

# Creating an Accommodating Culture

*Easy ways to help customers with disabilities feel more comfortable in your restaurant*

by *Mary Lou Santovec*

**M**arcelle Gambaro is mad as hell and she wants restaurateurs to know she's not going to take it any longer.

What has this 76-year-old Madison resident so steamed? "The combination of very dim lighting and very small print on the menus" at the restaurants she frequents.

Her inability to read traditional menus has Gambaro so upset she's considered "boycotting and walking out on restaurants that don't have large print menus."

Gambaro is on a mission to get restaurants to provide large print menus—not because she's a trouble maker, but because she wants to be able to go out to dinner without anxiety and worry. She truly enjoys being able to dine out with her family and is frustrated that something so simple as not being able to read the menu is making her stay at home.

She does not have one of the four major vision-stealing diseases: glaucoma, macular degeneration, cataracts or diabetic retinopathy. As she's aged, her vision has simply deteriorated making reading menus with small type and lots of items all but impossible, especially in low lighting. "My vision is not that bad and even with that I can't read the menus," she said.

Gambaro's story serves as forewarning for what restaurateurs and their staffs will face as the population continues to



*I wish the chair had arms so I can get up easier.*



*This section is really noisy, I'm not sure I'll be able to hear.*

*I can't read this.*

age. And what's good for people like Gambaro and her friends is also good for your customers with disabilities.

Marshall Flax, a low-vision therapist with the Wisconsin Council of the Blind and Visually Impaired, estimated that there are now about 100,000 people in Wisconsin who have vision problems; 75 percent with low vision and 25 percent who are legally blind. Twenty percent of people age 80 or older are visually impaired.

"The only people who are recognized as blind are those using a cane or a dog, those who fit the stereotype of what a blind person is," he said. "The rest are not wearing a sign saying 'I can't see what you're pointing to.'"

But those people are some of your customers. People don't shut down their lives after losing some or all of their vision. They learn coping skills and continue to do most, if not all, of the things they've always done. And that includes dining out.

"People with disabilities want to have the same chance to enjoy a dining-out experience as anyone else and aren't looking for exceptions or privileges," said Jason Beloungy, assistant director of Access to Independence, a Madison-based nonprofit. "If a person with a disability feels at all that their visit to a restaurant will be difficult because of apparent barriers, they will save themselves the hassle or possible embarrassment of attempting to give business to that restaurant."

Waitstaff encountering a customer asking what appears to be a silly question need to step back and consider what the customer is really requesting. "They may ask if you have a wine list when the list is right on the table in front of them," said Flax. "If they ask, it's likely because they didn't see it."

Don't assume it's ignorance or that the person is playing games. Staff should not respond in a tone of voice that is usually reserved for a five year-old. The person your employee just insulted could have advanced degrees in multiple subjects and be highly accomplished. Flax's clients report it happening to them all the time.

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“If you see someone and are not sure of their ability, treat them like an adult,” he said. “It’s always better to start at the top and work your way down if [you find] they don’t understand.”

Another complaint Flax frequently hears is when a server asks the companions what the disabled customer wants rather than asking the customer himself. The “spread effect,” where people tend to assume that those with one disability are disabled in multiple ways, is also a major irritant. “We talk louder if they’re blind assuming that if they can’t see, they can’t hear,” he said.

Waitstaff serving a visually impaired customer can earn their respect (and repeat business) by announcing the sequence and direction—“I’ll start with the lady on your left”—in which the orders will be taken. When the plate arrives, a clock system can be used to help the customer locate the food on the plate—“The lamb chop is at 1:00 p.m.”

Glare is a huge problem for those with visual impairment. “At age 60, people need two-and-one-half times more light to do the same tasks at age 20,” said Flax. Laminated menus reflect light making them hard to read. Certain kinds of table lighting also produce glare.

Dark hallways leading to the bathrooms and doors with theme names cause much embarrassment when a visually impaired customer walks into the wrong washroom. Dark spaces are dangerous for both mobility and for your guests’ peace of mind.

Lighting is an issue not only for those with vision impairments but also for those who are deaf or hard of hearing. “Even those with mild to moderate hearing loss have problems with bad lighting,” said Kerry Malak, communications director with the Center for Communication, Hearing & Deafness (formerly the Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing), a Milwaukee-based nonprofit. “Those who are hard of hearing need to look at people’s faces to pick up gestures to understand them.”

Background noise is a huge issue

for the hearing impaired population. Playing loud music makes it almost impossible for the hard of hearing to carry on a conversation. The high ceilings and hard floors in large dining rooms cause sound to bounce.

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The problem could be solved with alcove areas or small rooms off the main dining room that customers can request in advance. It’s best if you don’t sit your hearing impaired guests near the kitchen or in the middle of the dining room. Round tables are more customer friendly to those with impaired hearing than square tables. Close-captioned televisions allow the hearing impaired to enjoy a TV show at the bar. Having options for people can make a big difference.

“The Center’s clients tell me that

## To Learn More

Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired  
Phone: 608-255-1166  
Website: [www.wcblind.org](http://www.wcblind.org)

Center for Communication,  
Hearing & Deafness  
Phone: 414-604-2200  
Website: [www.cdhh.org](http://www.cdhh.org)

Access to Independence  
Phone: 800-362-9877  
Website: [www.accesstoind.org](http://www.accesstoind.org)

Greater Wisconsin Agency on  
Aging Resources, Inc.  
Phone: 608-243-5670  
Website: [www.gwaar.org](http://www.gwaar.org)

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Hearing the waitstaff recite the specials can be a challenge for those

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## Recent ADA Developments

New federal accessibility rules took effect last March. To recap, the US Justice Department adopted a new set of technical specifications—the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design—that govern how buildings are constructed or altered, among other things. The ADA prohibits places of public accommodation from discriminating against people with disabilities. The ADA affects new construction and alterations and also requires existing business to remove barriers to access to the extent this is “readily achievable.” The new standards cover technical specifications for a wide range of architectural features including restrooms, signage, elevators and parking spaces. In some cases it differs significantly from the 1991 standards.

Under the new rules, restaurants that go through alterations or new construction can follow either the 2010 Standards or the 1991 Standards until March 15, 2012. After that, all alterations and new construction must be done in compliance with the 2010 standards. The same timelines apply for businesses to remove barriers to access.

To obtain the helpful publication “ADA Update – A Primer for Small Business” visit [www.ada.gov/regs2010/smallbusiness/smallbusprimer2010.htm](http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/smallbusiness/smallbusprimer2010.htm)



with hearing loss. “The things that the staff say all the time, they usually say very fast,” she said. “It’s hard for those with hearing disabilities to pick up.”

You may think you’re able to serve everybody if your restaurant is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but think again. “A lot of barriers are invisible and not covered by the ADA,” said Evansville resident Bridget Rolek, the mother of five-year-old Sam who was born with severe cerebral palsy.

Sam is visually impaired, can’t roll over and is unable to keep his head up. In addition, he suffers from some cognitive impairments and gets most of his nutrition through a feeding tube although he’s able to eat some pureed foods. Sam spends much of his time being pushed in a wheelchair with a stroller bar and his feet extended.

The ADA requires a five-foot turning radius for wheelchairs around tables, but that’s not enough to accommodate Sam’s chair. “The ADA is written generally for people who maneuver themselves, who have upper body control,” said Rolek.

While most restaurants are technically ADA compliant, the Roleks face accidentally hitting other customers while maneuvering Sam. After everyone sits down, there’s often not enough clearance space for the waitstaff to maneuver. “If your servers are wriggling between tables, we’re not coming in,” she said.

Another thing to keep in mind is that people with disabilities often take longer to respond to a question. “Sam can respond with a smile or a vocalization, but it takes 10 to 20 seconds for him to do so,” said Rolek. “It’s a hard thing to train a server to wait for a response.” Younger servers are often more comfortable with this having had peers with disabilities mainstreamed into their classrooms.

One of the easiest things a restaurant can do is ask if there’s anything they can do to make the customer’s dining experience more comfortable. It simply makes good business sense. Just ask Brookfield resident Charles Dreyfuss. This 75-year-old, retired bank vice

president makes it a point to only eat at restaurants that provide him with a chair with arms. “If I don’t have someone who can give me a yank up off my chair, I can’t get up,” he said. “It’s embarrassing having someone lift you up by the belt.” Actually when you think of it, asking all of your customers what you can do to make their dining experience more comfortable makes a lot of sense. It provides the opportunity for a diner to ask for what they might need without seeming to single out customers who might appear to have a disability.

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Dreyfuss, who also uses a walker, has eaten at well-known restaurants across the United States. He eats out three or four times a month with his wife and occasionally with another couple. They often select fine dining establishments like Milwaukee’s Karl Ratzsch’s. “When I call for a reservation, I ask them for a chair with arms,” he said. The waitstaff at Ratzsch’s knows Dreyfuss and quickly

provides him with the appropriate chair from their office. “I would go out to dinner much more than I do if I could have a chair with arms at the restaurants I want to eat at,” he said.

“Good access isn’t about changing what the restaurant is, but simply ensuring that anyone with a disability has the same opportunity to spend their money and have a good time as anyone without a disability,” said Beloungy. “Any changes that need to be made are usually minimal and tend to benefit more than just people with disabilities.” Sometimes it’s the simple things like a large print menu, a flashlight or lamp to add more light or a chair with arms.

A customer-service focused attitude will go far. Instilling knowledge and confidence in your frontline staff can empower them to help make the dining experience a good one for people with disabilities or physical challenges—and keep them coming back. When someone has a positive experience, they are likely to share this information with others they know who have similar challenges.

Employee training helps ensure that all guests have a pleasant experience. Consider adding training modules on diversity, disability etiquette or deaf culture. Many of the nonprofits mentioned in this article provide training on disabilities to businesses.

## Additional Resources

More help is available from the Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTAC): Regional ADA Centers through free phone consultations at 800-949-4232 and free online publications on the following topics (and more):

Expanding Your Market: Customers with Disabilities Mean Business  
[www.ada.gov/busstat.htm](http://www.ada.gov/busstat.htm)

ADA Guide for Small Business [www.ada.gov/smbustxt.htm](http://www.ada.gov/smbustxt.htm)

Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals in Places of Business  
[www.ada.gov/qasrvc.htm](http://www.ada.gov/qasrvc.htm)

Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG)  
[www.access-board.gov/adaag/html/adaag.htm#rest](http://www.access-board.gov/adaag/html/adaag.htm#rest)

Reaching Out to Customers with Disabilities – an on-line course comprised of ten short lessons about how ADA applies to businesses.  
[www.ada.gov/reachingout/intro1.htm](http://www.ada.gov/reachingout/intro1.htm)

“Staff in a restaurant should be more interested in what the customer wants than what the customer’s disability is,” said Beloungy.

Rolek suggested having waitstaff maneuver in a wheelchair from the outside into your restaurant and then to the bathrooms to get a feel for what it’s like to be unable to walk.

For the record, Gambaro doesn’t care whether the large-print menu you give her is decorative like your regular ones. She just wants to be able to make her own selections and not end up ordering something she normally wouldn’t simply because she can’t see the options.

“Restaurants should keep in mind that when groups of people choose a place to eat, if one person in the party with a disability cannot or will not go to a particular restaurant because of inaccessibility, the entire group will go elsewhere,” said Beloungy. “Accessibility is good for everyone.” **WR**

## Disability Etiquette Tips

DBTAC offers the following Disability Etiquette Tips in their handy brochure “Access to Restaurants” which can be ordered by calling 800-949-4232

- Speak directly to the individual you are addressing, not to a companion or sign language interpreter. Never shout at a person. Speak in a normal tone of voice.
- When you meet someone with a vision disability, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. If conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
- Listen attentively when talking with people who have difficulty speaking, and wait for them to finish. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers or a nod of the head. Never pretend to understand; instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond.
- Service animals are working animals, not pets. Do not pet, feed or distract them.
- If needed, describe people with disabilities using “person-first language” (e.g., a person who is blind, not a blind person). Avoid words/phrases like handicapped, victim and confined to a wheelchair.



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