

INFORMATION SHEET*

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Supporting Customers with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Considerations for Business Owners

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Overview

In 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court, in a landmark decision, ruled that states have an obligation to ensure that all services to individuals with disabilities are provided in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs (*Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 U.S. 581). Despite this ruling, individuals with disabilities are often excluded from full participation in their communities. For many, this has resulted in significant limitations in decision making about where to live, work, shop, and engage in leisure activities. In 2012, Governor Cuomo formally recommitted to the intent behind this decision. Through executive order, New York State was charged with meeting the obligation of full integration for all people with disabilities. As a result, community businesses are under new pressures to improve access to products and services for people with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This Information Sheet has been designed to assist business owners in increasing accessibility for customers with ASD.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate and socialize. Because of these difficulties, people with ASD may not be able to communicate their choice for the purchase of products and services and may not be able to initiate or complete a transaction without assistance. As a business owner it will be important for you and your employees to recognize the particular difficulty a customer with ASD may have and to consider some simple strategies that may improve the customer's access to your products and services and further promote his/her independence in the community. With a bit more than 1% of the US population estimated to be affected by ASD and increasing numbers reported almost every 2 years, improving accessibility for this growing customer group can have implications for the 'bottom line.'

People with ASD tend to do well in situations that are organized and where there are clear visual references such as pictures and words to help them identify the products or services they are interested in. Here are some suggestions for you to consider for improving access to the products and services offered by your business:

I. Organize:

- Consider a 'store map' that can provide visual information on the location of products and services.
- Clearly label categories of products and services and their location in the store.
- Consider a mobile app for your store that provides a listing of products and services and their location in the store.

II. Clarify:

- Ensure employees wear name tags that also contain their job function (e.g., *sales; cashier; manager*).
- Clearly post business specific 'rules' for customer behavior (e.g., *Do Not Touch the Merchandise; No Loud Noises in the Store; No Running or Pacing in the Store*). This can assist the customer with ASD with better regulating his/her in-store behavior. Consider posting these rules using pictures/ symbols and/or words.

III. Assist:

- Provide a brief written/picture description of the services you offer.
- Clearly label locations for where to initiate and complete a transaction.
- Clearly label where assistance can be obtained.
- Use Universal Symbols for common customer behavior (e.g., *Enter; Exit; Do Not Enter*) and use arrows to direct the customer's attention to relevant information or locations for products, services, and/or assistance.
- If a customer with ASD has someone assisting him/her be sure to communicate with both individuals when providing assistance unless otherwise informed.
- Consider offering the option of on-line shopping.

IV. Train:

- Train your employees to (1) approach the customer and stand at an appropriate social distance, (2) gain the customer's attention prior to speaking, and (3) state his/her name and inform the customer that he/she is there to help. The employee should then observe from a short distance to determine if the customer requires assistance and if so, offer assistance using clear and simple language along with gestures toward the product or service the customer seems interested in or has expressed an interest in; or by pointing to the location on the store map.
- If your business serves a large number of customers with ASD, be sure to share additional informational resources with your employees so they can further educate themselves on the needs of customers with ASD.
- Establish an internal communication plan to provide assistance to employees who may encounter difficulty working with a customer with ASD.

Find Out More

Below are some resources that you might find helpful as you work to improve access to your business for customers with ASD.

Web Links

1. To learn more about the NYS Olmstead Implementation Plan, visit the website at : <http://www.governor.ny.gov/olmstead/home>

To learn more about improving accessibility in your business, you can visit the following websites. These Centers provide a wide range of informational resources you might find useful.

1. Center for Universal Design. <http://www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/index.htm>
2. The Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access. <http://idea.ap.buffalo.edu/>

To learn more about Autism Spectrum Disorder, you can visit the following websites or contact these organizations by phone/e-mail.

2. Rochester Regional Center for Autism Spectrum Disorder: This regional Center provides a wide range of informational resources on ASD across the lifespan with specific information for the Greater Rochester/Finger Lakes Region of NYS: www.golisano.urmc.edu/rrcasd-nyautism or call toll-free 1-855-508-8485 or e-mail: rrcasd@urmc.rochester.edu
3. Autism Speaks: This national Organization provides a wide variety of informational resources on ASD across the lifespan considered to be of national interest: www.autismspeaks.org or call toll-free 1-888-288-4762.

Books

For more advanced learning about how Universal Design concepts can be used in your business to improve accessibility for people with disabilities these 2 books might be useful. Although neither book is specific to customers with ASD, the information provided may assist you in determining design improvements that can increase opportunity for ASD customers to access your products and services.

Universal Design: The HUMBLE Method for User-Centered Business by F. Aragall & J.Montana. This book provides information to assist you in determining how to make your business more 'customer oriented.'

Publisher: Gower Publishing, Ltd.

Year: 2012

Web Link: http://books.google.com/books/about/Universal_Design.html?id=nQbSN6gNeVQC

Universal Design Handbook-2nd Edition (W.F.E. Preiser & K.H. Smith, Editors). This handbook provides an overview of Universal Design and contemporary applications and future trends.

Publisher: McGraw Hill

Year: 2011

Web Link: <http://www.amazon.com/Universal-Design-Handbook-Wolfgang-Preiser/dp/0071629238#>

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