



Hot issues

ACCAN'S Disability Mystery Shopping report 2017

The Australian Communications Consumer Action network (ACCAN) has a strong membership base of disability organisations and individuals with disability. The most consistent feedback we get from these members relates to the lack of available information about telecommunications equipment and services for people with disability. The difficulty of accessing telecommunications for people with disability in Australia has long been recognised as a fundamental contributor to the disability digital divide.

While there is a growing number of new and emerging telecommunication products which can improve access and participation for people with disability, without information about these products and how to access them, people with disability will continue to be left out of our increasingly connected digital society.

Over the past several years both Telstra and Optus have retired their formal consultation meetings with the disability sector and earlier in 2017 the Government scaled back the scope of the National Relay Service Outreach program. Additionally, Communications Alliance, the industry association, has flagged C625:2009 Information on Accessibility Features for Telephone Equipment to be downgraded from an enforceable Code to an industry guideline.

If people with disability are to benefit from new and emerging mainstream and assistive communications products and services it is imperative that easy access to appropriate awareness, information, training and ongoing support is available from telecommunications providers.

Background

During December 2016 ACCAN commissioned a [Disability Mystery Shopping project](#) with two objectives in mind:

1. To assess the information provided by staff in telco customer service stores and through phone customer support lines to the general public in response to different disability-related inquiries.
2. To compare the current study to results from a mirror mystery shopping investigation conducted during April 2014.

Scope

The project was comprised of 100 'walk-in' visits to telco stores across Australia - specifically Telstra, Optus and Vodafone locations, mostly in metropolitan areas. In addition, 100 phone calls were made to a combination of Telstra, Optus, Vodafone, TPG and iiNet customer support lines.

Methodology

Each mystery shopper was provided with a specific enquiry and scenario to follow during their visit or call, made up of a number of typical enquiries by, or on behalf of, people with disabilities.

Scenarios used for enquiries about both landlines and mobiles included:

- “My son/daughter/relative who is deaf is moving into his/her own apartment next month. Are there any phone services for deaf people?”
- “My grandmother/grandfather/mother/father has limited hand strength and gets shaky hands. What home phone options could you recommend?”

The mystery shoppers were encouraged to prompt the staff member for further information if there was not an immediate information recall, for example: “A friend told me there was a special mobile phone or special features for people with physical difficulties,” or “I thought there was a special service for deaf people,” to give the staff member every opportunity to provide relevant information.

Scoring

The mystery shopping survey was scored in line with how many services the staff member could mention in accordance with the specific scenario. The mystery shoppers were provided with a list of products and services currently available according to each telco’s official policies or in reference to the law.

A gradient score of 0 to 3 was given for each evaluation, ranging from full points being awarded when the staff member could mention all services/products listed through to no points when no information could be recalled.

Key findings

Walk-in assessments

Current results:

- The overall average achievement rate for walk-in assessments was 26%. The Deaf scenario where the enquiry was about mobile phones had the highest achievement rate of 33% and the Dexterity Impairment scenario where the enquiry was about a landline had the lowest achievement rate of 17%.
- Comparing results for telephone type, mobile phone enquiries performed slightly better (30%) than landline phone enquiries (23%).

2014 comparison:

- Comparing 2014 results, achievement rates for walk-in assessments have remained relatively steady with a 2% increase in performance from 24% in 2014 to 26% in 2016. The best and worst performing scenarios have remained the same.
- The number of inquiries that resulted in no relevant information being provided increased by 7 percentage points to 38% in 2016 from 2014.

Phone call assessments

Current results:

- The overall average achievement rate for phone call assessments was 16%. The Hearing Impairment scenario where the enquiry was about mobile phones had the highest achievement rate of 35% and the Dexterity Impairment scenario where the enquiry was about a landline had the lowest achievement rate of 6%.
- Comparing results for telephone type, mobile phone enquiries performed better (20%) than landline phone enquiries (10%).

2014 comparison:

- Comparing 2014 results, achievement rates for phone call assessments have declined by 6% with a fall from 22% in 2014 to 16% in 2016.
- All but one of the retailers experienced a decline in their overall average achievement percentages, with the exception of one provider experiencing a 1% increase.
- The number of inquiries that resulted in no relevant information being provided increased by 11 percentage points to 62% in 2016 from 2014.

Combined results

- Bringing both walk-in and phone call assessments together it is evident that there has been a 2% drop in overall achievement from 2014 to 2016.
- Overall the amount of assessments that resulted in no information being provided is 50%. This is a 9% increase on 2014 results.

Mystery shopper comments

Phone call assessments

- Although staff were perceived as mostly friendly and pleasant, most of the time they were unable to provide information in response to the array of disability enquiries presented to them, and almost always needed to be prompted by the mystery shopper for more information. They were simply unable to assist and in most cases would refer the mystery shopper to a telco retail store or Harvey Norman, and in some cases provided the customer care number. Overall very few phone call assessments resulted in staff confidently providing more than one or two options to the customer (approximately 9%).
- Comment Extract 1: "Initially the team member misunderstood my query and started giving me details of plans that were on special at the moment. I informed them that one of my mum's friends told her there was a special service for people with hearing difficulties. The team member advised me that they were not aware of any service being offered and put me on hold to talk to their supervisor. I was then advised to call the telco's customer service number for assistance".
- Comment Extract 2: "The call was answered promptly and I provided my enquiry to the team member. Despite being prompted, the team member advised me that they did not offer any products that would assist my grandparent. The team member advised me that I should perhaps check with a different provider as they believed that would be the only provider who may be able to help."

Walk-in assessments

- Similar to the phone call assessments, although staff were friendly they were simply not able to provide specific information regarding the disability enquiries. Most customers were referred to other telco retailers or large department stores such as Big W, JB Hi-Fi or ALDI.
- Walk-in assessments fared slightly better than phone call assessments in staff confidently providing more than one or two options to the customer (approximately 13%).
- Comment Extract 1: “The experience I had was poor. The team member showed me one mobile that was very small and told me that was all they had for elderly people. They then advised me that if I wanted something larger I should go to ALDI as they sell phones with large buttons. They did not seem genuinely interested in resolving my enquiry. They did not consult with a fellow team member to try and find a solution.”
- Comment Extract 2: “My overall experience was good. The team member who assisted me advised me that they had no knowledge that the telco offered any phones specially catering to visually impaired people, however they mentioned one phone which had large buttons and lit up which might be helpful for visually impaired people. The team member also advised me that organisations for the visually impaired may be able to help. They gave me their business card and provided information on phone plans.”

Telco response

After the 2014 project results were collated, ACCAN contacted each of the telcos surveyed and shared the research results with them. The follow up discussions with Telstra, Optus and Vodafone were very constructive. Each of the telcos acknowledged that the research highlighted disappointing gaps in the awareness and knowledge of their customer service agents. While each telco indicated that they would be implementing a number of measures to improve both call-centre and shop-front agent’s disability awareness, the results from this current research project indicate that little has changed.

Again in 2017 ACCAN has initiated constructive discussions with Optus, Telstra and Vodafone to explore opportunities to improve the availability and accessibility of up-to-date and appropriate information suitable for consumers with disability. The telcos have committed to re-evaluate their processes for customer service staff training and are investigating new ways to provide more useful information about products and services suitable for consumers with disability.

Conclusion

Disappointingly, the 2016 results we received were no better than the results from the 2014 project. In some cases, the results were actually worse. Again in 2016, no company performed significantly better or worse than any other. Overall, the results for each of the companies surveyed supported the anecdotal reports we receive on access to information relevant to telecommunications products and services useful for consumers with disability – it is very difficult to get information from telco sales staff.

Unfortunately on the majority of occasions, unless the person inquiring already knows what is available and specifically asks for it, they are likely to remain uninformed or only partially informed.

While the individual shopper reports indicate that most staff are professional, friendly and polite, on the whole this study would indicate they continue to be inadequately informed about what is on offer for consumers with disability.