

# The ABCs of ADA-Compliant Conferences



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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a Federal civil rights law designed to protect persons with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination in employment (Title I), ensuring equal access to services of state and local governments (Title II), and ensuring equal access to “places of public accommodations” (12 categories of private businesses and/or non-profit organizations) (Title III). ADA compliance is not only an issue for employers in hiring decisions, it’s also important to consider when planning conferences and meetings.

Planning “accessible conferences” involves focusing on all aspects of your meeting, from choosing a site through promotion, registration, presentations and handouts. This includes not only selecting ADA compliant facilities, but also ensuring the material presented is accessible to all attendees.

One major area of equal access under the ADA that’s not often considered is “effective communication” for sight and hearing impaired individuals. Organizations will likely be required to provide materials, if requested, in Braille, as well as providing auxiliary aids and services for hearing impaired persons, such as qualified sign language interpreters.

Below are some guidelines for not running afoul of the ADA in your next meeting. This area of the law is often fact-driven, making each case different. In general, however, the following guidelines will be helpful.

## CHOOSING AN ACCESSIBLE SITE

When choosing a site for a meeting or conference, the meeting planner should determine whether or not any barriers to accessibility exist. The site visit must include checking entrance and interior doorways, parking lots, corridors, stairways, elevators, sleeping rooms, meeting rooms, restrooms, dining facilities, telephones, water fountains, temperature controls, light and emergency controls, and the fitness center. In addition, the accessibility of any outside entertainment and transportation services offered to participants must be checked. For all participants, the time necessary to move from one session to another must be considered and allowed for in the agenda. For example, do participants have to change floors to get to lunch or to the next session? Are the distance and route between meeting rooms traversable for all?

The staff of the hotel or conference center must also be educated about issues of accessibility. The conference planner should provide the site staff with as much information as possible about individuals with disabilities.

## When choosing a site for a meeting or conference, the meeting planner should determine whether or not any barriers to accessibility exist.

The goal of the conference planner is to select a conference setting that allows a person with a disability to move about the conference site freely and independently and participate in and benefit from the conference program. To achieve this goal, the following points should be considered during the site visit.

### MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals with mobility impairments, including those using wheelchairs, crutches, canes, or walkers:

- Accessibility of main entrances and doorways wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and three-wheel carts of varying sizes
- Capability to provide appropriately graded ramping in inaccessible areas
- Level surfaces
- Accessible restrooms (including wide doors and adequate space, unobstructed sinks of appropriate height, grab bars, etc.)
- Wheelchair accessible registration table
- Accessible electrical outlets and closet rods of appropriate height in guest rooms

### VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals who are partially sighted or blind:

- Well-lit areas, adjustable lighting
- Obstacle-free environment (i.e., free of protruding objects that cannot be detected easily)
- Large, tactile directions for equipment, elevators, and restrooms; elevator numbers written in Braille or raised print
- Dog runs in or near the hotel or convention center for guide-dog users
- Appropriate accommodations in guest rooms

### HEARING IMPAIRMENTS

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals who are hard of hearing or who are deaf:

- Guest rooms equipped with alternative emergency devices such as visual alarms and indicators, [e.g., flashing lights on doors, telephones, and as fire alarms]

- An available telecommunication device for the deaf (TDD)
- Dog runs for hearing-dog users

## PROMOTION AND REGISTRATION

Conference planners should arrange for all promotional material to be available in alternative formats, such as Braille or computer disk. In all conference material, make participants aware that accommodations can be made for a variety of needs. The registration form must ask whether any special assistance is needed, and should set a reasonable deadline for requesting any ADA accommodation. Examples include statements such as the following:

- If you have a disability and require special assistance, please inform [conference planner] by attaching your requirements to this form or call [conference planner.]
- If you have a disability and may require accommodation in order to fully participate in this activity, please check here. You will be contacted by someone from our staff to discuss your specific needs.

Designate someone on staff to handle all issues concerning accommodations for participants with disabilities during the meeting. Have this person available to assist in room registration and site orientation.

### SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AND MEALS

When planning social functions and meals, meeting planners should:

- Include personal assistants and interpreters in the estimated number of participants
- Make adequate provisions for seating, allowing all participants to sit in the same area. Do not place persons in wheelchairs, or those who use walkers or dog guides on the fringes
- Avoid buffet lines; they can be particularly difficult for persons with mobility or visual impairments.

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

The meeting planner must work with invited speakers and presenters to ensure that presentations are accessible to persons with disabilities. Attention to the following points will enhance the accessibility of conference presentations.

#### All Participants with Disabilities

- Choose well-lit and easily accessible meeting rooms
- Control background noise to the greatest extent possible
- Choose a meeting room with good acoustics and an auxiliary sound system, if possible
- Provide written materials in a variety of formats, such as raised print, large print, Braille, audio cassette, and computer disks

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- Instruct the presenter(s) to include only the key points of the presentation on overheads or slides. Be sure they are completely legible, with large print and sharp, contrasting colors
- Ask the speaker(s) to accompany conference materials, including presentations and handouts, with a complete verbal description. If slides, overheads, videos, or other visual aids are used, the speaker must describe them orally. Ask presenter(s) to provide a copy of presentation materials well in advance to allow for large print or Braille transcription.
- Check for the special needs of presenters with disabilities. Special needs may include ramping or podium requests, a reverse interpreter, an orientation and mobility specialist, or guide for a person with limited vision.

The following issues are particularly relevant to the accessibility of presentations for persons with visual impairments or those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

### Visual Impairments

- Meet with participants and show them the site by explaining the layout, identifying the location of amenities and exits, and walking through the meeting area with them. Help them to find seating in the meeting room.
- Have a staff member or volunteer available to sit with the participant and describe the presentations, if the participant so desires.
- Design all exhibits so that they may be touched and/or heard. Always provide an alternative to solely visual exhibits.
- Caution presenter(s) against relying solely on oral presentations and gestures to illustrate a point, or using visual points of reference [e.g., “here” or “there.”]

### Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Allow for preferred seating, usually in front of the speaker and interpreter, away from heating and air conditioning units, hallways, and other “noisy” areas
- Check that window coverings are adjustable to reduce or remove glare
- Arrange for qualified, professional interpreters, trained in the preferred communication style, for example, American Sign Language, Signed English, or Cued-Speech. Use a local or national agency or organization to obtain interpreters.
- Investigate the possibility of real-time captioning for large group meetings
- Arrange for an adequate number of interpreters for meetings, meals, and social events. At least two interpreters must be available for any meeting longer than two hours. Have an additional interpreter available for registration.

Generally, the type of auxiliary aid or service necessary to ensure effective communication with sight and hearing impaired individuals will vary in accordance with the particular needs of the individual, as well as the nature, length, and complexity of the communication [i.e., presentation]. The event planner should communicate directly with the individual(s) requesting an accommodation to determine what type of auxiliary aids or services are needed. The ultimate decision of what measures to take, however, rests with the organization.

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## Today's Membership Department (continued from pg 18)

- Average number of messages posted per member
- Most active members based on contributions or page views
- Number of first time posters to discussion groups
- Number of member directory searches and/or connections established
- Ratio of lurkers to contributors
- Total member engagement score

Wondering how you compare to other associations? [The 2014 Community Benchmarking Report](#), which was compiled by Marketing General and commissioned by Higher Logic, compares the member engagement results from over 300 associations. Download a free copy of this report at [www.higherlogic.com/benchmarking](http://www.higherlogic.com/benchmarking).