



Accessibility drives Loyalty

Restaurant Accessibility for Blind and Low Vision Customers: a survey

Introduction

The restaurant industry values customer loyalty. That includes customers with disabilities. How a restaurant treats customers with disabilities can significantly affect loyalty, whether through accessibility or attitude.

Equal access to restaurants is an important part of ensuring environments are accessible to people with disabilities. Technology can help address barriers in the physical world as well as make the restaurant experience more accessible and enjoyable to people with disabilities.

Between February and March 2024, Vispero and TPGi surveyed over 600 blind and low vision people about their experiences accessing restaurants, including the use of technology provided by restaurants.

This white paper provides key findings from analysis of the survey results and makes some recommendations that restaurants can follow to provide a more inclusive, enjoyable restaurant experience for people with disabilities.

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May 17, 2024

Finding 1: Most blind and low vision customers have encountered negative experiences at restaurants

People with disabilities enjoy restaurants just like everyone else.

The vast majority (96%) of the 632 blind and low vision people who responded to this survey are frequent restaurant-goers, either for sit-down meals or for takeout.

22% of these respondents mostly have *sit-down meals at restaurants*, 7% mostly *order takeout*, and 71% enjoy *both*. Less than 1% of respondents *never visit or order from restaurants*.

Very few respondents (2%) use restaurants *every day*. Most respondents (54%) use restaurants between *once a week and a few times a week*. Over a third of respondents (36%) use restaurants between *once a month and a few times a month*. Only 7% of respondents use restaurants *less than once a month*.

Despite enjoying dining out, people with disabilities regularly encounter ableism in restaurants.

Ableism is discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

Of the 632 blind and low vision people who responded to this survey, a majority (58%) have had a negative experience at a restaurant because of their disability.

For some, this was due to an inaccessible website, which prevented them from finding information about a restaurant, including menus.

For others, it was due to the inaccessibility of digital kiosks and payment systems at restaurants, which made it difficult to order food with confidence.

The physical accessibility of restaurants, including entrances, restrooms, tables, and seating, was a source of frustration for many respondents.

Similarly, inaccessible physical menus and signage around the restaurant made it difficult for some to determine what's available or how much it costs.

And compounding many of these issues, was low awareness of the needs of disabled people and negative attitudes towards disability from restaurant staff members.

Finding 2: Accessibility issues affect loyalty of customers who are blind or low vision

The accessibility of a restaurant has a significant impact on customers' loyalty.

Over three quarters (84%) of the 562 blind and low vision people who responded to a question on loyalty considered the accessibility of a restaurant to have a *moderate* or *significant impact* on their willingness to repeat their visit.

Only 11% of these respondents felt accessibility had *not much impact* on repeat visits, and only 6% felt it had *no impact* at all.

"Coming from a hospitality background. I firmly believe that having an accessible experience increases the idea that a blind diner will turn into a loyal customer."

"If they are willing to provide me what I need to have a good experience I will come back. If they are dismissive and not considering me or my disability, then they are not worth me spending money in their establishment."

"If a place goes to some effort like having an accessible menu on the web site or Braille or other alternative formats, this is an indication that they are interested in me as a customer, and I am far more likely to go back and want to give a place like that my money than one where no effort is put forth."

"I've never had an accessible dining experience and if I did, I would go back often. I want to be independent, order on my own, order for my kids, and pay on my own."

Finding 3: Customers who are blind or low vision respond in different ways to accessibility and ableist issues

People with disabilities respond to ableist encounters in different ways.

Some are **resilient** when faced with challenges and refuse to let it bother them.

“Similar situations happen regularly enough that I don't usually let it affect me. I just deal with the misconceptions, try to educate when I can, and otherwise just make it work.”

“It did not affect my patronage of the restaurant. I have much thicker skin than most people, so an uninformed server isn't enough to ruin my day. As long as a restaurant has good food, that's enough for me. Expecting all sighted people to automatically know how to properly interact with blind people is unreasonable.”

Some are **resigned** to experiencing difficulties and feel like they will only encounter the same experience at other restaurants.

“It didn't impact my willingness to have a return visit. The sad fact is, if I let every issue that comes up in this sighted-centric world dictate what I did, or where I went, I'd never do anything, because even with better options for independence, those of us who can't see are still, possibly even more so, looked at as if we're helpless, stupid, useless, or unworthy to participate.”

“The negative experiences I have had do not impact my decisions on which restaurants to go to. People are just not educated enough or aware enough to respect me as a person. It happens all the time, so I just have to live with it.”

Others are more **defiant** and will seek to make their feelings known to management, creating a learning opportunity for the restaurant and its staff.

“I didn't take it personally, but I felt embarrassed especially because I was with a bunch of people. They were quite upset as well. We got the manager and had him remove that server from our table. I did go back to that chain, but not that particular restaurant because it was in another state.”

“It makes me more forceful in making any server aware of my disability and constantly reminding them of it, as well as reporting anyone to management who violates my rights or disrespects me because of my disability. Also, if my experience is that bad, I will go online and give an unfavorable review of the place.”

But for many, it is a humiliating and degrading experience that will mean they ***never visit the establishment again.***

“How people treat me in terms of my disability greatly affects whether or not I choose to return to their business. It was also one of the first times someone accompanying me really saw how disabled people are often treated, (with annoyance and complete disregard for our needs) and while I downplayed it at first, I had no intention of ever returning.”

“I refuse to spend my money with a business not willing to be accepting of all people. And the next 10 or 15 years we may all have some type of disability. When I come across terrible service I now say, today me but tomorrow it could be you.”

Finding 4: Customers who are blind or low vision are more likely to return to an accessible restaurant

An accessible customer experience has a clear impact on the likelihood of returning to a restaurant.

The majority (92%) of the 570 blind and low vision people who responded to a question on loyalty said they would be *likely* or *very likely* to return to a restaurant that has an accessible customer experience.

Only 3% of these respondents said they would be “unlikely” or “very unlikely” to return to a restaurant that has an accessible customer experience, and only 5% said that it makes no difference.

“If I can be certain of what I am getting, I will come back. When I cannot read the information for myself, I am taking a risk.”

“If a restaurant is making an effort to be accessible, I want to support them. Of course, the service/food has to be good as well. I won't eat garbage just because it comes with an accessible experience.”

“Finding accessibility in restaurants is so rare that when I do find it, I will become a loyal customer for life. at this point, I will settle for restaurants with crummy accessibility as long as I am at least treated well. Basically, what I'm saying is restaurants for blind people aren't a great experience, but I refuse to stay home so I take what I can get.”

“When I walk into a restaurant, and I am treated as a loyal customer, not a blind one, because the restaurant has taken accessibility seriously takes the stigma out of being blind. When I have those experience, I want to return because I feel like all the other customers that walk in the door.”

Finding 5: Inclusive restaurant experiences are important to customers who are blind or low vision

The independence and self-reliance that an inclusive restaurant provides is extremely important to people with disabilities.

Over three quarters (87%) of the 571 blind and low vision people who responded to a question on inclusivity felt it is *very important* or *extremely important* that a restaurant is inclusive of people with disabilities.

Only 3% of these respondents felt an inclusive restaurant is “not so important” or “not at all important”.

“Feeling welcomed and that I am not inconveniencing restaurant employees with a special request/accommodation is vital to an enjoyable dining experience.”

“All restaurants should be inclusive of people with disabilities because we have as much right to go out to eat and be with the public as anyone else does. We may have to do things differently, but it doesn’t take that much, just a little patience, understanding, and maybe getting menus in either Braille or large print so that we are all able to enjoy the full experience.”

“Many people with disabilities are parents or caregivers for others. We need to be able to accessibly order for those we are responsible for and dine safely with them, ensuring their needs are met as well.”

“If they are not inclusive, I won't be back. If it is a chain restaurant, I am likely to avoid all of the restaurants in that chain after a bad experience. I think those in the restaurant lose sight of the fact that I go to a restaurant to be served. If I have to do things largely on my own, I can do that at home.”

Finding 6: Blind and low vision customers are reluctant to pay more for accessibility

When it comes to paying extra for an accessible restaurant experience, people with disabilities are conflicted.

Just under half (48%) of the 569 respondents who responded to a question on accessibility premiums would be willing to pay more for products or services from a restaurant that has an accessible customer experience.

Respondents generally feel that they **shouldn't have to pay more** for accessibility. But for some it is a **pragmatic acknowledgement** of the potential costs involved.

"At the end of the day, you get what you pay for. It costs additional money in order to set up and maintain an accessible restaurant or other business."

"I know that a Braille menu and setting up a website cause an increase in prices, so I understand the necessary steps taken by restaurants to cover their overhead costs."

"At the end of the day, we should NOT have to pay for equal access. I don't want to pay more than my non-disabled counterparts. If, however, a restaurant is making things accessible from the ground up, I would pay to support them because they are putting in the effort towards universal accessibility and valuing their customer experiences."

"I know it would be hard for many small mom & pop places to be fully inclusive, so I just want staff to have customer service and a willingness to help."

"This is a tricky question because you have to balance the knowledge of how much accessibility costs the restaurant owner with the right to be included like everyone else. I lean toward not wanting to pay however I am not completely set against it either."

"Access to services from a business serving the public really should not cost a disabled person more than any other patron. However, if an extremely small business was making good faith efforts to offer accessible services but could not bear the cost unsupported, I might be willing to support a portion of the cost through slightly higher prices."

For others, it is a **resigned acceptance** that paying more is the only way to get an accessible experience.

“I really shouldn’t have to pay more for accessibility. But that is the reality we live in, if you want great customer service, you have to pay more for it.”

“Asking me to pay more is discriminatory. Am I willing to pay more? Probably. The fact is I am willing to pay more at a restaurant that I like, because of its food, because of its staff, and many more reasons.”

However, as respondents were keen to point out, by considering accessibility from the start and designing inclusive restaurants experiences, accessibility **doesn’t have to cost a premium.**

“Accessibility should not be an afterthought. It should be included in the original design so I would not want to pay extra to have my needs met just like anybody else’s.”

“While restaurant accessibility is very important to me, I feel like good accessibility is achievable with focused attention, and not simply more money devoted to the problem by restaurants or customers.”

“Accessibility isn’t something ANYONE should pay for--but restaurants that provide products/services with accessibility in mind are more likely to be patronized, resulting in more profits, one would hope.”

“I don’t think accessibility should be a selling feature of a product or restaurant. It should be acknowledged and implemented because it’s the right thing to do.”

Recommendations

So, what measures can restaurants take to gain the loyalty of blind and low vision customers?

- Recommendation 1: Provide an accessible website or app with information about the restaurant.
- Recommendation 2: Ensure digital kiosk and payment devices are accessible.
- Recommendation 3: Help staff members become more disability-aware.
- Recommendation 4: Provide accessible menus and other in-restaurant dining information.
- Recommendation 5: Improve the physical accessibility of the restaurant.

Recommendation 1: Provide an accessible website or app with information about the restaurant

Blind or low vision customers usually start planning their restaurant visits online. They rely on restaurant websites or apps to find out key details like the menu, location, and accessibility options. So, restaurants should make sure these websites and apps are designed to meet accessibility requirements, and that it's easy for customers to complete key tasks such as browse the menu, find prices, locate allergy information about menu items, make or modify a reservation, find directions to the restaurant, or order and pay for takeout food.

It's not just about meeting technical accessibility standards; it's about making sure everyone can get the information they need to enjoy their visit.

“The most negative experiences I have are around inaccessible menus. If a menu is presented only as an image, accurately reading that menu becomes far more difficult.”

“No accessible menu was available. The printed menu was so small and light I could not read it. The PDF version was an image or required extensive scrolling at the magnification I needed.”

“As a person who tries to always check out the menu before getting to the restaurant, it would be great if there was some standardization in the format of menus online. Too frequently (today!) I encounter PDF image menus that are either partially or totally inaccessible on my mobile device. I am fortunate to have an Aira subscription for times like this, but not every person with low vision or blindness has that luxury.”

“I often view menus online before I arrive at the restaurant. Some of them use graphics for their menu items that are not accessible. Would like to see them change how they display their menus.”

Recommendation 2: Ensure digital kiosk and payment devices are accessible

Digital kiosks and payment devices are becoming increasingly common in restaurants, offering convenience and efficiency for customers. However, for blind and low vision customers, these technologies can present significant challenges.

Ensure that payment devices are designed in a way that blind people can independently order food and complete transactions, including providing gratuities and paying with coupons or discount codes, without relying on assistance from others and without having to sacrifice privacy.

“In fast food restaurants, the terminals are not accessible and there are fewer and fewer people at the checkout, I had to wait 45 minutes before anyone noticed that I was waiting because I couldn't use these terminals.”

“I have really only had trouble with inaccessible checkout solutions. Like right near me there is a pizza place with a totally inaccessible touch screen pin pad.”

“If they had had someone to help with the touchscreen, I could've ordered. But all the employees were busy and couldn't help me. So, I had to go somewhere else for my dinner because they're only method of ordering was using their inaccessible touchscreen.”

“If my wife wasn't at a restaurant with me, I wouldn't have been able to successfully use their tablet to check out, ensuring that I put my trust in the waitstaff to take my card and process for the successful payment. It puts me in an awkward position when I'm not able to independently determine tips and have to provide information to the waitstaff of how much I'd like to tip.”

Recommendation 3: Help staff members become more disability-aware

Restaurant staff play a crucial role in creating inclusive dining experiences for all customers, including those who are blind or low vision. Their positive attitudes and awareness of disability are essential in providing assistance when needed. Provide staff training to foster and encourage an environment of empathy and understanding, so that restaurant staff can ensure that customers with disabilities feel welcomed, valued, and able to fully enjoy their dining experience.

“The restaurant could have spoken to us directly and not spoken to us like we were deaf or daft. As we are visually impaired/registered blind and just needed more help and support. And if they would have asked us how we would have liked help, we could have explained properly before they just assumed we could all read braille and didn’t speak to us. And just given us some more time whilst we were in the restaurant it would have made our experience a lot better.”

“The restaurant was a buffet-style barbecue, and the staff were having a very busy evening with a full house. They refused to serve my husband and me, because we’re both totally blind and we came alone. It would have been better if they’d had some more staff who could help at least one of us through the buffet line. Instead, they turned us away because they weren’t willing or able to help us get our food.”

“Some wait staff act uncertain or awkward at best in interacting with myself and husband, who is also blind. If they could relax and treat us like anyone else, it would make our experience much more pleasant. Also, when walking to our table, they often take off and we have no idea where they are. I usually try to engage them in conversation, so we at least have an idea of where we are going.”

“They could do a better job of training their wait staff. People tend to talk to the person I am with, not to me. So, I have to tell them about not doing that. Then sometimes the waitress or waiter get an attitude. Sometimes they don’t come back to our table as often as they should. They act like they can’t wait for us to leave. It doesn’t make me want to go back to that restaurant again.”

Recommendation 4: Provide accessible menus and other in-restaurant dining information

In restaurants, it's crucial that physical menus and other dining information are accessible to everyone, including those who are blind or low vision. When menus and signage are designed with inclusivity in mind, everyone can feel confident and informed when making choices and moving around the restaurant.

Provide clear and readable menus, with options like large print or braille, to help blind or low vision customers easily understand what's available and how much it costs. Make sure information on menus in accessible formats is kept up to date, including prices and items offered. Provide accessible signage, including braille, throughout the restaurant to help customers independently locate restrooms and exits.

“On one occasion, the Braille menu had outdated prices. So, I was surprised when the bill came. They ended up honoring the prices shown in the Braille menu. On another occasion, I realized (after the fact) that the barista had added a tip to my total. I discovered this when reviewing my credit card activity.”

“Offer large print menus. Don't put offers/menus on the wall. Have high contrast and sans serif fonts. Have better lighting.”

“Have menus available in Braille or have an accessible menu that I can access with my iPhone with VoiceOver. Avoid pictures and graphics. Train workers so that they understand accessibility and solutions are different for different people. A Braille menu was thrown away. They must have thought it was garbage when they were cleaning out the office, the server said.”

“The problem was the menu that was provided to me, was in Braille, but out of date, and the choice that I made was no longer available. Unfortunately, rather than asking me if I wanted something else the waiter went away and brought out a completely different type of dinner assuming that I would enjoy that one even though the one I wanted was no longer available. They could've helped us by telling me that it was not available and asking me what I wanted.”

Recommendation 5: Improve the physical accessibility of the restaurant

Restaurants need to be physically accessible for everyone, including those with disabilities. Often, the most effective changes are small adjustments to layout. Pay attention to providing enough space between tables for easy navigation, accessible seating, limiting excess noise, and making sure restrooms and entrances are easy to reach.

By making these changes, restaurants create a welcoming environment where everyone can enjoy their meal comfortably.

“Seating near a wall or less active area is more comfortable. Went into a restaurant where I was seated in a high traffic area near the kitchen and felt as if we were always in the way. And the different sounds were confusing.”

“I often have navigation challenges in restaurants due to confusing and unfamiliar floor plans and low lighting levels. Finding restrooms is often challenging.”

“Some servers would place the drinks on the table without telling me where they put them, and there have also been restaurants that don't have Braille on their bathroom doors.”

“This isn't about any one restaurant visit, but common negative experiences I have: Better lighting at the table and in the bathroom, more space on the table (either through a larger table or by using fewer dishes - are 3 different empty glasses per person really necessary?), offering a digital menu that follows accessibility best practices, offering table service rather than just a buffet or requiring me to carry my own food while juggling a cane.”



How we conducted the survey

This white paper was based on a survey of 632 blind and low vision people conducted by Vispero and TPGi between February and March 2024. Survey respondents were recruited via email lists, special interest groups, and social media. Survey responses were collated using the SurveyMonkey online survey platform. The survey was tested to ensure that it was accessible to people using screen readers and screen magnification software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize survey responses and relevant quotes were extracted from the open-ended questions to support and illustrate the findings.

Note: Not all questions were compulsory and therefore all percentages quoted are of the total number of responses for that question and not the overall number of respondents.

Vispero and TPGi plan to conduct more in-depth analysis of the survey data, with the intention of publishing further findings. For more information about the survey, please contact the researchers:

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About Vispero and TPGi

Vispero® (www.vispero.com) is the world's leading assistive technology provider for visually impaired people. We have a long history of developing and providing innovative solutions for blind and low-vision people that help them reach their full potential.

TPG Interactive (TPGi) (www.tpgi.com) is a world-class accessibility consultancy with a reputation for excellence. We help clients achieve end-to-end accessibility in their digital assets, including websites, native mobile applications, documents, kiosks, and software. We also provide strategic and tactical support in embedding accessibility and disability inclusion into all processes and procedures that influence the creation, management, and procurement of digital assets. We work with our clients on a worldwide basis and across all vertical markets.

TPGi offers accessibility consulting to assist with creating an accessible kiosk through **JAWS for Kiosk** – world-leading JAWS screen reader technology with kiosk-specific features enabled for a seamless user experience.