

Going Beyond the ADA: Creating Accessibility That Is User-Friendly

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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is civil rights legislation for people with disabilities, signed into law by President George Bush on July 26, 1990. This law prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all employment, programs and services conducted by private entities and state and local governments. Most provisions of the ADA went into effect in 1992.

Private businesses and non-profits are referred to in ADA as public accommodations. There are twelve categories of public accommodations, but those of particular relevance to the field of visitor studies are:

1. A museum, library, gallery, or other place of public display or collection;
2. A park, zoo, amusement park, or other place of recreation
3. An auditorium, convention center, lecture hall, union hall, or other place of public gathering; and
4. A motion picture house, theater, concert hall, stadium, or other place of exhibition or entertainment.

All public accommodations must provide access in as integrated a manner as possible. This means, for example, that an auditorium should have seating that allows a visitor using a wheelchair to be able to sit with ambulatory friends and family, not be relegated to a segregated "wheelchair section." Modifications must be made in policies, practices, and procedures unless this would fundamentally alter the nature of goods and services offered. An example of this would be a museum refusing to allow blind visitors to touch delicate works of art in fear of irreparable damage or significant wear over time.

The ADA contains detailed specifications for physical access, known as the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG). While detailed, these guidelines are really minimum standards. They allow for and encourage designers to be creative and come up with solutions that produce equal or greater access. Since there are often several ways to configure a particular access feature, how can a designer or owner decide which approach is best?

As with any new legislation, the ADA has given rise to a large number of consultants. Most often, such access consultants can offer textbook knowledge of the ADAAG (at various levels of proficiency), but have no personal understanding of what is truly functional for people with disabilities. As a result, they may recommend "solutions" that do not achieve the intended result and often are needlessly expensive.

To avoid such problems, it is important to involve knowledgeable members of the disability community in every step of a project; from conception, to design, to construction, to evaluation afterwards. While it is often tempting to form a disability advisory committee, whenever possible consider hiring disabled consultants instead. Technical knowledge combined with personal experience of disability can provide valuable new insights to any project.

The authors of this paper are both disabled, and have been access consultants for several years. An example of how this combination can improve a project is the work Access & Training Consultants did for Colorado's Ocean Journey, a large new aquarium being planned in Denver. The owners, a non-profit, had a stated goal of making the facility accessible to all segments of society, going beyond ADA minimum standards wherever possible. They hired a consortium of architects and formed a volunteer disability advisory committee. When the committee discovered it could not respond in a timely enough fashion to keep up with the design schedule, they recommended that Colorado's Ocean Journey hire Access & Training Consultants. Access & Training Consultants reviewed more than 200 pages of blueprints in two weeks, producing a 10-page report of recommended improvements to the original design. As a result, the owners and architects are pleased, a long term working relationship was established, and disabled visitors will enjoy a superior level of access when the aquarium opens in 1998.

What are the physical access requirements under ADA? A full answer to that question is well beyond the scope of this paper. There are some basics, however, that the reader should know. Any facility

constructed for first occupancy after January 26, 1993, and any alterations of an existing building after that date, must meet or exceed the minimum standards of ADAAG. Path of travel to an altered area must also be accessible. There are narrow, specific exceptions to these requirements due to structural impracticability.

Existing facilities must provide access that is readily achievable, which means easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense. The finances of an organization help determine what is readily achievable. When a public accommodation cannot afford to make all of its needed access modifications at one time, then it must at least do those it can afford, and develop a barrier removal plan for finishing the job. The ADA recommends that first priority be "getting in the door," second priority be access to goods and services, third priority be restrooms, and final priority be other considerations such as drinking fountains and telephones.

The categories of providing basic access contain numerous items of relevance to museums and other visitor areas. "Getting in the door" includes parking, path of travel, entrance area, door, and directional signage. Access to goods and services includes path of travel, signage, access to all exhibits, integrated seating in lecture halls and auditoriums, access to performing areas and dressing rooms, assistive listening systems, gift shops, and food service areas. Bathrooms have numerous requirements in order to provide full access. Other features that must be made accessible include phones, drinking fountains, light switches, and electrical sockets. To make telephones accessible to persons who are deaf, an organization should consider purchasing a TTY, also known as a TDD or Text Telephone. Fire alarms must be both visual and auditory. All interior doors should have opening pressure of five pounds or less, and exterior doors should have opening pressure as low as allowed by local guidelines such as fire and building codes. All controls throughout a facility should be operable without grasping, pinching or twisting. Guidelines specific to parks and outdoor recreation are not yet completed, but are expected to be released in the near future.

Keep in mind that the standards of the ADAAG are minimum standards. There is a real value to going beyond what ADA requires, specifically for a group such as the Visitor Studies Association, which is interested in attracting visitors and improving customer service. The population in the United States of people with disabilities is 49 million, approximately one out of every seven people, which constitutes a huge,

largely untapped, financial market. The aging population is increasing rapidly as baby boomers mature. Properly designed access features benefit others too, such as people pushing strollers, delivery people, people with temporary conditions such as a broken leg, and children. Many things can be done that are not too expensive, often simply by modifying programs. Some frequently overlooked ideas for increasing access include:

1. When using a different facility for a conference or meeting, make sure it is accessible.
2. When conducting tours, have accessible transportation available.
3. Ask your audience if they have any access needs.
4. List the availability of access features in brochures and advertising.
5. For presentations, provide sign language interpreters, assistive listening systems, and an accessible podium and riser if requested.
6. Provide latex gloves for touching delicate works of art.
7. Have small tactile models of large statues and objects behind glass.
8. Have audio described or tape tours of the facility.
9. Provide tours for persons with developmental and learning disabilities.
10. Use exhibit labels that are large enough to read.
11. Provide label text in Braille or on tape, and in large print.
12. Provide your permanent publications and periodicals in alternative formats.
13. Publicize details of your access features throughout your regular marketing effort.
14. Make sure staff members are aware of access features and know how to use them.
15. Train staff in disability awareness utilizing consultants with disabilities as trainers.

Many facilities of interest to the visitors studies field are making an effort to meet at least the minimum ADA guidelines. Still others are going beyond the ADA, and doing creative work around providing access. The rest of this paper consists of examples from around North America of unusual and innovative access solutions.

Colorado's Ocean Journey, mentioned earlier in this paper, is providing simulated rock seating areas throughout parts of its exhibits. They are designing this seating in ways so that it will be fully integrated with wheelchair seating, giving a result that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing. The facility will also have two large portholes in the floor through which visitors can view fish swimming below. These portholes are being designed to not only support the weight of several ambulatory people walking over them simultaneously, but also to support the weight of two people using motorized wheelchairs traversing them at the same time.

The Denver Museum of Natural History has an exhibit entitled *Edge of the Wild*. This exhibit was designed in consultation with people having a variety of disabilities. It includes innovative features such as audio description of exhibits behind glass accessed by adjacent phones, foot prints of animals in the floor, hair and skins of animals to touch, smell stations such as mule deer musk, and the sounds of a mountain lion mother and cub heard by pressing a button. A particularly popular part of the exhibit is tactile examples of wild animal scat, or droppings.

The Tactile Gallery of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center is one of only three tactile galleries in the country and has been in operation since 1981. All 82 pieces of their artwork are tactile and are rotated on display, 16 pieces at a time, with staff willing to bring out the others for view if requested. There are Braille and large print programs and labels, making it possible to view the exhibit independently. It is the policy of the Tactile Gallery that touching these art objects takes precedence over the long-term preservation of the object.

At the Vancouver Science Museum, in Vancouver, British Columbia, there is an example of what probably was unintended access. Part of one exhibit has a large keyboard in the floor which makes music and flashes colored lights when walked across. This was probably intended to entertain children, but it is especially enjoyable for anyone using a wheelchair to roll across it.

The Walker Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota, is an example of a museum with a large outdoor sculpture garden. Blind visitors to this museum can enjoy a tour given by their own tour guide, usually a student intern. The tour includes scale models of the pieces which are too large to touch in their entirety. This gives the blind visitor the opportunity to have the same appreciation of the pieces as the sighted visitor, as well as information about the pieces and their creators.

Small facilities and organizations can also think of creative ways to provide access. An example of this is the Black Hills Mining Museum in Lead, South Dakota. Situated in a small town on top of a mountain, this small museum is a simulated hard rock mine that is fully wheelchair accessible, where everything on display can be touched. This includes old mining equipment and rock walls and timbers, all illustrating various aspects of the mining process. A popular feature in this museum is a detonator for a simulated blasting round, which lights up the mining face in a pattern and sounds like a real explosion. This interactive display provides a learning tool for all visitors but can be especially useful for visitors with disabilities that require concrete presentations of information in order for them to gain benefit.

The Platte Valley Trolley in Denver is a small operation with a renovated historic trolley from the early 1900's. This trolley takes visitors from near downtown Denver several miles to the western part of the city through the growing Platte Valley. Wheelchair access is provided by means of a cantilevered wooden retractable bridge built into the hillside, leading directly to the trolley seating platform. This simple, fairly inexpensive way to achieve access to this historic trolley was built before the ADA became law as a result of requests from senior groups, who found walking down steps to track level, then up steps into the trolley, too strenuous. This is a good example of how a modification made for one group of customers provides dual utilization and benefits other groups as well.

Another example of access being provided to a historic attraction is the Cafesjian Carousel in Saint Paul, Minnesota. This carousel was made accessible by building a movable curved wooden ramp that fits alongside the curvature of the carousel, and a wheelchair tiedown located under a removable seat, providing integrated amusement for families or school groups which include someone who uses a wheelchair. One of the authors of this paper stumbled upon this exhibit because wheelchair access was listed in one of its brochures distributed to the general public.

Author Note

This paper has presented some basic information on the Americans with Disabilities Act and its physical access guidelines as presented in the ADAAG. The paper has also given examples of ways that museums and visitor attractions can creatively provide access in integrated ways, often at little expense or difficulty. There are many more details contained within the ADAAG, and many other creative ways of achieving access which have been developed by museums and groups throughout the world.

Achieving good functional access is very much a creative process. This process should include consultation with people who have disabilities who have the qualifications to make such recommendations throughout the process. Visitor attractions which provide integrated access creatively are in an excellent position to be recognized for their efforts, and rewarded with increased revenue from satisfied and loyal visitors with disabilities.