

Barrier-Free Meetings

PMM5 Postscript™ Number 49

Background Information: The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) promises equal access to opportunities within education, employment and all of society for people with disabilities. Jonathan Howe and Barbara Dunn contributed their knowledge about the ADA to *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, in Chapter 43, The Americans with Disabilities Act. In this chapter Howe and Dunn:

- Define the purpose of the Americans with Disabilities Act
- Explain the types of disabilities covered by the ADA
- List general guidelines for accommodating people with disabilities
- Identify sources of information and assistance to comply with the ADA

PMM5 Postscript Use: This PMM5 Postscript™ provides an overview of the ADA. It delves into information on various meeting strategies and solutions for people with disabilities allowing them to fully participate in the meeting. The PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

Learner Outcomes: At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Compose a list of individuals responsible for ADA adherence during meetings, conventions and events.
- Identify twelve strategies to create a comfortable meeting for hearing-impaired and sight-impaired meeting participants.
- Identify eight solutions for hearing-impaired and sight-impaired meeting participants.
- Explain how technology can function as an enabler and barrier for participants with disabilities.

Related PMM5 Chapter: Chapter 43, The Americans with Disabilities Act
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The Law

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that places of public accommodation are prohibited from discriminating based on disability. The responsibility for meeting ADA requirements is born by both the companies and organizations sponsoring events, conferences, seminars or meetings and the place where the event is held, such as a conference center or hotel. The ADA holds that in some cases the allocation of obligations between the site and the lessee may be determined by contract.

On July 23, 2004, the US Access Board updated and revised guidelines for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA). Revisions have been made so that the guidelines continue to meet the needs of people with disabilities and keep pace with technological innovations. The ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) cover the construction and alteration of facilities in the private and the public sector.

What's My Responsibility?

While the responsibility for providing barrier-free meetings is a joint responsibility between the site and the event sponsor, the primary responsibility falls to the organization holding the event.

Areas meeting managers must plan for include:

- Meeting site allowing for physical accessibility
- Communication plan (including participants, on-site staff, speakers)
- Promotion and registration
- Social functions and meals
- Presentations

Before You Meet

Planning is the key to success. A meeting manager's overall plan should allot time and resources (including a point person) for the creation of a barrier-free meeting. Designate someone on staff to handle all issues concerning accommodations during the meeting. Have this person available to assist in room registration and site orientation.

Specific areas to consider include:

Site Visits

- Don't ask if a facility is accessible; ask how it is accessible (Howe, 2006).
- If side trips are impractical for those with disabilities, make separate arrangements.
- Choose properties that have experience dealing with people with disabilities rather than those that are simply compliant.
- Consider distances when viewing meeting spaces and accessible rooms.
- Remember that ADA regulations only apply to US-based hotels, airlines, ships, etc.
- Ask about training of staff at the hotel or venue. Work with places who have staff trained to interact with people with disabilities.

Communication Plan

- Participants' needs vary widely. Ask specific questions about what is required for participants with disabilities. Ask detailed questions regarding necessary accommodations on registration forms for the meeting and housing.
- Prepare the on-site staff for the meeting by orienting and sensitizing them to the needs of all participants. Be certain that information "trickles down" through all departments and levels of the host property. Identify specific needs that will help the group. Some areas may include:
 - Well-lit and easily accessible meeting rooms
 - Safety and exit information; alarm systems that alert both visually and audibly
 - Keys for rooms
 - Registration assistance
 - Accessible electrical outlets for audio tape or computer
 - Telephones equipped with Text Telephones (TTY)
 - Accessible restrooms on the same floor as the meeting
 - Preferential seating for people with disabilities

Promotion and Registration

- Arrange for all promotional material to be available in alternative formats, such as Braille or computer disk. Include photographs of individuals with disabilities in the promotional material; this illustrates a commitment to assuring all participants an accessible conference.
- In pre-event materials, make participants aware that accommodations can be made for a variety of needs. The registration form must ask whether any special assistance is needed. Be as clear and specific as possible. For example, vague statements such as "Disability-related services are available upon request" leave the reader wondering what services are really available. A preferred statement might be, "Audio tape, Braille, large print, electronic formats, sign language interpreters, among many other disability related services are available." While it takes more space, it eliminates ambiguity.

Social Functions and Meals

- When planning social functions and meals, provide for seating, allowing all participants to sit in the same area. Do not place persons in wheelchairs, or those who use walkers or dog guides on the fringes of the dining area.
- Avoid buffet lines; they can be particularly difficult for persons with mobility or visual impairments.

Finally, in overall planning, don't forget to include personal assistants and interpreters in the estimated number of participants.

Meeting Accessibility for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

There are various forms of communication used by hearing impaired meeting attendees, depending on their particular hearing loss (unilateral or bilateral — one or both ears), the size and type of meeting and when they had their hearing loss (born with it, or lost later in their life). Don't make assumptions that these individuals only want an interpreter.

General Guidelines

- Check that window coverings are adjustable to reduce or remove glare.
- Allow for preferred seating, usually in front of the speaker and interpreter.

- Preferred seating should be away from heating and air conditioning units, hallways and other "noisy" areas.
- Keep lights bright in the area where the presenter and interpreter stand.
- Arrange seats in a circle for smaller discussion groups.

Potential Solutions

- **Sign Language Interpretation** — Arrange for qualified, professional interpreters, trained in the preferred communication style. There are multiple languages and they are not all that similar. The most common is ASL or American Sign Language. The second most common is SEE or Signing Exact English. Other languages include Signed English, or Cued-Speech. Arrange for an adequate number of interpreters for meetings, meals, and social events. At least two interpreters must be available for any meeting longer than two hours. Have an additional interpreter available for registration.
- **Real Time Captioning** — Stenographic captioning (real-time captioning) provides simultaneous, word-for-word transcription. This service is known as CART, an acronym for Computer Aided Real-Time Captioning or Communication Access Real-time Translation. Some people differentiate between captioning of a speaker (the former service) and captioning of a presentation with video (the latter service). Using stenographic machines and computer software, CART translates the spoken word into the written word nearly as fast as people can talk. Text is displayed on a laptop computer, monitor, or large screen, depending on the situation. CART results in a verbatim (word-for-word) text of all spoken content. A related service, computer-assisted note taking (CAN), produces a summary that may not be as complete as a CART transcript. There are companies who have developed technology that allows them to do Virtual Computer Assisted Transcription (VCAT) without even being on location.
- **Assistive Listening Devices** — Useful for attendees with partial hearing losses, Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs) are amplification instruments that are designed to be helpful in specific, but not all listening situations. Hearing aids, which also amplify sound, are instruments that can be used in all listening situations. ALDs differ from hearing aids because the construction of an ALD is different from a hearing aid in one important aspect. All of the components of a hearing aid, the microphone, the amplifier, and the loudspeaker are located within the body of the instrument that is placed on the user's ear. In contrast, the microphone of an ALD is separated from the body of the instrument and is placed at the sound source so that it is most apt to pick up the desired signal at the expense of background noise. In practice, the ability to selectively amplify signal, but not background noise, is the biggest advantage of ALDs.
- **Speech Recognition Software** — There are several major desktop speech recognition products available today for consumers. Unfortunately, this technology isn't sufficiently developed to be viable for most meetings, because the software has to be 'trained' to the speakers inflections and words.

Meeting Accessibility for Individuals with Visual Impairments

The term "visual impairment" covers a variety of circumstances. Participants may be visually impaired, requiring assistance to see or legally blind. Knowing the participants is the cardinal rule for successful planning of a meeting.

General Guidelines

- Meet with participants who have visual impairments and show them the site by explaining the layout, identifying the location of amenities and exits and walking through the meeting area with them. Help them to find seating in the meeting room.
- Allow access to front row seats during meeting sessions.
- Have photocopies of transparencies or slides available at the registration area for close examination; some audiovisual materials may not be amenable to verbal description.
- Design all exhibits so that they may be touched and/or heard. Always provide an alternative to solely visual exhibits.
- Check for adjustable lighting in the meeting room; this is particularly important for the individual with low vision. Lowering the ceiling lights can increase the contrast and thus the visibility of audiovisual materials. However, moving from a brightly lit vestibule to a darkened room can cause temporary disorientation. Ask the participant whether a sighted guide would be helpful.
- Use sharply contrasting colors and large print for materials, maps, books, signs, menus, forms, and displays.
- Caution presenters against relying solely on oral presentations and gestures to illustrate a point, or using visual points of reference (e.g., "here" or "there.").
- Presenters should speak clearly and face the audience as much as possible.

Potential Solutions

Offer papers, agendas, or other materials in alternative formats. Options:

- **Large print** — These publications feature Big Type, Bold Print, sharp Contrast, and a Small Book Format.
- **Tape recordings** — A verbal listing of contents should be included at the front of each tape.
- **Readers** — This may simply be having a staff member or volunteer available to sit with the participant and describe the presentations or read the presentation to the participant.
- **Translation of graphs and figures** — Utilize tactile graphics, raised line charts and drawings or replace graphics entirely with descriptions.
- **Braille** — The traditional solution for individuals with visual impairments.

Braille Production

Davey Hulse, CEO of Braille Plus, Inc. provides these hints regarding the production of Braille documents (Tinnish, 2005):

- Allot a reasonable time for Braille preparation. At a minimum provide:
 - 2 days or more for documents less than 10 pages
 - 3 days or more for documents less than 25 pages
 - 7 days or more for documents less than 100 pages
- Most production houses can/will accept a variety of electronic files, although the favorite is Word or WordPerfect

- Pricing will be variable but will usually be based on price per Braille page
- For prose documents, expect three Braille pages per print page – 100 to 110 words per Braille page
- Documents with table and charts are much more difficult to handle and may yield up to six or seven Braille pages per print page depending on the composition of the table
- For lengthy documents such as 100-page conference programs with schedules, bios and advertisers, be ready to discuss how you want the document broken into volumes since a 300-page Braille document is very unwieldy at 4 inches thick
- Be ready to provide sample documents for bid purposes. Drafts showing layout, length, etc., are acceptable.
- Sources of Braille are most readily located through the Internet using key words such as:
 - Braille
 - Braille transcription
 - Braille translation
- In light of timing issues, aggressively broadcast the availability of alternate formats (Braille, audio, large print or electronic editions) in the publicity for the meeting so any potential need is identified at the earliest possible moment

The Growing Digital Divide

Technology can be a solution or part of the problem when creating barrier-free meetings. Federal agencies are bound by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 relating to electronic and information technology. Section 508 requires that when Federal agencies develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology, the electronic and information technology allows employees with disabilities to have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to the access to and use of information and data by Federal employees who are not individuals with disabilities. While all meeting managers will not be dealing with 508 compliance, consider these areas where technology can create a divide between those with disabilities and those without:

- Internet kiosks
- Smart cards
- Electronic textbooks
- Distance learning
- Web sites

Plan access to high-tech materials through magnification software, screen readers and accessible stations.

Summary

The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) promises equal access for people with disabilities. This right extends to attending and fully participating in meetings. Meeting managers must work with venues, vendors and suppliers to implement strategies to make all participants comfortable and afford them equal access. Meeting managers must be familiar with solutions to allow people with disabilities to participate in a meeting, conference or convention. Finally, while taking advantage of

all technology solutions for disable participants, meeting managers must also recognize that commonly used technology (e.g., websites) present challenges for some disabled participants.

Group Discussion or Projects

1. A major retailer has started testing a university-created robot designed to help visually impaired consumers navigate store aisles and find their desired products. The robot uses RFID technology to find specific products in aisles. It communicates with the visually impaired customer using a small Braille directory of products that is attached to the robot's handle, and it replies to the shopper's questions with spoken answers. How could such technology be adopted for meetings and meeting venues?
2. How would a meeting manager plan for disabled participants during a physical teambuilding event?
3. Some disabilities are not physically obvious (deafness as an example). How could a meeting manager appropriately identify participants with disabilities to aid in communication with them?
4. What questions would you include on a site visit for meeting participants who may be using seeing eye or service dogs?
5. A learning disability is a disorder that affects people's abilities to understand what they see and hear or to send information to different parts of the brain. Those problems can become apparent in many ways: certain challenges with spoken and written language, coordination, self-control or listening. If a participant identified themselves as having a learning disability, what questions would a meeting manager ask to provide the participant with equal access to the meeting?

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