

INTEGRATING STRATEGIES AND SERVICES FOR GUESTS WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

By Lisa Potvin

Stevie Wonder once said, “Just because a man lacks the use of his eyes, doesn’t mean he lacks vision.”

In this article, I will address the integration of strategies and services for guests with cognitive disabilities. I will start with my community and our Special Needs and Adaptive Program better known as SNAP Dance. This is a monthly community dance for adults with disabilities. Although far from a large scale event, it demonstrates the framework for how to host an accessible festival. This extraordinary group of individuals comes out to the dance every month to take pictures, make friends and bust a move. Over time we have found that our guests want to be more involved and take part in community events but there is either too much stress on the families or the large scale events are not accessible enough. It poses the question: How do we, as industry leaders, make inclusion and accessibility possible at our large scale festivals and events?

It all started with a dance. After hearing from multiple families in the community we realized there was a major gap in our system that needed to be filled. There were limited programs available for adults with disabilities. Those that were available were costly. We came to a realization, after reading an article from the National Down Syndrome Society, which stated, “While in school, most, if not all of the resources that make up a student’s principal support system of special education and related services are mandated by law. Upon graduation, the student will no longer be eligible for many, if not all of the services. Leaving the responsibility of identifying, locating and coordinating appropriate resources mainly upon the individual and their families.”⁽¹⁾

Our small dance of less than 20 participants quickly grew to over 100 and has been a success within the community for over five years. Over the past year, we have put in an increased focus into talking to the caregivers about other events and activities they attend. At one of our dances, we asked the caregivers and parents of our guests how they enjoyed our local large scale events. They stated that although they meet the ADA requirements they were still too



difficult to navigate for our participants with severe Autism and Down syndrome. As a community which strives to be inclusive to all, this did not settle well with us and we realized steps needed to be taken.

Step 1. Understand Your Audience

As a Special Events Coordinator, I do not have a background in therapeutic recovery or caregiving, so my first step was to learn more about our participants and understand what they truly go through in different situations. The importance of dietary restrictions, sensory details and preparation became obvious. It was also clear that although there are many restrictions placed on this population, the benefits of community involvement outweigh the restrictions.

One study drove this point home the best. Autism Speaks recently did a study that concluded:

“Roughly 50,000 youth with autism will turn 18 years old this year. So many of these young people have the potential to work and participate

in their communities. Supporting this potential will benefit everyone—the person with autism, the family, employer and society.”⁽²⁾

It is also imperative to understand current laws in place, such as:

“The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which became law in 1990. The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The ADA gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state

and local government services, and telecommunications.”⁽³⁾

The Americans with Disabilities Act also provides us with a map on regulations, how to build proper ramps, and to make sure that our event grounds are accessible to all. This can be a helpful tool when designing your event grounds.

Step 2. Identify Who Is Doing It Right

Recently, at the 61st Annual International Festivals and Events Association Convention, Expo and Retreat it was stated, “We are in the business of making magic happen!” Well who makes magic happen better than the happiest place on earth, Disney World. They have put together a list of simple services and strategies to give guests with cognitive disabilities a magical experience. This list includes:

- **Advanced Ticket Purchase** - to avoid the possibility of waiting in line in inclement weather.
- **Stroller and Wheel Chair Rental** - having a rental option for either a stroller, wheel chair or ECV/ Motorized scooter for a day can turn a good experience into a great one.
- **Rider Switch** - offering a rider switch for parties of two or more so that the third party can switch out without going back in line.
- **Accessing Attractions** - being able to designate a specific return time for guests who are unable to tolerate extended waits at attractions due to a disability.
- **Break Areas** - should the guests with a cognitive disability become over-stimulated, cool, calm areas should be offered on event grounds.
- **Companion restrooms**
- **Attraction Guides** - include pamphlets for carnivals where each ride offers different features and effects.
- **Dietary Recommendations** - either offer multiple options or allow guests to bring food items into your event.
- **Transportation** - Offer accessible parking as well as busing to and from your event grounds.
- **Have ear plugs available.**

Disney World included all of this stated above in a pamphlet which also provides a section with information on preparing your guests for the event. They also include suggestions for planning a visual schedule and links to videos to help prepare for the experience.

Another organization making a difference is Accessible Festivals, a contract organization that will come to your event and handle all aspects of accessibility regarding legal compliance for mobility,

hearing and visual impairments. The organization goes above and beyond by utilizing volunteers to help participants move around the uneven and dusty roads at music festivals, as well as having raised platforms for attendees in wheelchairs to be able to see over the crowds to the stage. Through partnerships with Live Nation and Goldenvoice they are making huge strides in creating accessible festivals.

The organization which strives to make the biggest impact on the community is the Special Olympics. At the Special Olympics, they are able to make sure all aspects from food and beverage to announcements are accessible to every participant. They also have partnered with the Department of Aging and Disability Services to provide year-round programs and support for this community. Through an almost entirely volunteer base they are able to make over 300 competitions accessible each year!

These three organizations are doing it right and can provide us with valuable insight on how to make the festivals and events industry accessible to everyone. When we spoke with these organizations one employee stated, “The biggest issue we face going into a venue is the crowds. It is important for the correct measures to have been taken, ADA regulations to have been met and access to all the different areas not hindered or forgotten.” The key point made by all three organizations is that we cannot forget about this population. We must keep them in mind as we make key decisions regarding our events.

Step 3: Adapt your Event

Although the ADA lays out a guideline on the laws and regulations around your event grounds, there is so much more that you can adapt to truly be accessible to this community. Consider what Disney World has done best by providing break rooms for sensory overload. Offer something as simple as early ticketing and free passes to caregivers and companions. Have a sponsor hand out free ear plugs before loud concerts and fireworks. Look at what Accessible Festivals does by creating skyboxes with ramps so that guests can see the stage from their chairs. In regards to food and beverage, if you can't supply it, make an exception for the family, by allowing them to bring in the specialized food.

Almost all of these changes are low cost and easily adaptable to events both large and small. By offering a pamphlet with information and links to videos so that guests can prepare ahead of time you are making your event more accessible. Most importantly, make sure all of your staff is aware of the various services you are providing so that they can spread the word and answer questions correctly when asked about break areas, ear plugs, or other amenities.

Lastly, reach out to the various care homes in your community and the programs that are already in place. Let them know that your event is accessible or ask them if they have any recommendations. By adapting your event to not only meet ADA requirements but to go the extra mile so that each guest can fully experience your event, you are truly making magic happen.

Step 4: Accept the Challenge

The SNAP Dance has proven to us on a smaller scale the positive impact that we can have on this specific community. There is a huge gap after these individuals turn 18 when they are “aged out” of the system but they still have so much to give and want to be involved. Whether it be working, volunteering or going to programs to meet others they want to remain active in the community and in the event industry, we have the opportunity to make this happen. Our large event is far from perfect when it comes to being fully accessible to those with cognitive disabilities. We have a lot of opportunity to update in the upcoming year. Although we are only starting to make the move by taking small steps in the right direction, through early ticketing, involvement and reaching out to the community, we know these easy changes can make a difference in the long run.

Just as we have challenged one another to make changes to our large scale events in our office, I challenge everyone who reads this to make a positive change to your event in order to become more accessible. By doing so, you are becoming an advocate for your guests with cognitive disabilities.

Sources

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