Sorenson

Unlocking the Potential of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Communities

EBOOK

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Introduction

In today's interconnected world, inclusivity is not just a buzzword it's a necessity. Accessibility goes beyond legal compliance and social good; it's about creating an environment where everyone can thrive, especially those in the Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) communities.

This eBook is your insider handbook for practicing active accessibility. It's not just about understanding the importance of accessibility; it's about learning how to implement it in a way that genuinely engages and supports the DHH communities. By embracing this approach, your business will unlock a talent pool of skilled, dedicated employees while fostering loyalty among a significant customer base.

Accessibility translates to growth, positive brand perception, and a competitive edge.

So, how do you begin to truly understand the DHH communities and implement an accessibility strategy that goes beyond compliance? We're glad you asked.

In this eBook, we'll provide you with the tools and insights to move from passive to active accessibility, making your business a leader in inclusion and social responsibility.

- Addressing Common Misconceptions: Debunk myths surrounding the Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) communities.

- Exploring the Impact of Ignorance: Understand the negative consequences of not addressing accessibility needs for those who interact with your business.

- Providing Actionable Solutions: Learn practical steps to make your business more inclusive and accessible.

Understanding the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Communities

The Hearing Loss Association of America estimates that over 48 million Americans have some hearing loss.[1]

According to the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS), about 3.6% of the U.S. population, or about 11 million individuals (about twice the population of Arizona), consider themselves deaf or have serious difficulty hearing.[2]

These statistics underscore how numerous DHH experiences are in the U.S. and globally. While these numbers are staggering, they don't highlight the rich history and vibrant culture of DHH communities because it's about more than just difficulty hearing; it's a living and breathing culture and community.

Part 1: Deaf Community (Signers)

The deaf community is diverse, with people from varied races, ethnicities, cultures, languages, and religions. They foster a culture centered on visual communication and a distinct shared identity.

American Sign Language (ASL) is a cornerstone of this culture in the U.S., recognized as a complete and complex language by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). With its unique grammar, syntax, and nuanced facial expressions, ASL forms a visual language that millions use every day to communicate with the world around them.

How to Engage:

- Ask About Communication Preferences: Never assume a one-size-fits-all approach. Always ask the individual about their preferred communication method.

- Provide ASL Interpreters: Ensure that your business can offer ASL interpreters for meetings, events, and customer interactions.

- Respect Deaf Culture: Acknowledge and incorporate the cultural nuances of the deaf community into your business practices by hiring a consultant to review best practices.

Part 2: Hard-of-Hearing and Late-Deafened Individuals (Non-Signers)

Not all individuals with hearing loss use sign language. Many hard of hearing or late-deafened individuals rely on hearing aids, cochlear implants, or other assistive technologies. Their needs differ, and businesses must adapt accordingly.

How to Engage:

- Use Assistive Technologies: Invest in devices like hearing loops, captioning services, and real-time transcription apps.

- Offer Clear Written Communication: Provide written summaries of meetings and ensure all audio content is accompanied by transcripts or captions.

- Be Mindful of Noise Levels: Ensure your environment is conducive to effective communication by minimizing background noise and providing quiet spaces.

Did you know?

ASL is not equivalent to English and is not a universal language. It's a unique language mainly in use by DHH communities in America and parts of Canada.[3]

Common Misconceptions

Bridging the communication gap with the Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) communities starts with dismantling common misconceptions. When you know better, you can do better in your social impact and business accessibility strategy.

While this isn't a comprehensive list of misconceptions, it's a great place to start on your journey to better understanding the DHH communities and becoming more inclusive in your professional and personal life.

- **Deafness is Not Unitary:** Deaf communities are incredibly diverse, with people identifying across a spectrum that includes Deaf, Deaf Blind, Deaf Disabled, hard of hearing, and late Deafened. Every person's experience with deafness is unique how they become deaf, their level of hearing, their age of onset, their educational background, their communication methods, and their cultural identity. How individuals identify themselves is profoundly personal and might reflect their connection with the DHH communities.[4]

- **Focus on Accessibility:** While some DHH individuals may not use sign language, ensuring accessibility is vital. Businesses must offer captioning of videos and audio, provide written transcripts, and use visual aids whenever possible. Having a pen and paper ready for a deaf customer or your phone available with a speech-to-text app is a great way to show a commitment to clear communication for everyone.[5]

- **Importance of Deaf Culture:** The deaf community has a rich cultural heritage with artistic expressions, values, and social norms. Recognizing and respecting this unique culture fosters a more inclusive environment. Many people who identify as part of this community use the capital D, Deaf, when referring to themselves instead of the lowercase d, deaf.[6]

- **Technology as a Bridge:** Advancements in technology offer exciting opportunities for communication. Consider offering real-time captioning services through apps, video conferencing with sign language interpreters, and investing in assistive listening devices for meetings or presentations.[7]

By moving beyond stereotypes and embracing these added considerations, businesses can build stronger relationships with the DHH community. Fostering inclusivity is not just a good practice it's smart business. It opens doors to a loyal and engaged customer base, enriches your brand image, and positions you as a leader in accessibility.

Did you know?

The term "hearing impaired" is offensive to and rejected by most of the DHH community. The term sets up the standard as "hearing" and anything different as substandard, damaged, or in need of fixing.[8]

The Impact of Ignorance and Lack of Accessibility

The DHH communities, despite a long history of discrimination and exclusion, have shown remarkable resilience. The challenges have been significant, from limited educational opportunities to barriers to employment.

Historically, DHH individuals were often isolated and denied access to education and employment opportunities, leading to widespread social and economic disadvantages.[9]

Despite progress, DHH individuals still encounter educational, employment, and social integration barriers.[10]

According to the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, 53% of DHH individuals are employed, compared to 75% of their hearing peers. Barriers to employment include a lack of access to sign language interpreters, captioning, and workplace accommodations.[11]

On your job posting, state that your business is inclusive ready, and will provide accommodations for deaf/hard of hearing applicants. Offer options for them to choose what they need — sign language interpreters, captions, etc.

It's critical that employers then follow through on providing those tools to enable effective communication. Even if a DHH candidate has a successful job interview, they can still face accommodation struggles within their new workplace, such as meetings, performance reviews, and other workplace interactions without communication accommodations.[12]

In classrooms dominated by spoken language users, crucial information passes unnoticed. Deaf students can miss nonverbal cues and incidental learning that happens through casual conversation. This creates a knowledge gap that can snowball over time, affecting not just academic achievement but also social development and self-esteem.

Research shows that only 2% of deaf children globally have access to education in sign language. Not having access to sign language is a leading cause of language deprivation, with lifelong effects such as underemployment, mental health struggles, and social challenges.[13]

Did you know?

Just because a deaf person can read lips/speak well does not mean they can hear well with hearing devices. It's essential for hearing people not to assume that a deaf person wearing hearing devices will understand 100% of a conversation.

The Value of Accessibility in Business

Understanding the importance of accessibility for our business is half the battle to ensure you are truly inclusive to DHH communities. Beyond human rights and social responsibility, robust accessibility solutions empower DHH individuals to take part fully in society. Imagine a doctor's appointment where vital information is conveyed from medical providers clearly through sign language interpreters or captions.

Accessibility empowers DHH individuals to reach their full potential personally and professionally. Additionally, legal frameworks like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensure equal access and opportunity.

Legal Frameworks

The legal framework serves as a foundation in the case of accessibility. Laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)[14] act as powerful equalizers to set a baseline for accessibility in many public and private spheres. The goal of these frameworks is for individuals with disabilities to avoid employment discrimination.

The ADA, for instance, includes requirements for reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities. Reasonable accommodations could be screen readers for individuals with visual disabilities and sign language interpreters for deaf employees.

Similarly, ADA requirements for accessible communication in certain government and businesses offering public accommodations could mean braille menus in restaurants, closed captioning on public televisions, and elevator buttons with raised lettering — all designed to remove communication barriers.

The Business Case for Accessibility

Going beyond compliance can yield significant benefits. An inclusive workforce enhances creativity and problem-solving, while an accessible customer base expands market reach and loyalty. A report by the Return on Disability Group found that companies leading in disability inclusion had an 89% higher retention rate for employees and were 72% more likely to capture new markets.[15]

Research from 2018's "Getting to Equal" report established a clear link: Companies embracing disability inclusion outperform their peers financially (revenue, net income, profit margin).

Beyond financials, a 2023 survey by Morning Consult revealed a robust consumer preference: 84% of Americans view companies positively for featuring disability inclusion in advertising, and 80% prefer to do business with them.[17]

By embracing and enhancing accessibility, companies can tap into a large and often neglected consumer base, potentially increasing their market share and boosting revenue. An example is Microsoft's inclusive design initiative, which has broadened its market and enhanced user engagement across its product lines, proving that accessibility can drive significant business growth.

To create an accessibility plan beyond compliance, organizations must incorporate new strategies that can adjust to the changing needs of a diverse customer base. This forward-looking approach uses advanced technology to improve interaction and accessibility at every stage, effectively enhancing the user experience.[18]

Did you know?

If you see people conversing in sign language and need to get past them, you can just walk through. This is culturally appropriate and the least disruptive action.

Solutions for Accessibility and Inclusivity

1. American Sign Language (ASL): Providing ASL interpreters can bridge communication gaps. ASL is a visual language with grammar and syntax distinct from English.[19]

2. Captioning: Offering real-time captions during meetings and presentations ensures that DHH individuals can follow along. Captioning is also beneficial for non-native speakers and individuals with learning disabilities.[20]

3. Assistive Technologies: Using devices and software that enhance hearing and communication. Sorenson solutions, such as video relay services (VRS) and video remote interpreting (VRI), can be practical examples.[21]

Did you know?

When using an interpreter to aid in communications, speak directly to the deaf person. Don't use "tell them" Or ask the interpreter questions. Interpreters support communication between the deaf and hearing person and should never take over the narrative.

Engaging the DHH Community

TALENT ACQUISITION

Recruiting DHH talent requires understanding where to look and how to attract the right candidates. Partnering with organizations that support DHH professionals, such as the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and Deaf Professional Network.[22] and platforms frequented by the DHH community, such as the National Deaf Center.[23]

RETENTION AND GROWTH

Supporting DHH employees' professional development ensures their retention and growth. Offering mentorship programs and career advancement opportunities are vital strategies. Providing access to professional development resources, such as training in ASL and leadership programs, helps DHH employees thrive.

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

Inclusive marketing and services build loyalty among DHH consumers. Ensuring your website, products, and customer service are accessible can significantly affect customer satisfaction. For example, Starbucks has introduced signing stores staffed by baristas who are fluent in ASL, creating a welcoming environment for DHH customers.[24]

Did you know?

Research estimates that only 10% of deaf people are born into deaf families.
The remaining 90% come from hearing families.[25]

Case Study: Salesforce Driving Success Through Accessibility

Salesforce, a leading customer relationship management (CRM) platform provider, exemplifies how a commitment to accessibility can benefit both business and society.

Their focus on inclusive design translates to a broader user base, a diverse workforce, and a positive brand image.[26]

Building Accessible Products:

- WCAG Compliance: Salesforce prioritizes accessibility by following Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA.27 This ensures their products, including the Salesforce platform and Lightning Experience, are usable by people with visual, auditory, motor, and cognitive disabilities. Users can use screen readers, keyboard navigation, and other assistive technologies for a seamless experience.
- Focus on Usability: Features like straightforward user interface (U.I.) design, keyboard accessibility, and screen magnification tools cater to diverse user needs. Accessible design not only benefits users with disabilities but also improves overall user experience.[28]

Fostering an Inclusive Workplace:

- Disability Recruitment: Salesforce actively seeks talent from the disability community, recognizing the value of diverse perspectives. They offer robust career development programs, creating equal opportunities for employees with disabilities.[29]
- Accessibility Support: A dedicated accessibility support desk aids both Salesforce employees and customers in building accessible environments within the platform. The accessibility support desk ensures that everyone can use the platform's full potential.[30]

Championing Accessibility Beyond Products:

- Partnerships for Change: Salesforce collaborates with organizations like Inclusively, using A.I. to enhance employee accessibility resources. This commitment extends beyond their internal operations and helps the broader tech industry.[31]
- Accessible Workspaces: Accessibility isn't limited to the digital realm. Salesforce considers accessibility in their physical offices, ensuring everyone can navigate and work comfortably. Disability-friendly spaces create a more inclusive work environment for their employees.[32]

The Success Equation:

- Salesforce's dedication to accessibility has yielded positive results[33].
- Increased Market Reach: Accessible products open doors to a broader customer base, expanding their market potential.
- Stronger Talent Pool: By actively recruiting individuals with disabilities, Salesforce taps into a diverse and talented workforce, fostering innovation.
- Enhanced Brand Reputation: Their commitment to inclusion strengthens their brand image as a leader in social impact and corporate responsibility.

Salesforce serves as a model for how accessibility can be a strategic advantage. By prioritizing inclusion, they cultivate a thriving business environment while positively affecting the world, and your business can, too!

Understanding the DHH community's needs and implementing accessibility measures are crucial to creating a more inclusive society.

This level of accessibility goes beyond legal compliance, it's about social responsibility and creating a more equitable world. Start by assessing your current accessibility measures, engaging with the DHH community, and implementing strategies to bring your brand beyond compliance to true accessibility.

Resources for Further Learning

To continue learning about the DHH community and become truly accessible, explore these resources:

- Books:
  1. "Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language" by Nora Ellen Groce.
  2. "Seeing Voices" by Oliver Sacks.
  3. "Deaf Culture: Exploring Deaf Communities in the United States" by Irene W. Leigh.
  4. TRAIN GO SORRY: Inside a Deaf World by Leah Hager Cohen.

- Websites:
  1. National Association of the Deaf (NAD): www.nad.org
  2. Gallaudet University: www.gallaudet.edu
  3. National Deaf Center: https://nationaldeafcenter.org/
  4. Disability: IN: https://disabilityin.org/
  5. World Federation of the Deaf (WFD): www.wfdeaf.org
  6. National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes: https://nationaldeafcenter.org/

Want to learn more about how Sorenson is building a more inclusive and accessible future by partnering with businesses? We would love to connect with you.

Book a call with one of our accessibility experts.

You can also reach out team at 800.659.4783, option 8, or sales@sorenson.com

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