

Maple Seed Enterprises

Messages with Meaning • Designs with a Difference



Paving the Way for Visitors with Disabilities

For many of us, the word "accessibility" brings to mind images of accessible parking spaces, ramps and electronic door openers. But creating a welcoming environment for visitors with disabilities, involves more than simply removing the architectural barriers to our parks and museums. Before visitors step foot in the door of a facility, they are "sizing us up" by reading our brochures, calling for information, or checking out our websites. Their experiences during this process will at least be a factor in how they plan to spend their leisure time. Here are some ways that you can send a positive message about the inclusiveness and accessibility of your park or museum.

Develop a basic understanding of various disabilities, the implications, and the accommodations that might be needed by people with those disabilities. Read information or attend training that provides a general overview of working with people with disabilities and disability etiquette.

Be prepared to provide accommodations to visitors that request them. Consider ahead of time the possible accommodations that might be needed by prospective visitors to your park or museum. Secure the resources for making such accommodations or having assistive devices available if needed. Develop contacts with people with disabilities and service providers. These people can be great resources when a question arises about accessibility. Learn who to call to request sign language interpreters, to get materials printed in Braille, or to purchase assistive listening devices.

Learn how to use the telecommunications relay service. People who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, or who have a speech-related disability may contact your park or museum through the use of the telecommunications relay service. The person with the disability uses a TTY to make the call and the relay service operator translates the message to voice over the phone.

Provide access information on brochures, flyers and other publicity. When you develop event brochures, provide the visitor with information on the accessibility of the event or location and on how to request accommodations. A simple statement like this one is helpful.

"If you have questions concerning access or wish to request accommodations for a disability please contact (insert name and contact information including an e-mail address or TTY number if available)."

Make sure your website is accessible. Many web designers are unaware that how they design a site can in fact exclude people with disabilities from accessing it. People who are blind access websites by using a software application called a screen reader. Websites should be designed in such a way as to be accessible to this adaptive technology. There are also other considerations that need to be considered to make sites usable by people with disabilities.

Have alternate formats of printed materials ready. Prepare a few copies of frequently used brochures in alternate formats such as Braille, audiotape, or in large print (18 point font size). An individual with a disability may also request to have the information in digital format on a diskette. So that printed materials can easily be provided upon request, it is helpful to save a text version of each brochure in a separate file on a computer.

Once the request is made the brochure can be printed in the requested font size or saved to a disk and sent to a vendor to be translated into Braille. Here is a sample statement for inclusion on printed materials:

"If you need to request this information in an accessible format (Braille, digital, tape or large print) please contact (insert name and contact information including an e-mail address or TTY number)."

By taking these simple steps, you will set a positive tone for the visitor's experience—a tone that allows visitors with disabilities to have a relaxing and enjoyable visit. After all, that is the primary reason we all visit parks and museums.

For more information, check out the resources listed below.

Online Resources:

National Center on Accessibility

www.indiana.edu/~nca/

Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design

www.si.edu/opa/accessibility/exdesign/start.htm

Tip Sheet on Using Telecommunication Relay Services:

www.netac.rit.edu/publication/tipsheet/relaya.html

Information on Web Accessibility:

www.webaim.org