

Communicating Access: Expanding Your Audience

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After a number of inspiring presentations today, it is clear that arts organisations work towards increased access for people with a disability for more than legislative reasons.

Organisations are keen to increase their audience base and be more inclusive of all people including people with a disability.

As we have heard, international practices are particularly advanced in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, we have also heard exciting testimonies from a number of organisations in NSW who are working in the short, medium and long-term to break down the barriers and decrease the limitations that exist within the arts environment.

We have seen just some examples of the large number of ways in which organisations can work towards increasing access for people with a disability to creative opportunities and cultural experiences. It is also interesting to note, that many of the communication tools that you can utilise in your projects, events and venues will be beneficial not just for people with a disability but for the broader community as well.

The Sydney Observatory and the Sydney Opera House showed us that increasing access is not only physical access, it is attitudinal. An organisation can develop a language of access for people with a disability. Access is no longer an additional consideration or an extra requirement upon the core activities of an organisation. It is becoming central to the way that programs are planned; venues are developed and maintained; and events are communicated and implemented.

COMMUNICATING ACCESS: EXPANDING YOUR AUDIENCE

This brings us to our final topic for today, and that is the need to communicate your access. There is no point in having a venue that is perfectly accessible in physical terms and then staff the venue with people who do not have an understanding of disability issues. If somebody with a disability arrives at a venue and they can physically access a space, however, they feel unwelcome, they are less likely to enjoy their experience and are less likely to return on a second visit.

Furthermore, if you have wonderful physical and attitudinal access, except people with a disability are unaware that your opportunities exist, then they will not make the first steps in actually arriving at your organisation. Arts organisations can break down barriers by reducing the rates of hidden access. We need to open up the lines of communication, reduce what is concealed and increase what is common knowledge.

Many of you would be familiar with communication techniques and processes. However, I thought that I might run through a few of the things that you can do to specifically connect with people with a disability.

AUDIENCE NEEDS

We need to consider the messages that are communicated to audiences: from the beginning when they are initially interested in information; to when they arrive at the venue and participate in the event or program; to the end when they leave the organisation with time to reflect on their experience.

People with a disability have different needs. The definition of a person with a disability includes:

- Intellectual;
- Physical;
- Sensory (includes hearing and vision impairment);
- Psychiatric;
- Neurological (includes acquired brain injury);
- Physical disfigurement;
- Learning difficulties; and
- Disease causing organisms (includes HIV/AIDs).

People with different disabilities will respond differently to events and programs and they will have different needs.

Ask your audience what they need. Consultation is key to getting access right in the long run.

AVENUES OF COMMUNICATION

When communicating with people with a disability, it is good practice to use a range of communication formats to ensure that people who have difficulty accessing certain formats, can gain information through other ways.

I will discuss some of the issues that you may like to consider when developing your:

- Website
- Flyers
- Staff training
- Links with disability organisations
- Media relationships and
- Access Information

DO'S AND DON'TS

I will also be discussing a couple of do's and don'ts that will help guide you on the road to improved access including:

- Don't overestimate the access you can offer
- Do respect the individual's right to information
- Do cross-reference your communications.

WEBSITE

More and more people are using the Internet as a remote form of communication.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission have web access guidelines and standards under their Disability Rights section www.hreoc.gov.au

Ensure that your website is Bobby approved:

Bobby is a web-based tool that analyzes web pages for their accessibility to people with a disability and it is a free service.

Examples of suggestions may include less flashing lights, more large print, more than 75% contrast between the font colour and background colour and more detailed considerations.

Provide text only versions of information that is surrounded by graphics.

Ensure that you include access information on the front page of your website (or a clear and obvious direct link from the front page).

FLYERS

Clear, large print (14 point, Arial, Bold).

Electronic and hard copy.

Black and White version

Access and transport information either on the back, or available as an attachment.

Use symbols to communicate access that is available or provide access information as an attachment.

There are universally recognised access symbols e.g., those printed in the International Day of People with a Disability program.

STAFF

Disability Awareness Training:

Ensure that your strong message continues to be communicated upon the visitor's arrival at your venue or event.

There are many organisations that provide disability awareness training including Accessible Arts.

Disability awareness training is traditionally provided to front of house staff, box office staff and other staff who regularly relate directly with the public.

This is a strong first step.

It is important to see the bigger picture.

Disability awareness training is relevant to all staff if you are to encourage access to be central to your organisation's language.

In addition to disability awareness training, staff will need to gain knowledge of the specific access services available within your venue, and they will need a flexible approach to ensuring that they can meet a variety of audience needs.

DISABILITY ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR NETWORKS

If you are running a program for people with a disability, disability organisations are a great source of information on access needs.

They are also a strong point of call for communicating information with their clients and community.

Many disability organisations have journals, magazines or news bulletins that are regularly accessed by people with a disability, family, friends and carers.

Providing information to carers directly in an e-mail or by post can also be effective in distributing information to a large number of people.

MEDIA

Utilise disability media as well as mainstream media. Disability and access information is relevant to the whole community.

1 in 5 Australians have a disability. People with a disability access mainstream information, and they have family and friends who also access mainstream media and will share information.

ACCESS INFORMATION

So what is access information?

Access information should include:

Transport information: how do people get there, and what services are available e.g., accessible parking spaces, courtesy buses etc.

Accessible entrances: which entrances are easiest to access.

Are there other accessible services: hearing loops, audio description, Auslan interpretation, captioning, reduced ticket costs, Braille or tactile maps and information etc.

This access information should be available at initial engagement stages such as in flyers, advertisements et cetera, and it should also be available upon arrival at a venue. Always ensure that there is appropriate signage and so on.

DON'T OVERESTIMATE WHAT YOU CAN OFFER

If you don't have a specific form of access, don't state that it is available. It will be a more negative experience for the individual if they show up expecting a specific form of access, and it is not available.

But at the same time don't underestimate what you can achieve.

DO RESPECT THE INDIVIDUAL'S RIGHT TO INFORMATION

Provide contact details for further information through a variety of channels: phone, e-mail, post, TTY, fax etc.

DO CROSS REFERENCE YOUR COMMUNICATIONS

Often, when people are working to increase access to an event, they will utilise an outside system or an additional communication avenue. Many organisations work specifically on provision of access information and services.

When you refer people on to a further service or source of information, you need to make sure that this second point of reference is accessible as well.

Events and programs will often provide a further reference point for booking an audiotape or checking access requirements to a particular venue within a festival or series of events.

Often the second reference point will only have one avenue of communication e.g., a phone number that is greeted by a pre-recorded message or an e-mail address when people may not have access to the internet.

How many points of call does the audience member need to travel through before they have booked their ticket and have all the information that they need to prepare for their visit?

How hard are we making it for people to come to our venues and events?

Shouldn't we be working to gain visitors, rather than visitors working to gain access to our venues or events?

ACCESS TO THE ARTS

It is important to remember that people with a disability are individuals in the same way as able-bodied people. Individuals have their own interests, character, talents and skills. They excel in their own areas and have needs that are specific to them.

As Sancha suggested in her welcoming speech, International Day of People with a Disability provides us with an opportunity each year to reflect on the rights of people with a disability to choose how they would like to become engaged in the arts as participants, audience members and as arts practitioners.

It is our opportunity today to commit to a sustainable approach to ensuring equal access for all to arts venues, events and programs.

By opening up the arts industry to people with a disability, we can enable further:

- Creative development;
- Intellectual input;
- Diversity of art forms;
- Free expression of stories and ideas from differing perspectives; and overall
- Enrichment of the arts industry.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

A holistic approach to audience development would consider the changing demographics such as our aging population who are more likely to acquire disabilities over time. Steps that you can take now will increase access for people with a disability in the future.

Projects that increase access for people with a disability will also benefit the broader community such as the captioning example that we heard earlier.

Audience development is about understanding what your audience needs. Never hesitate in asking questions, the more knowledge you have, the more you can achieve.

Be flexible in your response and approach to access programs and issues.

Audiences who have a positive experience and have had their expectations and needs met, will be more likely to make return visits and report positively to their colleagues, friends and family. Word of mouth is an extremely strong form of communication.

Increasing access for people with a disability will assist you in retaining your audiences.

WHAT IS YOUR MESSAGE?

Through communicating access you are explaining to the broader community that you have taken the steps to increase access. You are explaining to the community that people with a disability have the right to choose and actively participate in the arts and creative practices.

There are many benefits to come from your work in the journey towards access. You are not only increasing access for people with a disability; you are also sending a message out to the broader community, that your organisation operates within a best practice framework. This will in turn reflect well on other areas of your work. Through increasing access, you are practicing a real and current form of advocacy for the equal rights of people with a disability.

THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to come to Embracing the Accessible Era. Accessible Arts looks forward to working with arts and disability organisations across NSW to continue to increase access for people with a disability.

Please take advantage of our services. If you ever have any questions about access, disability awareness training, or events and projects in the disability and arts sector, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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