

EXAMPLES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL & PHYSICAL ACCESS

Even ringing to up to check accessibility can be fraught with frustration. In April 2013 I decided to attend a conference at the Gold Coast. I decided that it would be easier for me to stay at the same hotel as the conference venue. To stay at a cheaper option would have meant paying taxis to and from the venue so I decided that it was more economic and safer to stay where the conference was being held.

So I phoned the hotel to enquire price and explained my needs and deficits – the girl in reservations was quite abrupt and impatient with me. I rang a few days later to book the room and enquire if I could get a better room rate. I was told if I paid in full by a certain date that I could get 15% so I left it a few days, rang back, paid the booking in full and was given a booking number. Most people could accept that all was in place but with my previous experiences I checked again a few days before I was due to go down to the Gold Coast only to be told that there was no such booking or booking number! After many phone calls to my bank and to the hotel it was sorted up in a couple of days so it was complete the morning I left for the hotel. So you can imagine I went to the hotel in fear and trepidation of just how I would be treated in person and wasn't disappointed as the same rudeness continued.

The Concierge and maintenance men (the shower was broken in the accessible room) were delightful and the hotel started to redeem itself. The improvement was short lived – the last day of my stay (I was there 3 days and 2 nights) I went to the front desk to finalise my account. I was waited patiently in the hotel's loyalty line and was ignored for 20 minutes as customer after customer was served then sent on their way – if it wasn't for the kindness of a complete stranger who said that I was next, I would still be sitting there!!! Needless to say, I was very discouraged as a person with disabilities who had been looking forward to a lovely weekend away only to be disappointed!! This is a classic example of a psychological barrier to accessibility. One of my major frustrations is being treated like an idiot when putting things in place to make my life easier.

Later that year I decided that I would visit my younger daughter, who at that time, lived in Darwin and loves it and wants to show me why, so I booked a flight to Darwin 27 June returning 1 July so I thought I would give hotel loyalty another try. I was thrilled to find I had a choice of three. I rang one of the hotels and was told that there were NO accessible rooms, so then rang another hotel within the group and a young fellow

with quite a heavy accent told me that none of their hotels had a HANDICAP room. I explained TWICE that the word HANDICAP was not acceptable, he didn't seem to understand the offensiveness of using such a word, so the third time he used it I got his attention when I called him a RETARD!! He was offended and said I was rude and I said that I found the word HANDICAP rude and offensive. Maybe the universe was trying to get me try another chain of hotels as I did, the hotel wasn't perfect but they were responsive to my complaints.

I have given up with the hotel telephone staff because they automatically think I am drunk and don't treat me well! I had surgery on my vocal chords in 2005 and my voice had improved to almost perfect, so I thought.

Since my experiences of staying at hotels, I have always offered to do an access assessment/report – sometimes it is just a small change which can make an enormous difference to a person with disability. To illustrate the detail I put into a report to this particular hotel chain, I start at the arrival at the hotel (I have changed the name of staff members);

Upon arrival Joseph took my wheelchair out of the taxi and very roughly opened it up (please remember that a wheelchair is to a person who is unable to walk is very precious – I could almost hear my chair cry out in pain by the way it was treated!), my wheelchair is an extension of me. Then my chair was brought to the passenger side of the taxi, my brakes were NOT put on and my seat cushion was upside down. Speaking up to Joseph these things were rectified but had he had training this would have been done before presenting the wheelchair to me. I transferred into my chair and was pushed by Joseph up the curb cut-out and he did not notice the tiny ridge so my front wheels became caught and I was almost flung out of the wheelchair.

Ian spoke to me as I entered the foyer, so I put my feet down to speak with him but Joseph kept pushing my chair almost snapping me off at the ankles!! I made another mental note that the concierge staff definitely need training when it comes to communicating with a person with disability. All this treatment occurred before I had even got to my appointment with the Customer Liaison Manager so I was feeling quite

vulnerable and frazzled – not the impression I'm sure the hotel wants to make to potential customers.

I am a person with incomplete quadriplegia and feel that the front of house hotel staff could do with some training in how to treat persons with a disability. In August 2007 our Federal Government ratified United Nations Convention of Human Rights for Persons with Disability (CRPD) and I felt like Joseph had forgotten I was human – I refer <http://www.disabilityrightsnow.org.au> People with disability deserve to be treated with dignity – not patronised.

Joseph just dumped me on the 6th level – he just pushed me out of the elevator with no explanation. I had to ask him where I was and why I was there. I then met with Customer Liaison Manager, who kindly showed me one of two accessible rooms. I was impressed that the heavy hydraulic hinge had been removed off the room door. The bathroom was well appointed and very usable. Perhaps my only suggestion would be to remove the bathroom door altogether. In the accessible room at another of your hotels, the bathroom there did not have a door on the bathroom making it very accessible. Another suggestion that I would like to make is that the hotel group could purchase a 'self propelled with swing away foot-plates' shower chair for under \$1000 and hire it out per night for people with disability – it would pay for itself in no time and it could be an extra service the hotel could offer. I use a K-Care shower chair at home.

Some more observations I would like to bring to the hotel's notice is the bed looks very voluptuous but that extra fluffy padding makes the bed difficult to transfer safely onto the bed. At the hotel in Darwin the bed was quite firm (when one has limited movement soft beds make you feel like a 'beetle stuck on its back' if the bed is too soft!) and could the hotel also ask housekeeping NOT to wind the telephone receiver cable around the telephone – it looks neat and tidy but when one answers it from a wheelchair the telephone ends up on the floor. The beds in the Accessible Rooms at the Embassy Suites in New York, Charleston West Virginia and Washington DC were/are fabulous. I know that the Embassy Suites throughout the USA have only a 4 star rating but they are of a 7 star standard for persons with disability.

The Customer Liaison Manager then showed me around the hotel area – café and bar in the reception area. He was personally made aware of some accessibility shortfalls like the lack of signage to access the café and bar area via ramp behind lifts, the ridge between tiled and carpet areas and the heavy hydraulic hinge to the accessible toilet facilities on that level. Removing the heavy hydraulic hinge would make it easier for entering but on leaving the area would leave the door open. I would like to recommend a soft/light hydraulic hinge so the door would close quietly upon leaving.

As I mentioned to the Customer Liaison Manager that People with Disability are an untapped market, with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (formerly Disability Care), more and more people with disability will be able to travel. From my personal experience I sing the praises of the Embassy Suites in the US and would like to be able to do the same for hotels Australia-wide but with my experiences of Darwin and a Gold Coast hotel I can't do this and I'm sadden by this. With just a few small physical changes and staff training your hotels could become the leaders in this new industry.

This report was also received quite favourably but it has to go through the hotel hierarchy before it can be acted on. Another frustration of mine. Believe me when I tell you that I don't like being frustrated but to avoid that I would have to resign to go nowhere.

I always sign my letters 'with love', it always makes me re-read what I have written to make sure that I haven't been offensive and that it is coming from a place of love and understanding.

There is a lot to get your mind around in the field of disability – nowhere is perfect, so people with disability often make do with what is available. When you become disabled you also become very adaptable – people who are born with a disability tend to be more accepting of the status quo as they don't have previous experience of what it could be.

Meriel Stanger June 2014 Brisbane mstanger@powerup.com.au