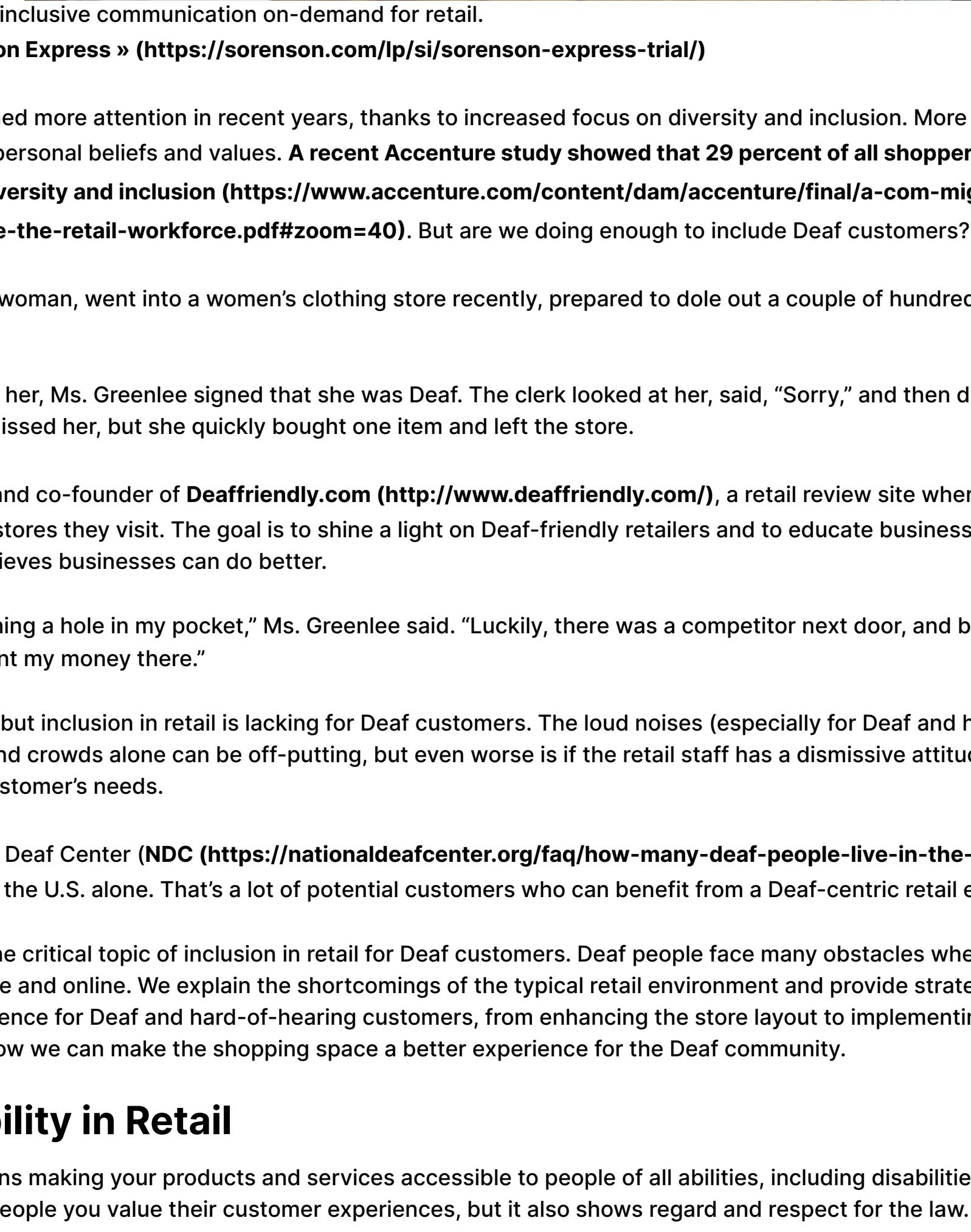


Inclusion in Retail: Upgrading the Retail Environment for Deaf Customers

Juana Poareo (<https://sorenson.com/author/jpoareo/>)



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Inclusion in retail has gained more attention in recent years, thanks to increased focus on diversity and inclusion. More consumers than ever are shopping based on their personal beliefs and values. A recent Accenture study showed that 29 percent of all shoppers are likely to switch to a retailer that embraces diversity and inclusion (<https://www.accenture.com/content/dam/accenture/final/a-com-migration/r3-3/pdf/pdf-149/accenture-reimagine-the-retail-workforce.pdf#page=40>). But are we doing enough to include Deaf customers?

Melissa Greenlee, a Deaf woman, went into a women's clothing store recently, prepared to dole out a couple of hundred dollars on new athletic clothes.

When a clerk approached her, Ms. Greenlee signed that she was Deaf. The clerk looked at her, said, "Sorry," and then disappeared. Ms. Greenlee said the clerk completely dismissed her, but she quickly bought one item and left the store.

Ms. Greenlee is the CEO and co-founder of [Deaffriendly.com](https://www.deaffriendly.com) (<http://www.deaffriendly.com>), a retail review site where Deaf and hard-of-hearing people leave reviews for stores they visit. The goal is to shine a light on Deaf-friendly retailers and to educate businesses on how they can be Deaf friendly. Ms. Greenlee believes businesses can do better.

"I literally had money burning a hole in my pocket," Ms. Greenlee said. "Luckily, there was a competitor next door, and because my experience was more positive there, I spent my money there."

Shopping is typically fun, but inclusion in retail is lacking for Deaf customers. The loud noises (especially for Deaf and hard-of-hearing customers who wear hearing aids) and crowds alone can be off-putting, but even worse is if the retail staff has a dismissive attitude and general lack of awareness of the Deaf customer's needs.

According to the National Deaf Center (NDC) (<https://nationaldeafcenter.org/faq/how-many-deaf-people-live-in-the-united-states/>), about 11 million Deaf people live in the U.S. alone. That's a lot of potential customers who can benefit from a Deaf-centric retail experience.

This blog post explores the critical topic of inclusion in retail for Deaf customers. Deaf people face many obstacles when navigating the retail environment, both in-store and online. We explain the shortcomings of the typical retail environment and provide strategies to help you create an inclusive shopping experience for Deaf and hard-of-hearing customers, from enhancing the store layout to implementing Deaf-friendly online features. Let's dive into how we can make the shopping space a better experience for the Deaf community.

ADA Accessibility in Retail

Accessibility in retail means making your products and services accessible to people of all abilities, including disabilities. Not only does a welcoming environment show Deaf people you value their customer experiences, but it also shows regard and respect for the law.

According to Title III of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), a business that "serves the public" must provide equal access to disabled customers. Title III ADA compliance applies to both online and physical shops. Compliance can involve providing other methods of communication, removing physical barriers, and modifying store policy to be more accessible to customers with unique needs.

Impact of Accessibility on Brand Image and Customer Retention

The accessibility laws passed 50 years ago mandated equal access for how disabled people live and work. Many corporations have followed these laws, legally and because it's the right thing to do. But in the last seven to eight years, companies started realizing that accessibility isn't just a moral imperative but also a business advantage. They see their brand reputations, consumer and employee experiences, and financial strategies getting a boost because of their commitment to accessibility.

Deaf consumers represent \$9B in discretionary income in the U.S. alone ([American Institutes for Research \(<https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Hidden-Market-Spending-Power-of-People-with-Disabilities-April-2018.pdf>\)\) And their networks—your value-based shoppers—equal a whole lot more. In fact, two out of three Americans say their social values now dictate their shopping choices \(\[McKinsey \\(<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-rise-of-the-inclusive-consumer>\\)\\)\]\(https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/the-rise-of-the-inclusive-consumer\).](https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Hidden-Market-Spending-Power-of-People-with-Disabilities-April-2018.pdf)

When Deaf customers can express their needs in the store and are understood, that creates a positive feeling that encourages them to return to the store repeatedly. If this is missing, frustration sets in, and the customer—Deaf or hearing—will simply go to another accommodating store, which Ms. Greenlee did.

Whenever a Deaf customer has a notably good or bad experience in a retail store, they talk about it with other Deaf people, friends, and family. Word spreads fast, and a store's reputation can soar or suffer.

Molly, a Deaf advocate, describes some of her difficulties when shopping at Walmart.

"Most are supercenters with a large layout to navigate," Molly says. "It's their store policy that if someone asks an employee where something is, they should walk them to that aisle and show the location. But [in my experience] they never do."

Current State of Accessibility for Deaf Customers

The current state of accessibility in retail globally can seem dim, judging by a UK survey of customers with disabilities. (<https://www.retail-insight-network.com/news/disabled-consumers-accessibility-online-retailers/>) But with some large, well-known retailers (<https://www.retail-insight-network.com/news/disabled-consumers-accessibility-online-retailers/>) (e.g., Google (<https://about.google/belonging/disability-inclusion/>) and Target (<https://www.target.com/c/accessibility/-/N-4ynq1>)) and leading the way for inclusive customer service, this can serve as a call to other retailers that it's time to embrace language equity for Deaf customers.

One Starbucks store (<https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2018/eight-things-to-know-about-the-new-starbucks-signing-store/>), near Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., is remarkably accessible to the Deaf population, but customers in all areas want that level of service.

Accessibility is paramount to creating a seamless retail shopping experience.

The retail industry, one of the largest industries in the US, can provide practical support to Deaf customers by offering options for different communication needs, such as on-demand sign language interpreters, captioning, and text-to-speech apps.

The need for retail accessibility has ironically been the biggest challenge in providing it. The number of retail locations means it may not be possible to provide sign language interpreters in-store for Deaf customers (because that service is usually scheduled ahead of time), but innovative technology offers new ways of using on-demand video interpreting that can help with this issue. [Sorenson Express](https://sorenson.com/si/sorenson-express/), an on-demand video interpreting service (<https://sorenson.com/si/sorenson-express/>), now available to public and private businesses via a subscription service, can help to create an equitable communication experience for Deaf customers. As the retailer, you can have this service readily available for any Deaf customer who walks in and wants to strike up an impromptu conversation with you.

This new service uses Sorenson's best video and audio codec technology. Think of a Deaf customer being able to communicate with retail staff with a click of a button that calls up best-in-class interpreters. Sorenson Express brings you these features:

- Subscription-based
- On-demand
- Easy to use: just one click to get an interpreter
- Integrated into daily operations
- ASL to English and ASL to Spanish available

It's important to remember that not every Deaf person uses sign language to communicate. Each Deaf customer has unique communication needs so it's essential to ask them their preferred communication method. If a Deaf customer doesn't use sign language, pen and paper or a smartphone app can work.

Improving the Retail Experience for Deaf Customers

There are several ways retail can be accessible to Deaf customers. As mentioned earlier, shopping can be a fun experience but also stressful. A welcoming retail environment can alleviate anxiety and put customers at ease.

Here's how to become a Deaf-friendly retailer:

1. Create an open, well-lit store layout. Deaf people use their eyes to take in their environment so good lighting is vital for lip reading. (Not all deaf people lip read, but many do.)
2. Designate a quiet space for customers. The corner of a store could be an ideal space that's comfortable, with low music and pleasant ambience.
3. Display visual aids and clear signs. Display prices, product details, offers, and store policies in large font with good color contrast. Add captions for videos, if displayed.
4. Offer accessibility and American Sign Language (ASL) training for your staff. Provide education and resources on the Deaf community, communication needs, and the challenges Deaf people face. Staff can also learn about sign language interpreters and relay services.

You can also hire an ASL instructor to come into the store and teach basic ASL signs. A Deaf instructor can teach not only appropriate signs but also educate staff about Deaf culture and etiquette. This will encourage interaction between staff and the instructor and allow the team to practice in a retail setting.

Another option is encouraging staff to learn ASL through YouTube videos and apps. This can help them learn at their own pace.

5. Provide video remote interpreting (VRI) services. Sorenson Express can be helpful for Deaf customers as it provides the service on demand. This allows Deaf customers and hearing people to comfortably communicate.
6. Ask Deaf customers for feedback. This can involve running surveys, focus groups, and interviews. You can also collaborate with Deaf organizations.

Satisfied customers become loyal customers. Inclusion in retail can be the backbone of a flourishing business. By showing Deaf customers the respect and understanding they deserve, they reward you with positive word-of-mouth marketing.



(<https://sorenson.com/lp/si/sorenson-express-trial/>)

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Optimizing Online Shopping for Deaf Customers: A Mini-Checklist

Many Deaf people prefer shopping online to in-store. They can get all the information they need if an online store is accessible.

Although data on Deaf people's online shopping habits are nil, the US has the second largest e-commerce market (behind China), totaling \$340 billion yearly.

With this in mind, you can make your web design more accessible to Deaf people (and those with other disabilities) with this mini-checklist:

- Closed captions for videos
- Summaries and transcriptions for audio and short video content
- Use headings, lists, bullet points, and short video content
- Include visuals to break up the text (images, infographics, short video clips with captions) Provide more than one way to contact you. Include phone, email, text messaging, contact forms, and live chat.

Make it a regular practice to maintain the accessibility of your online store. Not hearing from Deaf customers doesn't necessarily mean there are no customers to access. It's often easier to navigate to a more accessible site.

Adapting to Deaf Customer Needs

Ms. Greenlee recommends following the Deaf person's lead if you don't know how they prefer to communicate.

Adapting to your customer's needs is critical for Deaf customers. "If they're asking you to write, go ahead and write on paper or grab your phone and utilize speech to text or a Notes app," Ms. Greenlee said. "If they're requesting to write, pointing or using sign language, be willing to grab your phone and utilize speech to text or a Notes app."

It's important to remember that deafness is a spectrum and can mean having limited hearing to no hearing. Some Deaf people wear hearing aids and cochlear implants, and some don't.

Molly says retail workers tend to assume she can hear more than she can.

"I usually use my phone notes to pass back and forth, but often that's an assumption that I actually do," said Molly.

Molly said her dream retail setting would be the ability to use kiosks that would allow her to look up products and their descriptions, without having to talk with a retail worker. This idea is similar to the price checkers that we see in big-box retailers.

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How Starbucks Made a Store Deaf-Friendly

It is safe to say that everyone recognizes Starbucks through its unique mermaid logo that is on every corner in America.

In 2018, the Starbucks store in Washington, D.C., earned the nickname the "Signing Store" because all the employees, hearing and Deaf, are fluent in ASL.

What sets the Deaf and hearing employees apart are the green aprons with pins saying "Sign."

Hearing workers wear the standard green aprons with pins saying "Sign."

The store's technology is also a standout, with electronic notepads and two keyboards so customers and baristas have another option to communicate with each other.

Starbucks' foray into inclusivity of the Deaf community can spur other retailers to take that first step toward starting a dialogue with this minority group and learning more about the Deaf community.

Conclusion

Everyone deserves an enjoyable shopping experience. Making your store inclusive of the Deaf customer shows that you value their engagement and loyalty.

By optimizing your retail environment to be Deaf-friendly, you're making a powerful statement about your commitment to inclusivity and respect for every customer, regardless of disability.

Are you ready to make your retail space accessible? Sorenson's experts can help you evaluate how you can start integrating scalable accessibility solutions (<https://sorenson.com/si/sorenson-express/>) to support Deaf and hearing customers and staff.

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