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2-2019

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Kristin Meyer

Grand Valley State University, meyerkr@gvsu.edu

Samantha Minnis

Grand Valley State University, minniss@gvsu.edu

Kiersten Quilliams

Grand Valley State University, quilliak@gvsu.edu

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ScholarWorks Citation

Meyer, Kristin; Minnis, Samantha; and Quilliams, Kiersten, "Accessible Customer Service Practices" (2019). *Library Reports and Communication*. 4.

https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/library_reports/4

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Accessible Customer Service Practices

Compiled by Kristin Meyer, Samantha Minnis, and Kiersten Quilliams
Grand Valley State University Libraries, Operations & User Services Department; 2/28/19

Background and scope:

Grand Valley State University and University Libraries (UL) are committed to inclusion and diversity. Additionally, University Libraries has a shared service philosophy—Steps to Giving Great Service—to guide how we deliver customer service across the Libraries. The following practices are meant to provide employees with practical tips on how to provide accessible customer service. These practices align with our larger service philosophy and support the university’s values of inclusion and equity. Accessibility is defined by the University Libraries IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility) committee as: “Ensuring our tools, devices, services, and environments are available to and usable by as many people as possible.” These leading practices seek to help us provide accessible service that promotes the principles of dignity, independence, integration, and equal opportunity.

Leading practices:

Keep in mind:

- Many disabilities are invisible—you often don’t know if someone you’re assisting has a disability. One example of an invisible disability is dyslexia.
- Asking clarifying questions and checking that you’ve completely answered the user’s question can be important—don’t assume that a user does or doesn’t understand.
- Not making assumptions and giving great service is the best way to ensure users maintain their dignity and do not have to “out” themselves as having a disability.

Specific tips:

- Don’t make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do because of their disability. Ask them if and how they’d like you to help.
- Service animals are working—do not distract them.
- When assisting a person who uses a seated mobility device, such as a wheelchair, sit down or back up so you’re at eye-level.
- Don’t touch or move someone’s assistive device or equipment—wheelchair, cane, etc. —without permission. Often people who use these devices view the equipment as an extension of their physical being.
- If a support person is accompanying a user, speak directly to the user rather than the support person. The support person acts as an assistive device.
- When sharing your computer screen to show a user how to do something, ask them if the display is ideal. You could offer to increase or decrease font size or brightness.
- Keep pen and paper in reach and offer them to users if you’re having trouble communicating.
- Keep your face visible to users to allow for lip reading.
- When working with someone who has a speech or language impairment, listen patiently. Don’t complete their sentences, and ask one question at a time and wait for their reply.

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Language and terminology:

- Use the terms “accessible parking” and “accessible bathroom stall” rather than using the word handicap.
- Use person-first language that emphasizes the person and not the disability. For example: Use “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person;” use “person who uses a wheelchair” rather than “wheelchair user;” use “person who is blind” rather than “blind person.” However, it’s important to note that if a person identifies in a different way, use their preferred language.
- If someone has trouble hearing you, rephrase rather than repeat your response. Also, ensure that the person can see your face and try deepening the tone of your voice. Raising your voice may not help.
- Keep your language simple: break complex processes into small steps and avoid jargon, slang, idioms, and multi-part directions.

Advertising barriers to accessibility:

When significant barriers to accessibility occur (for example: the power door openers for an entrance are broken), Operations & User Services will communicate this to users through various channels, including at times:

- Social media
- Alerts on the library website
- Physical signage
- Reporting lengthy issues to Disability Support Resources

Resources that informed these practices:

American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/pi/disability/resources/publications/enhancing-your-interactions.pdf>

Disability Advocates of Kent County: <https://www.dakc.us/>

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities: https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/pdf/disabilityposter_photos.pdf

University of Waterloo’s Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act: <https://uwaterloo.ca/library/aoda-toolkit/customer-service-standard>