



King County

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TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING PEOPLE

Background

Hearing disabilities may come at any time in a person's life, and hearing abilities vary widely. Some are born with no hearing, while others lose it gradually over time. Whether a person has a memory of sound can make a difference in the way they experience language, including written language. Do not be surprised if a customer who is Deaf or hard of hearing uses words differently. Remember, sign language may be their primary language, and English a second language.

Deaf and hard of hearing people communicate in different ways, depending on several factors: age at which deafness began; type of deafness; language skills; speech abilities; personality; intelligence; family environment; and educational background. Some individuals are more easily understood than others. Some use speech only ... or a combination of sign language, fingerspelling, and speech ... or writing ... or body language and facial expression.

Communication Strategies

You can communicate in several ways. And remember – Deaf and hard of hearing people have successfully navigated a “hearing world” for years and are more than willing to help facilitate communication. The key is to find out which combination of techniques works best with each person. Keep in mind that it is not how you exchange ideas but that you do.

For someone who primarily uses sign language, these guidelines for customer service should be used when the communication will be short, simple, and straightforward. If the information being conveyed is more complex, is of longer duration or is related to medical or legal matters, you will need to engage the services of a sign language interpreter. For more information, see [Tips for Using a Sign Language Interpreter](#).

One-to-One

Get the deaf person’s attention before speaking. Call out the person’s name; if that is not successful, a tap on the shoulder, a wave, or another visual signal usually does the trick.

Identify who you are. Introduce yourself or show your name badge or business card.

Ask about communication strategy. Ask if it would be helpful to communicate by writing or by using a computer terminal to type back and forth. If so, see “In Writing” on page 4.

Background noise. The noise level in a room can make a big difference. Be aware that a customer with partial hearing may have trouble hearing in certain situations. You may need to locate a quiet place in which to converse, with little or no background noise.

Key the Deaf person in to the topic of discussion. Deaf people need to know what the subject matter is to be discussed in order to pick up words that help them follow conversation. This is especially important for Deaf people who depend on speechreading.

Speak slowly and clearly, but do not yell, exaggerate, or over pronounce. Exaggeration and overemphasis of words distorts lip movements, making speechreading more difficult. Try to enunciate each word, without force or tension. Short sentences are easier to understand than long ones.

Look directly at the person when speaking. Avoid talking while turning away to pull something from a bookcase or file.

Do not place anything in your mouth when speaking. Mustaches that obscure the lips, smoking, pencil chewing, and putting your hand in front of your face all make it difficult for a Deaf person to follow what is being said.

Maintain eye contact with the Deaf person. Eye contact conveys the feeling of direct communication. Even if an interpreter is present, continue to speak directly to the Deaf person. He/she will turn to the interpreter as needed.

Use “I” and “you” when communicating through an interpreter, not “Tell him ...” or “Does she understand?”

Avoid standing in front of a light source, such as a window or bright light. The glare and shadows created on the face make it almost impossible for the Deaf person to speechread.

First repeat, then try to rephrase a thought if you have problems being understood, rather than repeating the same words again. Don't hesitate to try communicating by pencil and paper if necessary. Getting the message across is more important than the medium used.

Use pantomime, body language, and facial expression to help supplement your communication. A lively speaker always is more interesting to watch.

Be courteous to the Deaf person during conversation. If the telephone rings or someone knocks at the door, do not ignore the Deaf person and carry on a conversation while the Deaf person waits. Excuse yourself and tell the Deaf person that you are responding to the knock or answering the phone.

Potential speech issues. Some people who are Deaf or hard of hearing may not speak or may have speech that is difficult to understand. Focus on listening and communicating. Here are some tips:

- If you do not understand something, do not pretend that you do. Ask the person to repeat what was said, then repeat it back.

- Be patient and take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Avoid barriers like glass partitions and distractions, such as noisy, public places.
- Discuss private or personal matters in a private place to avoid staring or eavesdropping by others, as you would do for any other customer.

Note: For conducting brief business, an individual may bring along someone to act as their interpreter. This interpreter should be viewed as any formally hired interpreter, and you should direct your attention and communication to the Deaf or hard of hearing person.

In a Group

Ask about communication strategy. As in one-to-one situations, ask the individual what communication option(s) will be effective: sign language interpreter, assistive listening, providing a notetaker, etc.

Use an interpreter in a large group setting. In such a situation, an interpreter makes communication much more effective for Deaf or hard of hearing participants who primarily use sign language. The interpreter will be a few words behind the speaker in translating the information. Therefore, allow time for the person to obtain all the information and ask questions.

Use a notetaker when possible to record information. It is difficult for many Deaf or hard of hearing individuals to pay attention to a speaker and take notes simultaneously.

Assistive listening devices. If you will be using an assistive listening device, familiarize yourself with its operation. Read the instruction booklet and test it before the meeting or event.

Seat the Deaf or hard of hearing person to his/her best advantage. This usually means a seat near the speaker, so that the individual can see the speaker's lips. If possible, use a round table or semi-circular seating so that he/she can see everyone's face. Usually, the person will know best where to sit. Also, take into consideration lighting in the area, so that the speaker is illuminated clearly.

Provide new vocabulary in advance. It is difficult to speechread and read the fingerspelling of unfamiliar vocabulary. If new vocabulary cannot be presented in advance, write the terms on paper, a whiteboard, or overhead projector, if possible. If a lecture is to be given or a film shown, a brief outline or script provided in advance helps that person follow the presentation.

Avoid unnecessary pacing and speaking when writing on a whiteboard. It is difficult to speechread a person in motion, and impossible to speechread someone whose back is turned. Write or draw on the board, then face the group and explain the work. If you use an overhead projector, do not look down at it while speaking.

Use visual aids if possible. Vision is a Deaf and hard of hearing person's primary channel for receiving information. Make full use of visual aids, including films, overhead projectors,

diagrams, and whiteboards. Give participants time to read the information before you proceed with the presentation.

Make sure the Deaf person doesn't miss vital information. Write out any changes in meeting times, special assignments, additional instructions, etc. Allow extra time when referring to manuals and texts, since Deaf and hard of hearing individuals must look at what has been written and then return their attention to the speaker.

Slow down the pace of communication slightly to facilitate understanding. Many speakers talk too fast. Allow extra time for the person to ask or answer questions.

Repeat questions or statements made from the back of the room and point to the person speaking. Remember, Deaf and hard of hearing people are cut off from whatever happens outside their visual area.

Allow full participation by the Deaf or hard of hearing person in the discussion. It is difficult for them to participate in group discussions because they are not sure when the speakers have finished. Be aware of turn taking and try to give the person a chance to look at the various participants before each speaks.

Use hands-on experience whenever possible in training situations. Like other people, Deaf and hard of hearing people learn quickly by "doing."

In Writing

Always ask a Deaf or hard of hearing person if they prefer written communication. Do not assume that this is the preferred method. When using written communication, take into consideration their English and writing skills. Their skills may depend on whether their hearing loss was present at birth or developed later in life, what teaching method was used in their education, and which communication method they prefer. Also, if the individual is Deaf and has low vision (Deaf-Blind), please use a black felt-tip pen so letters are dark and thicker for greater readability to that individual.

Keep your message short and simple. Establish the subject area, avoid assumptions, and make your sentences concise.

It is not necessary to write out every word. Short phrases or a few words often are sufficient to transfer the information.

Do not use "yes" and "no" questions. Open-ended questions ensure a response that allows you to see if your message was understood correctly.

Face the Deaf person after you have written your message. If you can see each other's facial expressions, communication will be easier and more effective.

Use visual representations if you are explaining specific or technical vocabulary to a Deaf person. Drawings, diagrams, etc., help the person comprehend the information.

Service Animals

Some Deaf or hard of hearing people use service animals called "hearing dogs" which alert them to sounds such as a telephone, doorbell, fire alarm, or car horn. The service animal is permitted to accompany its owner within public facilities. These animals are not required to have any special identification card, collar or harness. For more information, see Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals.

How to Alert Customers and Clients About Your Accessibility

It's important to make sure your customers and clients who are Deaf or hard of hearing know that you have accessible services. One way is to include your TTY number next to your voice phone number on all brochures, flyers or other printed material you share with the public (or if you have no TTY, include the Relay Service number). Here are some symbols that denote access for the Deaf community:



TTY



Interpreter Services



Volume Control
Telephone



Assistive Listening
System

Some information in this handout is based on a publication by Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services (ADWAS).