

John Williams' Column: Access to the Community Benefits Everyone

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For people using wheelchairs, consumer access to restaurants and gas stations expands business opportunities for the owners. Denying economic access to wheelchair users weakens our economy and our community.

Recent observed events in the business area demand me to ask this question: Does America really want people using wheelchairs to be consumers?

While visiting New York City, I saw a man in a wheelchair unable to enter a restaurant because he lacked the strength to open the door. Customers entering and leaving the restaurants seemed impervious to his situation. Minutes passed as I watched them refuse to offer him any assistance. Finally, I walked over to him and said, "I need coffee. Will you join me?"

"Yes," was his reply as we entered. Inside, the salespeople asked me, "What does he want to drink?"

My reply was, "Ask him."

We drank our coffee, and while doing so I learned that he experiences these situation frequently. When I asked the management, "Did you know he was having trouble entering your restaurant?," I was told emphatically, "No."

I told the management, "There is a solution to this dilemma. Have a bell installed outside so people requiring assistance can receive it."

When asked, "Do you know of a company who can help us?"

I replied, "[Inclusion Solutions](http://www.inclusionsolutions.com) at www.inclusionsolutions.com."

Inclusion Solutions sells wireless BigBell products and other communication products. When the BigBell is mounted outside of a storefront and accompanied by a directional signage, customers can ring the bell and an interior chime rings to alert employees that a customer needs assistance. The price for the bell is \$129 for a distance up to 100 feet and \$199 for 600 feet.

Isn't it cheaper to install a bell when the building is being built? The price for installing a bell when a building is being built is negligible. However, builders tell me that installing a bell, after a building is up, can cost hundreds of dollars with labor being the highest cost. What motivates a decision to make a building communication accessible? I was told by a commercial building manager that, "When we know we may be sued, we become accessible."

Patrick Hughes, the founder of Inclusion Solutions, says this about the BigBell, "Big Bell is the first communications system that allows customers with disabilities to request assistance with entry."

We left the restaurant hoping it would invest in the technology that allows employees to know when a person with a disability requires assistance.

However, assistance is precisely what some people with disabilities don't want when entering a restaurant or other buildings. Wheelchair user Andrew McKinley is one of these people. He says, “ When I can't get into a building I inform the owners they need to have automatic doors that open either when a button is pushed or when a pressure plate is either stepped on or rolled on. If they don't, I can always sue.”

More and more, newer and renovated buildings are beginning to install automated push buttons to open doors, build ramps and have wider entrance ways for people with mobility challenges.

Two days after the incident at the restaurant, it was evening. I was pumping gas at a gas station when a van stopped in the next aisle. The driver wheeled himself out of the van and started towards the pump. He pulled out a credit card and tried to insert it in the slot. He couldn't reach it.

He looked around, but he could not see anyone to help him. When I asked if I could assist him, I was waved off. He wheeled himself to the door to the store, but he could not open the door because there was a step between his chair and the door. An employee working in the garage allowed him to enter the garage and then pulled the door open for him to go inside. The wheelchair rider gave his credit card to the cashier. Exiting the store the same way he entered, he pumped his gas and left. There was anger in the man's tone and manner as he pumped his gas.

This wheelchair-using customer would have been well served if the gas station had a bell to notify the cashier he needed assistance, if the gas station had a portable ramp for wheelchair users (these ramps cost from \$200 to \$600), and if the pump's credit card slot had been lowered. The gas station could also have posted signs, such as those sold by Inclusion Solutions, that tell people with disabilities where the accessible pumps are and their hours of service.

Nearly one million Americans use wheelchairs. It is good business to ensure they have access to stores, restaurants and services. And there is low cost technology out there that affords businesses the opportunity to cater to this customer base. Once this technology is installed, consumers with disabilities will reward these businesses through their patronage.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the National Organization on Disability.

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John Williams, an award-winning columnist, has been writing about disability issues for 22 years. He has written a weekly column for Business Week Online magazine and is the author of Assistive Technologies: Expanding A Universe of Opportunities for People with Disabilities. If you have any comments or questions, or would like more information on this week's article, please contact John at JMMAW@aol.com.