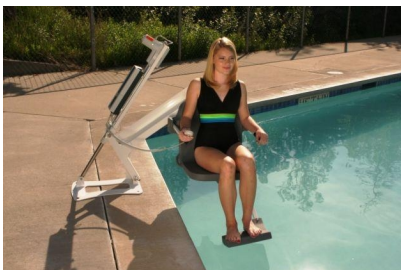


How Should Hotels Enhance Accessibility for Guests with Special Needs?

Despite the relatively wide gap in accessibility tourism research and availability of forums aimed at establishing and streamlining hospitality industry practices in order to create inclusive environments, significant gains have been made over the last decade. Many countries around the world have passed legislations that ban any form of discrimination towards the disabled and have included guidelines for the hospitality industry players to modify their facilities like hotels and transport facilities in order to make them user friendly to the disabled.

Still, much ground needs to be covered, but the trend is positive and the future looks bright as more hospitality industry professionals become aware of the need to address the challenges that disabled travelers face. The need to make accessibility a priority is informed by several factors.

First, one of the biggest challenges that most disabled people face is the attitude of other members of society towards them. Often, there is indifference, pity, disgust or outright scorn to deal with, which causes negative emotions like anger, pity and shame, and this does nothing to make their lives easier. Being considerate of their plight is therefore the right thing to do.



Despite the increased awareness and the emergence of travel services specifically designed for disabled people, travelers with disabilities are still limited in their ability to enjoy the facilities that other people take for granted. The implication of this is a huge consumer niche in the hospitality industry that professionals can tap into.

According to an information published on hospitality.org on why the hotel industry needs to be concerned about accessibility, statistics in the UK indicate that about 20 percent of the population (about nine million people) are disabled. This group has a disposable income of approximately 40 billion Pounds. Among these, less than five percent use wheelchairs. It adds that 70 percent of the economically active people become disabled at some point in their lifetime. The disabled often travel with members of family, friends or assistants.

Modifying hotel facilities to make them accessible should therefore be part of business planning for the hotel industry professionals. Whether modifying the existing facilities or constructing new ones, the aim

should be to comply with legislation and remove any architectural or structural and communication barriers that limit their use. To make their facilities accessible, hotels should make modifications that include: Constructing wide doorways and installing ramps for wheel chair users and those who have difficulty using the stairs or carrying heavy baggage Multiple and spacious elevators Marking hallways with clear maps and signage Limit the use of floor covering like carpeting that can make movement difficult Reserving a certain number of rooms for people with disabilities. These should have amenities like roll-in shower, built-in visual alarms (for the hearing impaired), notification devices and telephones with volume control Meeting and conference rooms should be fully accessible with proper lighting and ample space to accommodate wheelchairs and interpreters Enough power outlets for those using aids that require electric power and laptops Removing physical barriers and controlling traffic on hallways Purchasing transportation like vans that accommodate wheelchairs Avoiding serving meals that may be difficult to handle like spaghetti and providing drinking straws as well as providing assistance with meal serving

Other studies have revealed that most tertiary institutions offering training to hotel and tourism staff do not have specialized programs in the curriculum to train the students on meeting the requirements of tourists with disabilities. Good news however, is that it is easy to change the trainees attitudes towards people with special needs.

Stakeholders in the hotel industry need to advocate for improvement in this is area in order to streamline the practices across the industry.



Staff training is therefore an important component of enhancing accessibility in the hotel industry. This should incorporate effective communication skills and improve staff attitudes towards the disabled. Staff should be trained to be empathetic and helpful, communicate clearly and avoid talking down at hotel guests with disabilities.

Even though some businesses may find it difficult to implement these modifications due to the cost implication of making them accessible, hotels can comply with most of the legislations, which require reasonable modifications that are not necessarily expensive to install. One way around this for business owners is to incorporate the adjustments when planning their annual budgets. Considering the projected potential of accessibility for the hospitality industry, the investment is well worth it.

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