

# A+ CUSTOMER SERVICE



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

FALL, 2006

## WASTING MONEY ON THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY

Too often businesses lull themselves into a false sense that they have met the needs of people with disabilities, when in fact, they have fallen significantly short of their good intentions. Wasted time and money in renovating a building to meet the needs of people with disabilities without knowing or understanding what those needs are become costly errors to you and frustrating to those who rely on you to supply them with access to your services.

Okay, so you are moving into a new building and

have worked with an architect. He/she designates washroom facilities to be “accessible”, but what information have they used when setting the criteria by which **you** will be judged by your customers? And, let us say, for example, that the your building has passed the building inspection. Can you relax in knowing that you have truly met the needs of your customers? Sadly not. Many buildings that we have inspected, that are new buildings or recently renovated, do not meet the Ontario Building Code



**Are you certain your business is accessible to people with disabilities?**

**Would a person with a disability agree with you?**

**Have you asked?**

requirements for accessibility.

It isn't enough to make a toilet stall wider. It needs

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## MAKING YOUR PLACE OF BUSINESS ACCESSIBLE:

- **Train staff to know about people with disabilities.**
- **Make accessible parking spaces wide enough to allow a person to bring a wheelchair at the side of the vehicle and transfer.**
- **Provide extra seating near the front entrance of your building so guests can sit while waiting for a ride to pull up to the door.**
- **Always make sure that stairwells have railings on both sides – there isn't a common side that is less affected by disability. And, even if a single railing is on the correct side on the way up the stairs, it will be on the wrong side on the way down.**

## ATTITUDE IS AS MUCH A BARRIER AS THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

When thinking about barriers that a person with a disability must face, it is normal that the built environment comes to mind. After all, if a person can't get into the building how can they access the services offered within?

Unfortunately many buildings today are not accessible to people with disabilities. In fact, some features that are designed with good intentions of making a space accessible to one group of people with disabilities only serves to

create new barriers to other people with different disabilities.

One common example of not understanding the needs of people with disabilities seems to happen

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**58% of people in the general public are uneasy around a person with a disability and nearly half admit they feel fear.**

## ... ATTITUDE IS AS MUCH A BARRIER AS THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

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when a person who is blind or a person who is deaf checks into a hotel and they are offered the “accessible guest room”. While it is a nice gesture that the staff realize this guest might have unique needs, it is also significantly misguided.

Typically, the “accessible guest room” has been designed for a person using a wheelchair and not necessarily for someone with vision or hearing loss.

Another common error occurs when a person using a wheelchair enters a room for a meeting and the reac-

tion of some well-intentioned individual is to pull a chair away from a desk or table. Again, nice gesture, but this assumes that the person is going to stay in their wheelchair during the meeting. However, many people who use wheelchairs prefer to transfer into the chairs that everyone else is using.

The only way to keep from making these mistakes is by getting to know what people with disabilities are really like.

Understanding the differences between various disabilities and realizing that people within the disability

community are unique individuals that should not be lumped under the single category of “disabled”.

Sensitivity training will go a long way in breaking down barriers of even well-intentioned staff.

Sterling Frazer Associates provides sensitivity training that can be custom-tailored to meet the needs of your business customers and/or your industry. Each session provides information about all types of disabilities and helps break down attitudinal barriers by enlightening participants about the differences and similarities we all share.

## A CASE STUDY IN ACCESSIBILITY

A new community centre recently opened with the typical fanfare and support from the surrounding neighborhood. That is, from everyone but those who are among the disability community.

Here are a few examples of what we found when we audited the facility.

The building was constructed with a curb located along the front entrance with no curb-cut or ramp to allow a person with a disability to easily access the

front door from the parking lot.

The toilets in the accessible washrooms were too high and uncomfortable for people to use. The toilet paper dispensers were mounted too close to the grab bars, making it difficult to reach and hold onto the grab bars.

Elevators were installed to access the upper floors, but to preserve floor space in the building, the elevators were so small that a person using a wheelchair could not turn to face the buttons

to select the floor once they were inside the elevator car.

When asked how so many things could be wrong with a new building, the architect replied, “the client didn’t specify what they meant by *being accessible*.”

Don’t make the same mistake. Ensure that your facility is meeting approved guidelines. Don’t assume the building code provides the answers to accessibility. The Code only gives the bare minimum, and many times the Code itself is not being met.



**Many people who are legally blind can see.**

**Remember to ask before offering assistance.**

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to be wide enough to allow a person using a wheelchair to bring their chair into the space with him/her and allow him/her to transfer safely and easily from the chair onto or off of the toilet. It needs to be wide enough that the chair can be brought into the space and the door closed.

How many of your accessible washroom stalls have doors that self-close? Or more importantly, how many of your accessible washroom stalls have door handles on the inside that allow a person to pull the door closed?

So, if the building inspector gave you a passing grade, what happened?

The Ontario Building Code is a huge document with a few hundred pages of guidelines that inspectors are ensuring have been met by the architects and contractors. They are investigating the plumbing, electrical, heating and overall structure to make sure the building is safe. Unfortunately, many simply don't take the time to ensure that the criteria set out in the "Code" are being met when it comes to accessibility. After all, a larger toilet stall

should mean its accessible, right?

Washrooms are not the only area where businesses try to facilitate the needs of people with disabilities.

How about the doorways entering your building — are they fitted with automatic door openers? If you so, good for you, you are part way there! But, what criteria was used when selecting the door activation device? If you've selected the small red button design, you've been misinformed. The smaller button area is more difficult for a person with a disability to target and activate. These switch devices should have a minimum dimension of 25mm x 75mm.

Once the person has activated the door opener will he or she have to maneuver around the open door to travel through? Or will they have a clear path of travel to enter your business?

Do you have signage on the door to let people know which door will open? If not, you run the risk that someone will accidentally walk into the door as it opens towards them.

What about that red button? Surely the red color will help a person find the but-

ton more easily; so you can't have been that wrong, could you?

It is recommended that the color yellow is used when trying to accommodate the needs of a person with low vision.

So why use red? Has it really made that much of a difference, especially if the person can't narrow in on the small target? The red color will be mostly beneficial to those who can see or when trying to grab the attention of a male bovine.

Here's one last area of your facility that we will consider in this issue.

What about your accessible parking spaces? Besides needing to ensure that the accessible parking spaces are properly marked with the international symbol for accessibility (wheelchair symbol) painted on the parking space surface, **and** a vertically mounted sign posted directly in front of the space telling other drivers that this space is reserved exclusively for those customers with disabilities, have you posted the fine for violating the rule? Have you posted the local city bylaw that has jurisdiction for imposing the fine? If

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**The number of people with a disability who graduate from college is equal to those without a disability.**



**While this is the international symbol for accessibility it is important to realize that not everyone who has a disability uses a wheelchair.**



## STERLING FRAZER ASSOCIATES

In June 2005 the Ontario government unanimously passed the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) placing Ontario in the lead for creating an accessible place for people with disabilities to live, work, and play.

**Sterling Frazer Associates** is here to help you and your business develop a customer service approach to meet this legislation and is certain to help you build your business.

We offer sensitivity awareness training, accessibility assessments, and consulting on marketing issues relating to people with disabilities and other niche markets.

**Sterling Frazer Associates** delivers seminars tailored to meet the needs of your business and/or those of your

industry. Sessions are provided in-house or off-site at your request.

The basic outline of each seminar will answer questions about people with disabilities, such as:

- What is a disability? How do I know who has one?
- How should I act to ensure I provide the highest level of customer care?
- What differences should I be aware of? Aren't

all people with disabilities the same?

- How big is this market? And, how can I reach it?

Visit us on the web at [www.sterlingfrazer.com](http://www.sterlingfrazer.com) for more information about these and other services offered by **Sterling Frazer Associates**.

If you wish to contact us directly please call 905-704-9806 or email us at [info@sterlingfrazer.com](mailto:info@sterlingfrazer.com).

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not, you've created a loophole for violators.

Have you made the parking space any bigger than any of the others spaces? Many people with disabilities who use these spaces are relying on you to create a parking space that will allow him or her to exit their car and transfer into their wheelchair safely. Standard parking spaces simply do not give enough room for a person with a disability to do this.

Have you painted the outline of your parking spaces in white or in yellow? Living in a climate that spends several months of the year with snow on the ground, it

begs the question of why you would rely on white paint to help designate parking spaces.



Has this introspective look at the accessibility of your business changed your mind? Are you still convinced that you have a business that is meeting the needs of people with disabilities? If yes, then, good for you! If not, hopefully this will have given you food for thought — that people with disabilities are relying on you to create an environment that is accessible and welcoming. After all, this target population has \$25 billion in spending dollars, a portion of which could make its way to your

business — or perhaps down the street to a business that has truly met the needs of people with disabilities as customers.

If you are considering building a new facility or renovating an existing one, make sure that the architect and/or contractor you use has knowledge about people with disabilities. Do not rely on him/her to automatically consider all the needs of the disability community, but be aware you are the one who will have to live with that decision.

Sterling Frazer Associates works with businesses to evaluate their facilities to ensure that the environment they offer is accessible to people with disabilities.

Our staff will work with you to evaluate your existing facilities or work with you in the planning stages of creating your new or renovated business environment. Remember, fixing the mistakes after your grand opening will be far more costly, and the press of opening an inaccessible business will be hard to overcome.



**Are you still convinced your place of business is accessible to people with disabilities?**