TRIPTIPS

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Access guides are useful tools, but why should a city create one, and what goes into their production? Having produced a guide for Chicago, the author provides insights.

In the best of all possible worlds, everything would be accessible to everyone and access guides a thing of the past. For now, however, universal access remains a work in progress and, especially for travelers to unfamiliar cities and countries, access guides can make trip planning a whole lot easier. Even in our more progressive cities, how many restaurants still have one or more entry steps or no accessible restroom? And outside the US, finding a place to eat, lay one's head or even an accessible crosswalk can be a real challenge.

If access guides are here to stay, then why aren't there more of them? Put simply, because they're labor intensive and therefore expensive to create and keep up to date. Nonetheless, they're still a worthwhile endeavor, saving time and money for potential visitors with disabilities, positioning a destination as welcoming to all and encouraging locals including seniors and families to get out and enjoy their area.

The first and biggest challenge in creating a guide is to find funding. State and city tourism or development bureaus are one good source, but you'll need to make the business case. How large is the potential market—locally, nationally, internationally? Between the Census Bureau and Open Doors Organization research on travelers with disabilities, it's now possible to find reliable statistics, at least for the U.S. Once the first guide comes out, it's easier to convince those listed to advertise, which can be critical to supporting the guide long term.

A second set of decisions awaits, namely who your target audience is and what access features to include. Some guides are just for individuals with restricted mobility while others provide information for those with sensory, cognitive and medical disabilities as well. The latter approach has the advantage of encompassing a wider audience, including the fast-growing older population, and therefore tends to be more attractive to foundations or government entities who want the broadest possible impact for their dollar.

Since it's not possible to include every access detail for every type of property, qualitative research may be needed to investigate what key elements are important to each user group. When AAA created their *Barrier-Free Travel* guides, they conducted focus groups around the country that included people with all types of disabilities, including those of short stature. This is a good way to ensure that the guide actually achieves its intended purpose of providing the information that people really need in planning their visit or outing.

For a smaller city, selecting the properties to include is a relatively easy task, but for larger cities you will need to narrow the universe. Beginning with properties already included in the tourism bureau Web site or literature is one simple solution. The Mayor's Office on Disability or your local Center for Independent Living, if you have one, may be able to provide a list of accessible hotels, restaurants or attractions. The next step is to call each property to prescreen for basic access, asking specific questions like "Are there one or more steps at your entrance?" or "How many guest rooms with roll-in showers do you have?"

The decision on how to gather the access data, whether by external audit or self-administered survey, generally is determined by the size of the budget, number of properties, time frame and how reliable you want the data to be. There have been various attempts to improve the reliability of self-administered access surveys, but they will never measure up to an audit by an access specialist who is unaffiliated with the particular property. In some cases, however, the extent of the survey makes self-administered questionnaires the only viable option. A prime example is the recent Hotels.com settlement which requires the company to gather and post access information on all the hotels they list and within a nine-month period.

External audits, of course, have their own challenges. Getting buy-in from the properties, in particular hotels, can be an uphill battle, especially if the area has

been a target of "drive by" lawsuits. It may be necessary to get the local or national hotel association to vouch for the project and for your good intentions. Then comes an especially critical task, finding and training the auditors. While this provides a great opportunity to employ people with disabilities, it's not always easy to find individuals with the right combination of qualities and skills. In addition to an outgoing personality and non-confrontational manner, the person must be committed to the project and extremely detail-oriented. Stamina is also important since one hotel inspection can take up to two hours. If the budget allows, a team approach with two auditors working together can help assure accuracy and accommodate a team member's disability. Close supervision and quality control are of utmost importance throughout the project, from data collection through entry and reporting.

How to present the data and in what format are other important decisions. Web-only guides are much cheaper to produce and update, with worldwide distribution virtually cost-free, but not everyone has access to the Internet. Print guides can easily be carried along for reference and are handy for tourism bureaus and hotel concierges to give out. The ideal is to create guides in both media, even if the print guide can only be reissued every second year. *Easy Access Chicago*, for example, is available online and in an abridged print version. While the Web site has a searchable database for hotels, the print guide presents hotel data in the form of a table to fit a lot of detail into a little space.

Whether or not to rank properties or use symbols in guides are other choices that need to be made, along with the level of detail to report. The goal is to create a resource that's well organized and easy to use, with enough detail for the individual to decide if a particular property meets his or her needs. Presenting information by type of disability allows people to skip the sections they don't require. Some Web guides such as the UK's DisabledGo not only provide great detail, but even have photos of the various access elements. It also uses symbols very effectively. Obviously, by partnering with a major retail chain, this organization tapped into enough resources to create what might be called the "Cadillac" of guides. A much simpler example online is that of Accessible San Diego, now in its 17th edition. Now that's a record to emulate!

Online Guides

Access Guide Canada
www.abilities.ca/agc

Access Northern California
www.accessnca.com

Accessible Barcelona
www.accessiblebarcelona.com

Accessible Ireland
www.accessibleireland.com

Accessible San Diego
www.asd.travel

DisabledGo
www.disabledgo.info

Easy Access Chicago
www.easyaccesschicago.org

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