

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

BY JAMES E. PETERS

Richard Shepard is one of the more than 62 million people over age 50 in the United States. Like many others in this category, he is well-educated, a working professional and has reached a point in his life where he is interested in and able to have the better things. He is dating a woman and would enjoy going to the finer restaurants in Washington, DC, where he lives. The only difficulty is that both he and his companion use wheelchairs and most restaurants are unable to accommodate them.

Being an accessible hospitality business is rapidly becoming a competitive business advantage. It opens your doors to a larger market, provides a safer and more comfortable environment for all guests, and prepares businesses for the future demographic changes. Standards have been set for developing an accessible design. Just as important as the physical layout, however, is the attitude of staff; they should be well versed in "disability etiquette." Plus, making a restaurant accessible to the handicapped can earn substantial tax credits, and distinguish your restaurant in the reviews of newspaper and travel guides. Despite these benefits, many restaurants still remain inaccessible to millions of aging and disabled people.

Washingtonian magazine recently published a list of the city's top 50 reasonably priced restaurants. Shepard, who is program manager for the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped, surveyed the restaurants on the list and found:

- 42 out of 50 (84 percent) claim to have accessible interiors.
- 33 out of 50 (66 percent) have accessible entrances.
- 18 out of 50 (36 percent) have accessible restrooms.

- Three out of 50 (six percent) have wheelchair-accessible telephones.
- Not one has accessible off-street parking.
- Not one has a Braille menu.

Unless a person in a wheelchair finds it necessary to use a restroom or a telephone, they can be accommodated in two out of three restaurants. But is it true hospitality to deny guests such basic needs?

Some people believe that the disabled population will form the next civil rights movement in this country. Federal and state legislation passed over the last two decades has removed many of the physical barriers people with disabilities faced in obtaining education and access to public institutions. Improved transportation and access to state and federal government buildings have permitted these special interest groups to lobby for themselves and their rights.

Frank Bowe, author of many books analyzing U.S. data, estimates that there are 36 million people in the country that report having some form of disability. Since many people are embarrassed to report a disability to a Census worker, Bowe notes that the number could be even higher. According to Bowe, 18 million of the disabled are under the age of 64, two million are institutionalized and the remaining 16 million are over 65.

AGING POPULATION. Changing demographics and improved medical technology are contributing to an increasingly older population. The Census Bureau reports that the population of 55- to 74-year-olds will increase by 11.1 million or a jump of 13 percent between now and the year 2000. This pop-

Disabled patrons need amenities like accessible facilities and Braille menus; they also deserve courtesy.

ulation has greater than \$500 billion dollars of income and represents 25 percent of consumer spending. Simmons Market Research Company found that this group also represents 80 percent of all vacation travel.

It is important to remember that as people age, they develop physical disabilities, especially with hearing, vision and mobility. As the number of older Americans increases they will join the ranks of those already lobbying for accessibility to public and private facilities. The American Association of Retired Persons, representing more than 26 million people, has developed the Citizen Representation Program to initiate community-based "Older Consumer Action Panels." These panels work with local businesses in defining special needs of the older consumer, and expand the potential market of the business community.

The owner of a responsible hospitality operation who wants to attract the growing and lucrative market of aging and disabled people must assess the current operations to determine if it is

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accessible to people with special accommodation needs. Failure to prepare now for the future will lead to lost opportunities to expand and grow. A list

of resources for developing accessible designs can be obtained by contacting *Restaurant Business*.

THE DISABLED. John P.S. Salmen, AIA, director of the Technology & Information Department of the American Hotel & Motel Association (AH&MA), identifies four categories of disabilities: mobility, sensory, dexterity and developmental. Through its Executive Engineers Committee, the AH&MA has been working for several years to establish an effective level of accessibility throughout the lodging industry. According to Salmen, facility design has taken into account the four basic disability groups.

Mobility impairments can occur for any variety of reasons. Birth defects, accidents, disease or the aging process can hinder a person's mobility to the

extent that they need to use a wheelchair, walker or cane. Steps, changes in floor levels, tight corners, narrow aisles and protrusions can make it difficult or impossible for a person with a mobility impairment to maneuver.

People without any physical disability may also be hindered by these same obstacles. For instance, young children or a person with a baby carriage or stroller may avoid going to a business that has limited accessibility.

Sensory impairments include visual and hearing disabilities. Unlike mobility impairments, it can sometimes be difficult to detect when a person has hearing or visual impairments.

A person with a hearing impairment may request to be seated in a well-lighted area or say "Let me put on my glasses so I can hear you better" because they depend upon lip-reading to understand a person who is speaking. This is often true with the older guest too, who may be unaware of or embarrassed to admit hearing problems.

Dexterity impairments involve difficulty in manipulating objects because of arthritis or nervous disorders such as paralysis or multiple sclerosis.

Developmental disorders fall into several categories, including mental retardation, mental illness and learning disorders. While it might be obvious why a blind guest requests a server to read the menu, other guests may do the same because of dyslexia or other reading disabilities.

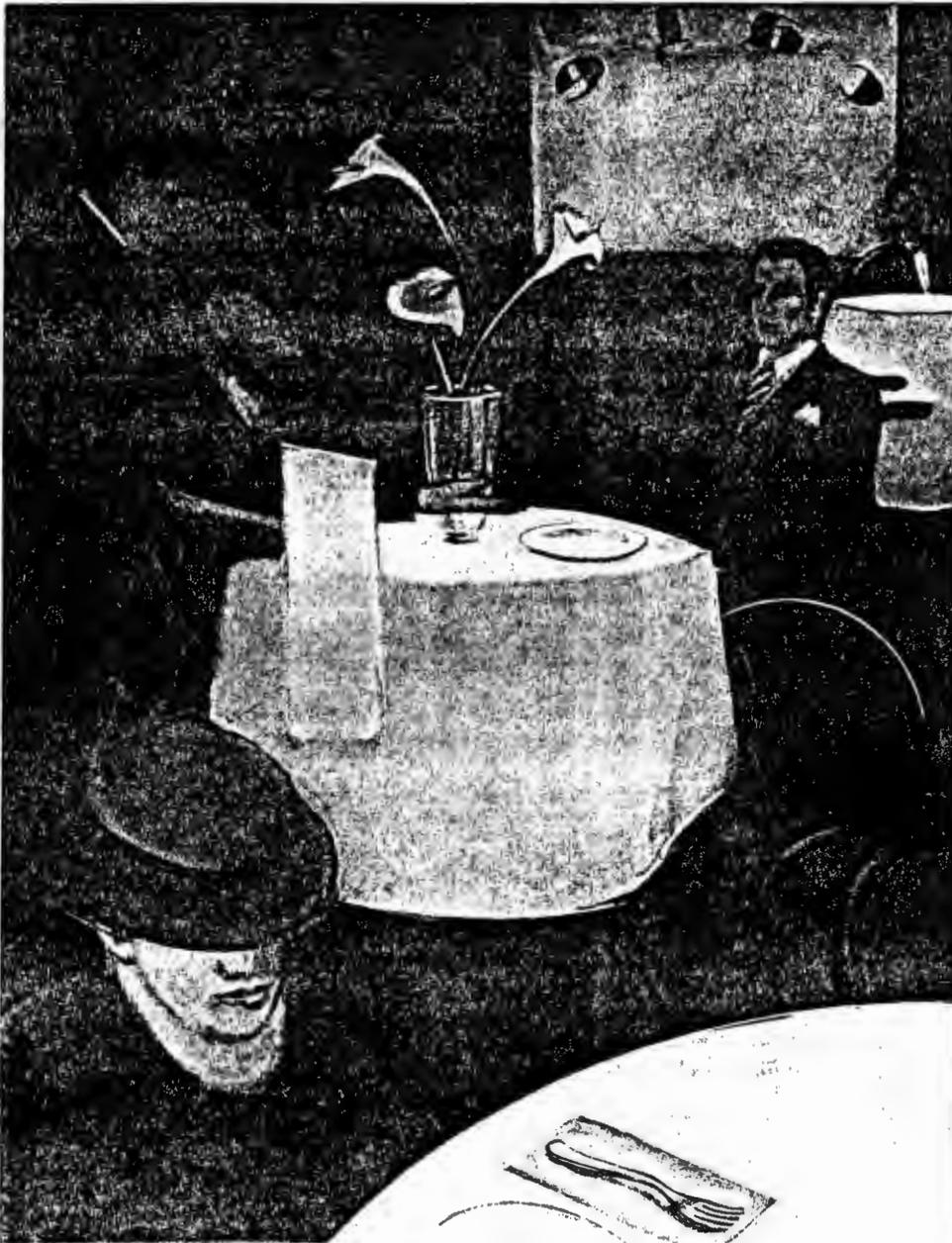
Federal and state laws requiring new buildings to have accessible parking, ramps, and accessible restrooms have made it easier for persons using wheelchairs to go to more places than ever before. In recent years, some not so obvious changes are beginning to break down other barriers.

In California, where there are 200,000 deaf people, a new state law requiring equal access for the hearing impaired broke new ground with the nation's first public telephone service for the deaf. This system will allow deaf people to make restaurant and hotel reservations.

Ten other states have legislation which allows deaf people to obtain telecommunication devices free or at a nominal charge. A directory of businesses with special equipment is available. The directory contains advertisements for hotels, airlines and other businesses tapping this market.

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ness is not only becoming a regulatory requirement, it is rapidly becoming a competitive business advantage. Of the 21 largest circulation newspapers in the country, 11 currently list whether or not a restaurant is accessible. Out of the remaining 10, only one does not plan on adopting the policy in the near future.

The Georgia Hospitality & Travel

Association (GHTA), in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Human Resources, publishes the *Blue Book: A Guide to Accessible Lodging & Dining* each year, listing all foodservice and lodging businesses within the state that are accessible. According to Tom Phillips, vice president of communications for GHTA, association members are very pleased with the booklet,

and the publication has "influenced operators to upgrade their standards to comply with the guidelines and obtain approval from the state to be included in the next publication."

The American Automobile Association (AAA) identifies accessible hospitality facilities in its *1987 Travel Guidebook* with the handicapped symbols

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DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

The National Easter Seal Society distributes several informative booklets about "disability etiquette." Some of this information was developed into a brochure by the National Restaurant Association. The following is a compilation of information contained in these and other pamphlets.

When talking with a person who has a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion.

Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel like it, but wait until your offer is accepted *before* you help, and listen to any instructions.

Treat adults in a manner befitting adults. Call a person by his or her first name only when extending that familiarity to all others present. Do not patronize people in wheelchairs by patting them on the head.

Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions, such as "See you later" or "Got to be running along," that seem to relate to the person's disability.

When planning events involving persons with disabilities consider their needs ahead of time. If an insurmountable barrier exists, let them know about it prior to the event.

Because a disabling condition may or may not be handicapping, use the word "disability" rather than the word "handicap." When speaking of the disabled, place the person *before* the disability out of respect for individual uniqueness and worth. Say "person with a disability" rather than "disabled person."

Give whole, unhurried attention when you are talking to a person who has difficulty speaking. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting, be patient rather than speak for the person. When necessary, ask short questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Repeat what you understand. The person's reactions will clue you in and guide you

to a better understanding.

WHEELCHAIR USERS

Do not seat a person with a disability at an out-of-the-way table. Suggest a table that will provide ample aisle space or ask the patron where he would like to sit.

When talking with a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, place yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level.

When giving directions to a person in a wheelchair, consider distance, weather conditions and physical obstacles such as stairs, curbs and hills.

Be aware of accessibility to parking, entrances, bathrooms, bars, coat checks and telephones.

Cerebral palsy is a condition which affects muscle coordination and it is often helpful to cut the food before it is served, and have extra straws available for beverages. Frequent speech disturbance also goes along with this condition. Staff members who are not aware of this problem can mistakenly believe these people are intoxicated; rather than cut off drinks, the manager should approach the individual and explain the concern. If you are frank, the situation can be resolved with a minimum of fuss.

Do not place no-smoking sections on separate levels. Often a person in a wheelchair has other health problems which are complicated by smoke.

DEAF OR HEARING IMPAIRED

To get the attention of a person who has a hearing problem, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. Not all persons with hearing impairments can lip-read. Those who do will rely on facial expressions and other body language to aid in understanding. Show consideration by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping your hands, cigarettes and food

away from your mouth. Shouting won't help; written notes will.

Seat sign language users in well-lighted areas.

Remember to address the person with the disability and not someone who may be serving as an interpreter.

BLIND OR VISUALLY IMPAIRED

When talking to a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself. Speak in a normal tone of voice, indicate when you move from one place to another and let it be known when the conversation is at an end.

Offer to read the menu, indicating the prices. If possible, have large print or Braille menus. Often local associations for the visually impaired will prepare Braille menus at little or no cost.

Seat people with visual impairments in well-lighted areas. Keep some small, flashlight magnifiers available.

Laws require that seeing eye dogs be allowed into foodservice establishments. Be sure employees are aware of this. Do not feed or distract the attention of the dogs.

Keep all areas well-lighted, especially stairwells and steps, and mark edges in a contrasting color. Mark restrooms in large, clear letters. Standard symbol for the men's restroom door is an equilateral triangle with a vertex pointing upward. The edges of the triangle should be one foot long. The women's room symbol should be a circle and should be one foot in diameter.

Wall signs and posterboards should be well-lighted, and should have a distinctive border. Keep them at eye level as much as possible.

Tell the guest when you have set something down. Ask the person if he would like you to identify the location of foods on the plate. If so, describe the placement in relation to a clock. The location of the condiments should also be explained.

When handing money to a person who is blind, separate the bills into denominations.

bol. The 6,100 restaurants listed in the guide have to pass an inspection which complies with the standards established by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) for hospitality businesses. According to Robert Sheron, supervisor of inspections at the AAA National Headquarters, 27.5 million copies of the guidebook are distributed each year.

A SERVICE FOR ALL. Marriott Corporation is an industry leader in developing accessible hospitality facilities, winning many awards for their newer properties. James A. DiLuigi, director of technical information systems for

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Marriott, attributes increased corporate awareness to the participation of vice president Al Rankin, who is on the board of directors of the Center for Barrier-Free Environments. His involvement on the board made Rankin realize the potential market that was being ignored.

DiLuigi points out that "by making our hotels and restaurants accessible for people with special accommodations needs, we also make them safer and more comfortable for our other guests as well as reducing liability from accidents." All Marriott hotel guest rooms are being equipped with slip-resistant tubs and tiles, grab bars, and wider doors. By setting up the dining area with continental seating, there are wider aisles, and having chairs with arms makes it not only more comfortable for non-disabled guests, but also makes any table accessible for a wheelchair.

STANDARDS. In 1961, the American National Standards Institute, (ANSI) an organization established to coordinate voluntary national standards, issued ANSI Standard number A117.1

entitled "The American National Standard Specifications for Making Buildings and Facilities Accessible to and Usable by the Physically Handicapped." The ANSI Standard was the first to establish such design specifications. The Standard was adopted or incorporated into many early state architectural barriers acts and became the standard for accessibility regulations of many federal agencies.

Revisions were made in the ANSI Standard in 1971 and again in 1980. The American Hotel & Motel Association (AH&MA) has recently published an interpretation paper on ANSI A117.1 for new hotels and motels. The 15-page document establishes a level of accessibility that is reasonable in new hotel construction.

AH&MA also realized that during the renovation process in existing facilities, a reasonable level of accessibility should be approached. For that purpose, AH&MA plans to develop a process whereby existing hospitality properties can take advantage of the network of disabled people in their local community, plus a prioritization schedule to develop shared renovation plans that will achieve success.

Besides opening your doors to a larger market, providing a safer and more comfortable environment for all your guests and preparing for future demographic changes, making your property accessible brings a substantial tax credit. Section 190 of the Tax Reform Act of 1986 allows up to \$35,000 annually in income tax savings for costs of site improvement.

ATTITUDE BARRIERS. Removing physical barriers is the easy part of making your property accessible. Sensitizing and changing the attitudes of staff is more difficult. AH&MA is also developing a staff training seminar/video presentation that will assist staff in understanding the needs of disabled and elderly guests. Most communities, however, have groups representing the disabled population which can train your staff about some basic issues of responsible hospitality for guests with special accommodation needs.

The most important element of serving the guest with a disability is attitude. Staff training can eliminate negative feelings and develop awareness of the needs of the disabled. All staff should be prepared to have an open dialogue when meeting a person with a disability and with whom you have no previous experience. Always display

an attitude of willingness to serve.

The accompanying sidebar gives important tips on "disability etiquette."

By definition, a characteristic—any characteristic—is a limitation. A white house, for example, is a limited house; it cannot be green or blue or red; it is limited to being white. Likewise every characteristic—those we regard as strengths as well as those we regard as weaknesses—is a limitation. Each one freezes us to some extent into a mold; each restricts to some degree the range of possibility, of flexibility and of opportunity as well.

Many human characteristics are obvious limitations; others are not so obvious. Poverty, ignorance, old age, blindness, deafness or a physical disability that impairs mobility are obvious, or seem to be obvious, limitations.

Jack Hofsiss won a Tony Award in 1979 for his direction of *The Elephant Man*. Two years ago he broke his neck when he dove into a swimming pool, and is now paralyzed. Yet he continues to direct plays; there his disability is not a limitation.

VETO VOTE. As a celebrity, Hofsiss is someone most restaurateurs would welcome as a guest. He would undoubtedly bring others with him. Yet if a restaurant is inaccessible, it is a limited restaurant. And not only will it lose the business of people like Jack Hofsiss, and the many millions of people who have similar disabilities, but it will lose the business of the nondisabled friends and relatives of these people. If one person in a group has a disability, that person can influence the decision of where the group will go to dinner.

Ted Balestreri, owner of the Sardine Factory, and former president of the National Restaurant Association, believes that restaurants will design packages appealing to the growing number of older consumers. He suggests the development of new menus to meet their special dietary needs, early evening specials to conform with their schedules and development of transportation to bring them in.

"This is an opportunity to expand the horizons of the restaurant industry to serve the public," says Balestreri. "We should not limit the opportunity of the aging and disabled population to continue to enjoy the benefits of our industry." B

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