does include document accessibility. Let's talk through social media next. So social media is a really, really important method of communication, as I'm sure you all are aware by now, especially in this information age and especially for people with disabilities who might be limited in their ability to travel or attend social events in person, and who might not be able to use traditional telecommunication options. So certainly, social media is arguably the number one way that people are connecting with each other and businesses. I think by now, we all realize how ingrained in our society and day-to-day life social media is.

An estimated 3.78 billion people use social media worldwide, and we also know that most people use more than one social media platform and most people are daily users. So social media content can be generated, can be produced in a way that is more accessible by implementing things like captions, alt text, and plain language.

You know, that's kind of just a few of the fundamentals. There's lots more to know about that. When your social media content is accessible, it's definitely going to be able to increase your reach and effectiveness.

It'll help foster those connections that you want to make, and it's going to positively impact cultural expectations, and it's going to help you to demonstrate your commitment to inclusivity. Right? So people with disabilities find it crucial to connect with each other, and of course, we know that they are on social media to be able to do that. And inaccessible content is going to exclude a large portion of those social media users. So, you know, of course, if a person with a disability can't see or can't understand your call to action through your social media content, they're not going to be able to act on those things. So accessible social media content might be the first way that customers notice your commitment to accessibility and thus become those loyal customers that we talked about earlier. So again, with social media accessibility, there is training available.

That's another one that's offered by the Rocky Mountain ADA Center. But there's lots of resources and information out there for folks who are interested in learning more about accessible social media content. So that does it for this presentation.

I always like to leave folks with my contact information and thank you for attending and being an engaged audience. But please do reach out to us if you have more questions or want to learn more about any of the topics that we've covered today.

Thank you.

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