

# Seven ways you can make your business a more welcoming and accessible environment for the Deaf Community

## **1. Know your legal obligations**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) delineates a number of responsibilities that businesses and other types of public entities must provide to Deaf and Hard of hearing individuals. Making your business Deaf friendly is contingent upon how well you not only know and adhere to these laws, but how well you show your Deaf customers or employees that you value their patronage. While this may seem overwhelming at first, it can be as simple as accepting a call through the video relay system without hanging up.

Click on [here](#) for specific guidance on the ADA that pertains specifically to effective communication with Deaf and Hard of hearing individuals.

The National Association of the Deaf has produced several letters that provide clarity on a number of situations that may apply to your business. They can be found [here](#).

## **2. Provide Accessibility Training for Your Staff**

One of the best ways to turn your business into an inclusive and welcoming environment is to ensure that your staff is well informed about the Deaf community. Educating them on communication techniques and the challenges faced by people that are deaf will help to reduce the barriers between your staff and deaf customers/employees.

There are different types of Deaf awareness training available. One option includes online trainings such as this from [Deaffriendly.com](#). If you prefer onsite trainings with a more individualized approach, [Deaf Inc.](#) is an organization in the St. Louis area that offers trainings. If your business is outside the St. Louis area, contact your local Deaf and Hard of Hearing commission.

Consider offering basic American Sign language classes to your staff. A little can go a long way to reduce frustration to customers and employee turnover. If you would like resources on this, please let us know.

## **3. Hire an ASL Interpreter**

Consider hiring an ASL interpreter for things such as business meetings, one on one meetings, or events. An ASL interpreter is someone who holds a nationally recognized American Sign Language certification and can interpret the event to your audience. Advertising that your event will have an ASL interpreter will ensure that you are not excluding the deaf community from attending. It will also help to increase deaf awareness, inspiring others to be more inclusive too.

If you are unsure where to find a certified and qualified ASL Interpreter, contact your State commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

#### **4. Communication Considerations**

- **Mass Communication**
  - The use of loudspeakers, intercoms or other forms of auditory communication are ineffective for Deaf and Hard of hearing customers or employees. Utilizing mass emails, text messages, or other visual communications are more accessible.
  - Utilizing a specific protocol instead of relying on an individual to relay information will prevent miscommunication and allow the Deaf and Hard of hearing customers or employees to function independently.
  - In group meetings, utilize technology to ensure full accessibility. Closed captions are often available for videos, and live captioning on phones, and web browsers (Chrome) are free. While not a substitute for an interpreter, it can add clarity in many situations. We have provided some links for using live captioning on an [Android](#) or an [iPhone](#).
- **Individual Communications**
  - In a workplace setting, it is extremely common for Deaf and hard of hearing customers or employees to be unintentionally left out of non-official communication such as group discussions on how to resolve a common problem, side talk during a meeting that may have pertained to their essential functions, etc. Make it clear that these discussions should include the Deaf and Hard of hearing customers or employees, or the information be presented to them in an accessible fashion.
  - Allow additional time for communication. Moving between two languages takes time. Allocating time for feedback, and clarifications is a simple way to avoid miscommunications.

#### **5. Use Subtitles for Any Video Content**

Whether your business has TV screens or a waiting room with display screens, make sure that all video content is displayed with subtitles. If you are hiring a Deaf or Hard of hearing employee, ensure in advance that all training videos are captioned. If they are not, hiring an interpreter would be a necessary next step to ensure they are fully trained.

Similarly, if you are posting social media content to promote your business or strengthen your online branding, ensure all video content that you post has subtitles.

#### **6. Adapt Your Facilities and Accessories**

When considering accessibility in your facility, speak directly with the Deaf customer or employee. Not all Deaf people are the same and may require different accommodations than others.

Some ways that you can make your facility accessible include:

- Deaf-friendly doorbell that triggers a light to flash when pressed
- Vibrating or flashing alarm clock
- Telephone with adjustable volume settings
- Deaf-friendly fire alarm that flashes as well as makes noise
- Smoke alarms that flash or vibrate
- Be aware of items that obscure the line of sight (ie, large centerpieces on tables, unnecessary partitions in a room, long conference tables that do not allow the person speaking to be easily identified.)

## **7. Have a Designated Quiet Area**

When a person uses a hearing aid or a cochlear implant, the device amplifies all sound. However, this does not allow the user to filter out extraneous noise that may exist in an environment. Creating a designated quiet area allows the Deaf or hard of hearing customer or employee to fully utilize their hearing devices to communicate effectively.

Specific things to consider when designating this space include but are not limited to:

- Lighting- ensures that the individuals can see each other clearly and make use of visual cues to enhance communication
- Proper ventilation- The use of fans, or heaters create an audible distraction that interferes with sound quality
- Placement- Areas of high traffic are not ideal as they create louder and more visually distracting environments.

*This was adapted from: <https://www.avinstallations.co.uk/how-to-make-your-business-accessible-for-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-customers/>*