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Is There Hospitality for Disabled Travelers?

Abstract

There is a plethora of options about what constitutes “accessibility.” Countries like England and Canada are making significant progress in improving accommodations. The Americans with Disability Act is being revised, but critics say hotels are not complying with either the letter or the spirit of the law. The author, a retired FIU professor who writes about disabled travel from his wheelchair, explores these issues from a very personal point of view.

Keywords

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Is there hospitality for disabled travelers?

by Andy Vladimir

There is a plethora of opinions about what constitutes "accessibility." Countries like England and Canada are making significant progress in improving accommodations. The Americans With Disabilities Act is being revised, but critics say hotels are not complying with either the letter or the spirit of the law. The author, a retired FIU professor who writes about disabled travel from his wheelchair, explores these issues from a very personal point of view.

Last January in Miami Beach the Second World Congress of the Society for the Advancement of Travel for the Handicapped (SATH) convened. Travel agents, tour operators, cruise lines, airlines, hoteliers, regulators, and other interested parties from all over the world gathered to discuss how to make travel more accessible for persons who have some kind of a disability.

The exact size of the market today is unknown. According to Paul Alterman, CTC, senior vice president of SPACE travel agency

consortium and congress chairman, there are 47 million Americans with disabilities.¹ "Thirteen million of them will never travel because they can't, or can't afford to," says Alterman. "Of the remaining, 24 million do not travel because of a prior bad experience or the expectation of one. If travel agents can just get one million of that group to take a vacation, we can generate \$3 billion in new sales."

In addition to persons classified as being disabled, many senior citizens with problems such as arthritis seek accessible facilities and accommodations as well. According to Charles Presley, an expert on the senior travel market, every 7.5 seconds a Baby Boomer turns 50 years of age, a trend that will continue for the next 18 years.²

Interest abounds

On the whole, the amount of interest in what is often viewed as

a marginal niche market is surprising. For example, one keynote speaker at the SATH congress was Fred Grandy, the president and CEO of Goodwill Industries. Grandy, a former U.S. Congressman and actor who played Gopher, the purser on the original *Love Boat* TV series, is passionate about "busting barriers" which he says is the main business of Goodwill. In 1997 Goodwill, a Fortune 500 company, employed 200,000 persons with disabilities which translated into \$354 million of payroll. "We don't know how much of that was plunked back into the travel industry, but you can presume it was considerable," he told the group.

Grandy's main message, along with several other speakers was that one effect of the ADA was to bring many persons with disabilities back into the workplace and that many of them have good jobs in management and technology. Grandy told delegates that consumers with disabilities represented \$175 billion in purchasing power, and that leading companies such as General Foods have committed significant resources to pursue the market. "Not because they have a burning corporate compassion to do something for somewhat less fortunate than themselves," said Grandy, "but because they are looking at a huge consumer market."³

There was a large contingent of international interests represented as well. Anne Couvez, director of the French Ministry of Tourism in Miami, was at the Air

France trade exhibit along with Lucky Congdon, Air France's vice president of industry affairs. "It makes good business sense for us to be here," said Congdon. "How can we ignore a market of this size?"

Britain moves forward

Britain's Prince Charles received SATH's "Freedom of Access Award" for his efforts to break down barriers to access. He has taken a prominent leadership role in motivating attractions and accommodations in the UK to become more accessible. In 1994, concerned about disability issues concerning employment, access, and attitude in England's hotel industry, the Prince held a luncheon with a group of CEOs from leading hotel chains. At the luncheon, he went around the table and asked each executive directly what he or she was doing or was willing to do to address these issues.

A group was formed called "The Hoteliers Forum" whose goal is to develop disability equality, accessible premises, and fair employment practices, so that disabled people may more readily use and work in hotel leisure and conference facilities. Twelve chains, including Hilton and Inter-Continental, have joined the forum, along with other associate members and partner organizations. Peter Holland, CEO of the Disability Partnership, an advisory group to the Prince, heads the Forum and told delegates that he meets with Prince

Charles monthly to brief him on what is being done.⁴

In the United States, accessibility has been governed by the Americans With Disabilities Act which was enacted in 1990. The law is divided into five titles, one of which deals with public services, such as airlines, trains, and buses, and another which covers public accommodations, including restaurants, hotels, and privately-owned transportation systems. Other titles cover employment, telecommunications, and miscellaneous provisions. Title II, which covers transportation, says that public systems and programs must be accessible to individuals with disabilities. Title III, covering accommodations, states that all new construction and modifications must be accessible, and that in existing facilities, barriers must be removed if readily achievable.

Questions remain unclear

Although there are a series of accessibility guidelines that have been issued by the United States Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, commonly known as the Access Board, questions such as exactly what kind and what degree of disability need to be addressed, as well as what constitutes accessibility, remain unclear. For instance, there are over 40 different kinds of neuromuscular diseases that fall under the general classification of muscular dystrophy. Individuals, like the author of this article, have various degrees of disability. Some people need roll-in showers; others

don't. Some require low light switches that are easy to turn and latch-type door knobs. Other persons who are blind or deaf need hearing or visual aids. Hotels that are refurbishing need to understand how much modification is necessary to satisfy potential guests. What does "readily achievable" really mean? The applicable rule says states "without too much difficulty or expense," but how much is enough?

The Access Board says that existing facilities must achieve a level of accessibility that balances user needs, the constraints of existing conditions, and the resources available for remedial work.⁵ These kinds of rules leave a lot of room for interpretation and many disabled persons feel that the hotel industry tends to use the narrowest, most economical interpretation because they think there is no real demand. That's simply not true. As author Nancy Mairs, who has advanced multiple sclerosis, writes, "You'd think that a capitalist society would eagerly grasp this principle without legal intervention; the more goods and services I can readily reach, the more likely I am to spend my money."⁶

Consumers voice opinions

Robert Elliott, director of regulatory affairs for the AH&MA, told delegates to the SATH Convention that the industry was trying to understand disabled needs and indeed surveyed the delegates. Elliott said that the industry standard has been the Americans With Disabilities Act. Since the SATH

conference, in preparation for upcoming federal rule-making, the AH&MA has launched a comprehensive survey of its members to determine property occupancy by guests with disabilities. The survey collects data on reservations, occupancy, turn-down, and "walk" rates, i.e., frequency for all of the property's rooms, as well as separate data for accessible rooms. It asks properties to identify on a daily basis for all accessible rooms the room-nights reserved, room-nights occupied, nights sold out, regrets, and walks.

In an interview for this article, Elliott said that the AH&MA was "focusing our efforts in a way most compatible with needs. Our minimum is to meet federal requirements. We are interested in what we can do to enhance investments."⁷ Elliott said that additional pilot surveys were being sent to members of various disabled groups such as the Paralyzed Veterans and associations of persons who are blind and deaf.

Because the AH&MA has been slow to act, and has not championed disability rights, activists feel that they may be waffling, showing some interest in the subject, but at the same time lobbying to block regulations that might impose additional expenses on their members. There has been little talk in the industry about the rich economic benefits this market can offer, nor about the ethical question of denying access to a public facility to a whole class of persons.

AAA gets involved

One agent of change is the American Automobile Association (AAA). Andrea West, project coordinator of industry evaluations of the American Automobile Association, asks, "Who decides if a room is accessible? According to our criteria, many rooms that hotels classify as accessible aren't accessible." West believes "the hotel industry is not buying into the importance of accessibility. They don't want to be bothered. They don't see the value. Why go to the expense when there's not the demand?"⁸

That, of course, is exactly the point. There are plenty of indications that persons with disabilities want to travel, but not to hotels which are not accessible and where they are not welcome. *ASTA Agency Management*, the official magazine of the American Society of Travel Agents, devoted two major stories by this author to the subject of disabled travel in the first half of 1998.⁹ But agents report that accessible accommodations are often difficult to find. Indeed, in the 1998 *AAA Guides to Lodging in the United States* only 8.7 percent of the more than 25,000 listed properties are rated as being either fully accessible or semi accessible. That's because the AAA has developed a very comprehensive set of criteria for listing a property, and it will not list any property that does not meet its full list of 59 specifications.

Their list is not based on compliance with the law, but rather with what member surveys and

consultants say is acceptable. A property that wants to be listed as fully accessible must, for example, have entrances and doors that are operable with a closed fist, public restrooms with adequate clear turning space for wheelchairs, guest room view ports at wheelchair heights, elevators with control buttons that either have tactile signs or help available and control buttons 48 to 54 inches from the floor, and restaurants where 5 percent of the seating is served by accessible routes of travel. West says that the 1999 AAA guides will probably list more properties because there will be increased levels of accessibility.

Reservations are difficult

Then there is the issue of reserving accessible rooms. Travel agents report that while hotels guarantee rooms, many will not guarantee that it will be an accessible room. There are a variety of reasons for this. According to Craig Farrell, president and CEO of Choice Hotels Canada, "There are usually only a few rooms for the disabled available at any given hotel. As a result hotel owners do not load this room type against their master inventory in the reservations system, but, instead, hold it back for reservations being made directly with the hotel or for last room availability."¹⁰

An example of what often happens can be found in a letter sent to *Accent on Living* magazine by a reader about her experience with the Extended Stay America Hotel in Overland Park, Kansas.

Recently staff from the Independent Living Center of Joplin, Missouri, required lodging so they could attend a conference. Advance guaranteed reservations were made for two couples; one needed wheelchair accessibility, the other only non-smoking. When the couples arrived, the couple needing non-smoking was provided the guaranteed room. The couple requiring handicapped lodging was sent seven miles away to a sister motel and given incorrect directions. Management's excuses were that no handicap reservations had been made; the facility provided no handicap rooms for anyone; the customers in the handicap room had not checked out. The final excuse: This particular facility guaranteed reservations for all types of rooms except handicap accessible.¹¹

While this practice is widespread, it is far from universal. In fact, to meet the AAA criteria for accessibility, properties must guarantee accessible room reservations. Jim Engel, assistant general manager of the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn Lodge, a 354-room property in Michigan, says that they pre-assign room numbers to avoid this problem. Reservationists also qualify clients by asking what kind of disability they have so that they can be assigned a room with a roll-in shower if they are in a wheelchair, or guide rails if they are blind. Engel says, "We

do the same for seniors as well.” Engel believes that his property benefits from this policy in all kinds of ways because they have developed an overall reputation for being concerned for guests’ needs.¹²

Training makes difference

Training is without doubt one of the major issues according to just about everyone. Robert Elliott of the AH&MA labels it as a key component of any program because of the high turnover rate that is endemic to the hotel industry. Industry observers and activists agree. A sensitive and willing staff with the right attitude and strong interpersonal skills can overcome many of the barriers persons with disabilities face and turn what may be perceived as an inaccessible property or vacation into an accessible one.

Writing in *ASTA Agency Management* this author observed:

Often in my travels I encounter hotels, restaurants, museums, attractions, and forms of transportation that were not designed with me in mind. I never expected they would be, nor do I desire to inconvenience them. Nevertheless, many welcome me when they see me approach with my cane or in my Amigo scooter. When I tell them I will stay downstairs because I cannot go upstairs, or off because I cannot get on, they say, ‘Nonsense. If you want to enjoy

what we have, you shall.’ Then they proceed to carry me up, or take me around or do whatever it takes to help me.

But more often I encounter those who look at me and say, ‘I’m sorry, we aren’t able to accommodate you.’ They may, indeed, be sorry, but I wish they saw the situation through my eyes and offered assistance instead of turning me away. On my last trip to China we took a cruise through the Three Gorges. Boarding the ship required a very long climb down a hill. I also visited the Ming Tombs, another long climb down and back up. China is not an accessible destination, but the Chinese people understand what true hospitality means. In both instances I didn’t need to ask for help. They knew I was there to see their world-famous treasures and they organized a team to solve my problem.

At Cody’s Ranch Resort in Cody, Wyoming, I had a similar experience. Owners John and Jamie Parsons saw me looking enviously at a group of guests heading out for a trail ride. They immediately enlisted the aid of one of their cowboys who improvised a ramp so I could climb on the horse, found a special saddle that I could hold onto firmly, and took us on a private trail ride into the hills. Cody’s does not routinely offer handicapped riding, but when we walked in

the door they became instantly accessible.

That's hospitality.¹³

Canada is model

For a model of what can be done, it is not necessary to look any farther than across the border to Canada. There is no ADA law there. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms is the only legislation that specifically mentions persons with disabilities when it mandates that "all people must be created equal." There is, however, a Hotel Association of Canada with an entrepreneurial spirit and an understanding of the market. The association has developed a program called "Access Canada" designed to "tap into a growing sector of the tourism industry, seniors and people with disability." The mission of the program is "To develop a workable and mutually beneficial system for both guests and operators that will increase opportunities for guests of all ability and age levels to enjoy accommodations, and therefore increase demand for accessible properties."¹⁴

The program segments the market into four functional groups: Agility, those who have difficulty moving, climbing stairs; Hearing, those with partial or total hearing loss; Mobility, those who cannot walk unaided; and Vision, those with partial or full sight impairment. Access Canada was developed, according to its operators manual, to be a client-oriented system rather than product-oriented. To ensure this, a series of three user focus groups was held to

provide input. Then two operator groups met to review the proposed recommendations and suggest adjustments that would make the proposed recommendations more business efficient.

The user groups identified a number of issues that needed to be addressed. The most important were as follows:

- staff training on awareness and sensitivity
- emergency exit from buildings
- physical access to buildings
- information
- bathrooms
- registration desk
- proximity - car and room
- telephones
- information systems via TV in the room
- signage
- room layout

A program was designed for hotels to be "certified" by an Access Canada inspector after achieving both training and building requirements. Four different rating levels were assigned that recognized different levels of accessibility so every property could participate in the marketing effort and consumers could determine whether a particular property could fill their individual needs. For example, Level 1, the lowest level of accessibility, was for properties that could effectively serve seniors with normal aging limitations of hearing, vision, and agility, and mild disabilities. Level 4, the highest level, was assigned to

properties that could effectively serve persons who are deaf, blind, and dependent on wheelchairs. Craig Farrell points out that Access Canada does not necessarily require making major changes to the property, but rather assures guests of receiving accurate information and having their needs recognized, understood, and realized upon arrival.

Choice Hotels has provisions

The story of Choice Hotels, Canada, deserves a close look. According to CEO Craig Farrell, every Clarion, Quality, Comfort, Sleep, Rodeway, Mainstay Suite, and Econo Lodge has made provisions for travelers with disabilities and special needs. Both Econo Lodge and Rodeway have introduced special "seniors rooms." Amenities include a large button telephone with volume control, large button clocks and TV remote controls, brighter lighting, grab bars in the shower and bath, hand held showers, and lever-style handles on doors. Econo Lodges allocate 10 percent of their inventory, and Rodeway 25 percent of their inventory for these rooms.

In Toronto, three Quality Hotels hired Gerald Parker, a disability consultant, to help them become more accessible and conduct sensitivity awareness training. Parker suggested enhancements such as closed caption TV, medical refrigeration, public telephones with volume controls, larger print menus in the restaurants, flashing fire alarms, and evacuation route lights.

All three hotels have received recognition from disabled groups for their efforts and the special rooms are sold out continuously.

Farrell believes that hotels must find affordable ways to create more inventory for disabled travelers. He emphasizes that these changes should not be regarded as complex and expensive when viewed in terms of the large market potential. Once the inventory exists, it needs to be loaded into global reservation systems.¹⁵

How much is enough?

From a marketing point of view, enough is whatever it takes to get the desired market share. That the market exists is undisputed. Hoteliers need to focus on how to get it. The evidence suggests that any property can benefit by taking these three simple steps:

- **Start with employee training:** Employees need to understand how to talk to and assist persons with disabilities. For example, the use of words such as "handicapped," "crippled," "disabled," and "physically challenged" focus on the disability. Persons with disabilities is much more acceptable because the adjective does not define them. Employees also need to understand the terminology that's used - the kinds of disabilities guests might have, both visible and invisible, and the kinds of

assistance that can be offered. Knowing these things helps avoid the common problem of the staff being flustered because they don't know how to talk to and serve persons with disabilities. This often takes the form of a patronizing attitude or simply ignoring the problem.

- **Train the front desk** and reservation staff to increase the quality and quantity of the information they give to persons requesting handicapped facilities. The goal here is to make certain that reality exceeds expectations. Specific information on services and facilities for each disability grouping, such as mobility impaired, vision impaired, etc., needs to be readily available.
- **Make some simple changes:** There's no reason why any property can't make some simple changes that will make a difference. Many needs can be met simply by focusing on ease of access on a path of travel, basic room layout, improved signage, enhanced communication devices, a few portable assistive devices such as raised toilet seats, and easy modifications of door and bathroom hardware.

Beyond these easy and relatively inexpensive steps, it all comes down to a matter of choice — and conscience.

References

¹ 1990 Census. Updated 1997 figures say current number is 54 million.

² Charles Presley, "Shattering Myths About Senior Travel," *ASTA Agency Management* (February 1998).

³ Andy Vladimir, "The Second SATH World Congress on Travelers With Disabilities," *ASTA Agency Management* (February 1998).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Department of Justice maintains an ADA Home Page at www.usdog.gov/cert/ada/adahom1.htm. The Access Board's home page is www.access-board.gov.

⁶ Nancy Mairs, *Waist High In the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

⁷ Interview, June 2, 1998.

⁸ Interview, June 3, 1998.

⁹ Andy Vladimir, "The Second SATH World Congress"; "Are You Getting Your Share of the Disabled Market," *ASTA Agency Management* (May 1998).

¹⁰ Speech to SATH Congress, Eden Roc Hotel, Miami Beach, Florida, January 9, 1998.

¹¹ Ina Mae Brooks, "Vacation Spots: Thumbs Up or Thumbs Down?" *Accent on Living* (Summer 1998).

¹² Interview, June 3, 1998.

¹³ Andy Vladimir, "Commentary," *ASTA Agency Management* (March 1997).

¹⁴ All of the references to the Access Canada program here, unless otherwise noted, are from George Szwender and Doreen Waugh, *Access Canada Operators Manual* (Alberta Hotel Association, #401, 5241 Calgary Trail South, Edmonton, Alberta T6H 5G8, 1996).

¹⁵ Interview, June 3, 1998.

Andrew N. Vladimir took disability retirement from his position as an associate professor in the School of Hospitality Management, Florida International University. Andrew Vladimir and Bob Dickinson wrote the book *Inside the Cruise Industry*, published by John Wiley & Sons in 1996.