



Groundswell

REGIONAL ARTS SURGING FORWARD
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Tributary 1.2 Audience Development

Audience Development for People with Disabilities

by KIERSTEN FISHBURN, Accessible Arts (NSW)

The audience development position focusing on people with disabilities is located in Accessible Arts, the peak arts and disability organisation in NSW. This position was originally funded as a two to three year trial by both the Australia Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts.

The establishment of the audience development position recognised that people with disabilities are one of the most under-serviced (and untapped) communities – in fact the disability sector is often spoken of as the last great market. The reasons for the under-servicing of the disability community are varied and include:

- A failure to recognise that people with disabilities comprise approximately 20% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- Poor physical access in Australian arts environments
- Poor provision of services to assist in meeting access needs generally (for example, hearing loop systems or Braille text)
- An “out of sight, out of mind” philosophy about people with disabilities; this reflects many years of institutionalisation for people with disabilities in Australia
- A homogenised view of the experience of disability (for example, assuming that providing wheelchair ramps meets all people with disabilities needs)
- A belief that catering for the needs of people with disabilities would be overly expensive
- A general lack of awareness about how to attract, meet the needs of and service the disability community wishing to access the arts

It soon became apparent during the first year of the audience development position that it was the last of the factors that was particularly inhibiting the arts from making any changes or providing any services for people with disabilities. The willingness and desire to meet the needs of the disability community was amply there; however, the knowledge of how to set about doing this was extremely low!

Therefore, a significant part of the audience development position has involved undertaking education and training and providing resources to help the arts and cultural sector self educate and monitor their work. These resources have ranged from training targeted towards particular organisations or events, to the development of specific modules on disability awareness that have been developed to meet the needs of the arts community (contact TAFE NSW Access Unit for further information about these modules).

One of the most important things an arts organisation can do to start improving its services for people with disabilities is to undertake some form of disability awareness training. This will have many benefits. Not only will you be able to better predict and identify services or opportunities for the disability market, it will also help all staff feel more comfortable about planning for visitors with disabilities and about making access changes. Undertaking disability awareness training will also help inform you about your legal access requirements under the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992). For more general information about this Act see http://www.humanrights.gov.au/disability_rights/

Disability awareness training can be provided by a number of different organisations, these include:

- Members of the DADAA (Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts Australia) network. Accessible Arts is the NSW member of this network.



- Disability organisations in your community
- Access consultants
- TAFE courses

Ensuring that your organisation is 'disability aware' will help break down one of the largest barriers to accessing the arts identified by people with disabilities themselves. Consistently identified (including in the Australia Council report, "Disability and the Arts") as the most crucial thing that will encourage or deter a person with a disability from attending an arts event or venue is the attitude of that organisation to them. Genuinely demonstrating your desire to have audiences of people with disabilities, and your commitment to access and inclusion, will significantly improve your reputation of being 'disability friendly'. There are a number of ways you can set about becoming more inviting to people with disabilities. These include:

- Ensuring you use access symbols on all your publicity, etc, material. (The best known access symbol is the one for wheelchair access; there are symbols for a whole range of other services as well. See www.gag.org for copies of these symbols.)
- Ensuring language is inclusive. Make sure the words you use are not discriminatory and that you clearly convey your services or opportunities for people with disabilities
- Ensuring that you are honest about what is available. One of the most important things for people with disabilities is to have enough information to help them plan a visit or experience. This will include identifying if any areas in your building or environment cannot be accessed and if you have provided any specific services for the disability community, such as braille information. If you aren't sure about your physical access you may want to have an 'access audit' done of your environment. These can be done by an access consultant, or Accessible Arts has a guide that you can follow to help you look at your own space.
- Including disability media and disability groups as part of your usual marketing and promotional plans.
- Providing services that meet the needs of different disability groups. These could range from sign interpretation for the deaf community (Auslan is the name of Australian sign language), to special opportunities or education programs, to tactile experiences for people who are blind.

The single most effective way to develop your organisation as 'disability friendly' and to therefore encourage audiences of people with disabilities is to actively involve the disability community. I strongly encourage all organisations, large and small, to directly consult with people with disabilities about what services they are interested in, any access issues you may have, and to assist with marketing and promotion of what you have available. This consultation can take the form of:

- Establishing an access committee made up of members of the community with disabilities or representatives from disability organisations (this is particularly effective in Regional communities as it helps significantly with 'word of mouth')
- Ensuring that people with disabilities are represented on your management committees, boards or any advisory groups
- Actively recruiting staff or volunteers who have disabilities
- Holding open discussions or forums about access or the inclusion of people with disabilities in your arts activities and programs

Encouraging the involvement of people with disabilities, and turning to the disability community for their expert advice is the easiest way to make sure that you get it right, and should hopefully eliminate a lot of fears about not providing the right services – after all, the best person to tell you about disability, is a person with a disability themselves.

As people with disabilities are 20% of the population, any changes you make will already impact on a significant percentage of your community. It is also important to remember that people with disabilities all have friends, families, colleagues, etc, who may be reluctant to use your services if you fail to provide adequately for the disability community. The services you make to meet the needs of people with disabilities will also benefit many other sectors of the community. The obvious example of this is wheelchair ramps assisting parents with prams, others may include large print assisting young readers or people who do not speak English or better signage making movement through an area easier for everyone. Therefore, thinking proactively about your audiences of people with disabilities is a way of ensuring a universal accessibility for all your audience/s.

Audience development involves identifying your audience, meeting your audience needs, promoting to your audience and most importantly ensuring that you are inclusive of all audiences. The benefits to inclusive thinking about people with disabilities are many: developing a large and loyal audience, meeting your legal requirements, adding diversity and difference to all arts experiences and developing universal accessibility

benefiting the entire community. And while these may seem lofty ideals, they are achievable through acknowledging the importance of audiences of people with disabilities and working collaboratively to reach the same goal – that is, the full access of people with disabilities to all arts and cultural experiences and opportunities.

— Kiersten Fishburn, Audience Development Officer, Accessible Arts, NSW

**Kiersten can be contacted on 02 9251 6499 or Email kiersten@aarts.net.au.
She is happy to answer any questions, or to provide specific advice or resources.**

