



VOICE VALUE

By Robin Springer

AAC Tech Can Help Those with Speech Disabilities Navigate Public Places

Augmentative and alternative communication puts control in the hands of people with speech disabilities, and that should be good for businesses, too

Nearly 30 years after the Americans with Disabilities Act became law, myriad businesses are still out of compliance. Several years ago, the Independent Living Resource Center in San Francisco received a \$25,000 grant to offer free architectural access services to small businesses in the city to help them come into compliance with the ADA. The center had sufficient funds to help approximately 250 businesses and spent a year reaching out to more than 1,500 businesses. Only three accepted.

Why did so many businesses fail to see the importance of being accessible to people with disabilities, especially when the improvements to their premises would have been free?

Putting the Numbers in Perspective

People with disabilities in the United States have significant spending power: \$544 billion in annual disposable income, according to a 2016 report by Solutions Marketing Group. Friends and family of people with disabilities add 105 million people and \$3.9 trillion in disposable income, per the 2013 Global Economics of Disability Annual Report. That's more than twice as large as the preteen (tween) market.

Diners with disabilities spent \$35 billion in restaurants in 2003, with more than 75% of people with disabilities eating out at least once a week, spending two to three times more per meal than people who are not disabled.

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And there are more people with disabilities in the United States than there are people of Hispanic or Latino origin, the country's largest ethnic, racial, or cultural minority group.

Of the country's 56.7 million people with disabilities, nearly 3 million people have difficulty having their speech understood, and there

are untold others who have difficulty communicating even though their speech is understandable. At least 2.5 million people sustain brain injuries each year. These populations often include high-functioning individuals with esoteric speech and/or language deficits who may not consider themselves disabled or who may not consider themselves candidates for augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

But educating people with disabilities about assistive technology (AT) apps so they can install and use them puts

control in their hands, empowering them and enabling them to be more independent. For a high-functioning person with a brain injury, this morsel of independence could be life-changing.

Alternative Communication in Places of Public Accommodations

Manufacturers of AAC devices could raise awareness by implementing a campaign targeting places like grocery, department, and home goods stores. Included in the campaign would be training to teach store employees how to identify a person who might be in distress, how to approach and speak to her, and how to use the device with her. Businesses that participate would automatically become "safer" places for people with these difficulties.

Manufacturers could also expand in-service topics in medical facilities to educate therapists about the ways in which AAC can benefit patients with esoteric speech and language deficits.

AT Apps on Phones and Other Mobile Devices

Developers could integrate assistive features into mobile apps, perhaps a distress button on the home screen that would perform a task like calling someone or opening a text-to-speech app. "It should be easily accessible and somewhat programmable," suggests Barry Romich, board chair of Prentke Romich Company. It should also bypass having to enter a password.

The person could press the distress button and the phone could say, for example, "I am having a hard time communicating. I need a quiet place."

We may not see an increase in sales of AAC in the short term, but by increasing awareness in places of public accommodations, people who have disabilities will be more comfortable shopping independently, and more people will know about AAC and its benefits. It might increase the bottom line over the long term, but even if it doesn't, perhaps the goodwill it generates will be enough of a win to make it worthwhile.

Let's start a conversation about how we can put AAC into the hands of people who need it, even if only occasionally. And then let's do it. ☒

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