



## Towards Strategic Intent: Perceptions of disability service provision amongst hotel accommodation managers

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Disability  
Vision  
Hearing  
Mobility  
Hotel  
Lodging  
Accommodation  
Service  
Social model  
Attitude  
Management perception

### ABSTRACT

The tourism sector globally has become increasingly mindful of how an ageing population is reshaping service provision forms and offerings. This being particularly true of accommodation operations where there is a now a growing recognition of the commercial value for providing market groups with exceptional service. With this in mind, this study sought to ascertain the perceptions of managers in the accommodation sector towards disability service provision with a view to identifying any current service gaps or failings. An inductive, qualitative approach was used with the data collection phase incorporating a series of one on one interviews and a focus group. The in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 managers of hotels deemed to have accessible rooms that complied with the relevant building codes and standards. A focus group comprised 22 managers of hotels located in the Sydney central business district, Australia. Study findings revealed five key themes that had not been previously discussed in the literature. They were: inclusive attitudinal approach; safety; the responsibility of people with a disability to communicate their needs to the hotel; perceptions of accessible rooms by the general public; and operational processes. Related themes that emerged from the data analysis that had previously been aligned with the literature included: legislative responsibility, policy and building codes; disability as a market segment; staff awareness/training; and language, marketing, and promotion information. Implications with respect to management of accessible rooms in the accommodation sector are outlined and further areas of research are proposed.

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### 1. Introduction

The importance of the global tourism industry appropriately addressing the basic needs of people with disabilities (PwD) has been further reinforced through the recent establishment of the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations, 2006). Over the last decade, the economic contribution of PwD to tourism has been documented in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia (Buhalis et al., 2005; Dwyer and Darcy, 2008; HarrisInteractive Market Research, 2005; Neumann and Reuber, 2004; Van Horn, 2007). Yet, despite such human rights and economic arguments, access to all components of tourism still remains a significant constraint for PwD (Daniels et al., 2005; Darcy, 1998; Smith, 1987; Turco et al., 1998). For PwD, accommodation continues to be a critical constraint because of the requirements for accessible accommodation as a prerequisite for an overnight trip

(Avis et al., 2005; Bi et al., 2007; Burnett and Bender-Baker, 2001; Darcy, 2002, 2010; Pegg and Stumbo, 2010; Turco et al., 1998; Yau et al., 2004). This is because if PwD cannot find suitable accommodation that meets their access needs, by necessity, they change their destination choice or do not travel. In many cases, PwDs prime holiday determinant is finding accommodation that can adequately meet their needs. This is in stark contrast to the nondisabled who in most cases are able to make do with any form of available accommodation if they really have a desire to travel to a destination.

There are over 650 million PwD living in the world and a growing number of people aged 65 and over that have higher levels of disability as they age (Genoe and Singleton, 2009). Over a hundred nations have implemented disability discrimination legislation with the United States having the longest history with the introduction of the *Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990*. Yet, the enactment of legislation does not guarantee that disability discrimination will not occur or that industry sectors proactively address disability access requirements (Grady and Ohlin, 2009). For example, the Australian *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)* was introduced in 1992 with the intent of ensuring equitable provision of services and opportunities for PwD, accommodation choice remains a major area of concern. Recently all the complaint cases

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brought under the DDA were analysed with one of the key findings being that approximately 12% of all cases were accommodation related (Darcy and Taylor, 2009). Given this finding, it is perhaps interesting to note that most system and market approaches to conceptualising tourism are centred on the tourist and the industry responses to servicing their touristic needs (Leiper, 2003). Yet, this does not appear to be the case for PwD as a great deal of previous demand based research has identified that their needs are not being met to the same degree or do not appear to have the same priority as those of the nondisabled (Avis et al., 2005; Bi et al., 2007; Burnett and Bender-Baker, 2001; Darcy, 2002; Turco et al., 1998; Yau et al., 2004).

Darcy's (2010) review of the demand side accommodation literature recognised that it was a significant constraint to the tourism experiences of PwD. In particular, these constraints included: a lack of accessible accommodation; provision of accessible accommodation that did not comply with the access standards; a lack of importance attributed to the role of accommodation in terms of overall trip satisfaction trip; problems locating accessible accommodation even when it did exist; and the inadequate level, detail and accuracy of information (Darcy, 2010, p. 818). While it is clear from the literature that there has been a great deal of investigation over the last decade into understanding the demand side of disability tourism experiences, it is also true that relatively little exploration has occurred with respect to supply side issues.

Given the identified lack of research in the supply side of service provision, this study sought to investigate the perceptions of accommodation managers to servicing the needs of PwD. More particularly, the study also sort to identify the approaches they take with respect their accessible accommodation stock given their *policies and practices* that constitute *service delivery*. The paper first reviews supply side issues of the accommodation sector provisions for PwD. This is followed by an examination of the social model approach to disability and the application to creating enabling tourism environments. The paper then outlines the research design used for this study before presenting the research findings and discussion.

## 2. Review of supply side research

Israeli (2002) noted that site accessibility is a precursor to tourism experiences for PwD. Yet, it is argued that many sites and accommodations do not offer the level of accessibility that many PwD require. Moreover, it is suggested that PwD use a different set of rules to evaluate sites than the nondisabled. These two points are, in themselves, critical as other researchers have consistently reported that access is a significant constraint to the tourism experiences of PwD (Avis et al., 2005; Bi et al., 2007; Burnett and Bender-Baker, 2001; Darcy, 1998; Turco et al., 1998). Yet, as Yau et al. (2004) have rightly argued, travelling with a disability is more than an access issue. Rather, it involves a series of interdependent and overlapping factors, each of which need to be fully considered. For example, for a tourism trip to occur, it requires the organisation of all sectors of the tourism industry through the stages of travel (in its most simple form) – anticipation and planning; travel to the destination; on-site experience; return travel; and reflection or through a tourism system (Leiper, 2003). The accessibility of these processes affects the overall tourism experience for the individual involved. Yet, this experience has a further level of complexity based on the dimension of disability (mobility; vision; hearing; or cognitive) (Darcy, 2010) and the level of support requirements (Burnett and Bender-Baker, 2001; Darcy, 2010).

Accessible accommodation stock makes up a small percentage of the overall accommodation stock (Darcy, 1998; Murray and Murray, 1995). Murray and Murray (1995) attempted to quantify

this by estimating that there are only 50 wheelchair accessible rooms in Melbourne. Similarly, Darcy (1998) identified that there was no inventory of wheelchair accessible rooms in Sydney, Australia and estimated that there were only 150 accessible rooms within the Sydney CBD room supply of 20,000 rooms or 0.75%. The common factor to both studies is that most accessible accommodation stock was built from 1985 onwards due to the improvement in the Australian Building Codes and the boom in 4–5 star accommodation over the 1985–1990 period (Griffin, 1989). Internationally, Tantawy et al. (2005) quantified the proportion of accessible rooms as 0.60% of room stock for Egyptian 5 star hotels.

O'Neill and Ali Knight (2000), investigated the Western Australian tourism industry perceptions of providing services for PwD as well as the level of accessibility of Western Australian hotels. The outcomes of the study focused on information provision, education and training, and accessibility issues. The major finding study was that, "Without doubt the biggest threat faced by the hotel industry... is its very ignorance of its obligations under the legislation" (O'Neill and Ali Knight, 2000, p. 171). This finding was supported by disability organisations whose own dealings with industry reflected this lack of understanding. Yet, while the majority of hoteliers invested in continuous training and development, none included programs to train staff for service provision for PwD.

Upchurch and Seo (1996) survey of American hotel and motel operators' compliance with the *Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990* (ADA) sought to measure: the level of physical compliance with the ADA; plans to meet or exceed ADA requirements; and barriers that impeded compliance. The findings suggested firstly that total compliance had not been achieved in a range of physical compliance factors (31%) including approach, entry/elevators and rooms. Secondly, there was a lack of understanding of the legislation, although the researchers did not regard this as a barrier to compliance. Thirdly, the sector regarded financial constraints as a major barrier to compliance. Upchurch and Seo's major conclusion was that accommodation operators must properly market their products and services. Operators had not done this for PwD but did it for other market segments. In concluding they argued that operators needed to be aware that they have a social responsibility for meeting the needs of PwD as well as a legislative requirement to do so.

The two previous supply side perceptions studies concluded that accommodation managers did not understand the access features of their rooms or provide any level of detailed information beyond whether an establishment had a 'disabled room'. In a Turkish study Ozturk et al. (2008) e-surveyed 252 hotel managers about industry readiness to meet the needs of PwD where their findings were remarkably optimistic in that while the Turkish managers regarded disability as a new group who they had not previously considered and that they recognized that sector had weaknesses in providing for the group, they believed that with strategic changes they would be able to accommodate the group. A series of structural recommendations were made to improve the conditions in the tourism industry for disabled customers.

Gröschl (2007) undertook a review of human resource policies and practices in Canadian hotels with respect to PwD in the hotel sector and came to the conclusion that an understanding of the tourist behaviour of PwD was an often overlooked but essential component of hotel operations. The accessibility of online service provision is a known supply issue where a number of studies have shown that there are particular disadvantages that people who are blind or vision impaired in accessing hotel websites (Mills et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2006). This is in itself a significant issue and the role and requirements for access information has been thoroughly explored by Eichhorn et al. (2008).

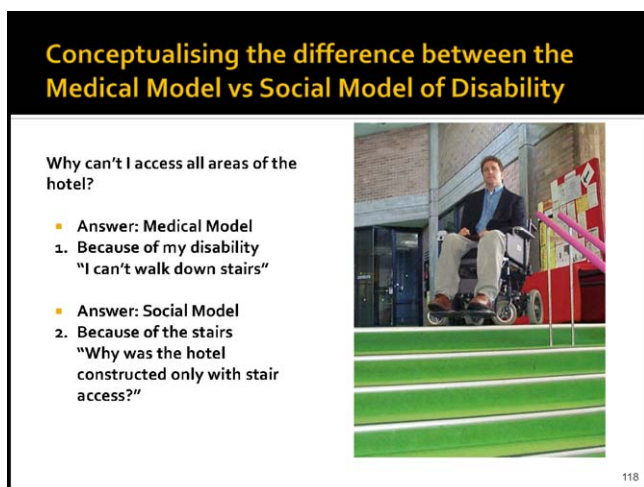


Fig. 1. Conceptualising the difference between medical and social approaches to disability.

### 2.1. Summary

The literature reviewing the supply side accommodation managers has been sporadic, covering a number of issues and countries. The major areas investigated in the research included:

- Supply of rooms;
- responsibilities of premises under legislative requirements;
- organisation experiences with PwD;
- disability as a market segment;
- information provision;
- human resource management practices; and
- staff training.

### 3. The social model of disability

The issues identified through the supply side literature are more often seen as the problems of PwD and equates to the dominant medical model worldview of disability as a medical problem that is a consequence of the person's impairment and their 'personal tragedy' (Oliver, 1996). A contrasting perspective suggests that the constraints are a product of the disabling tourism environment (Darcy, 2002), and in taking direction from the social model of disability, disabling environments are firmly placed on the social, cultural, economic and political agendas of government and the private sector (Barnes et al., 2010; Oliver, 1996; Swain et al., 2004). The social model of disability views disability as a product of the disabling environmental, social and attitudinal barriers that compound a person's impairment and prevent their participation in society. The model implies that the removal of disabling barriers serves to improve the lives of PwD, giving them the same opportunities as others. The strength of the model lies in its focus societal change and not the individual adapting to the disabling environment. Moreover, it is not the person's impairment that is disabling but the social exclusion that they are subjected to by environmental design or service attitude. For example, an individual with a given mobility impairment, is not disabled in an environment where he or she can use accessible public transport, gain full access to buildings and their respective facilities in the same manner that an individual without an impairment might do (Barnes et al., 2010). Fig. 1 provides a simple way of conceptualising the difference between medical and social approaches to disability.

In the tourism sense, the social model equates very strongly with the identification and rectification of the constraints to travel for

PwD that past demand studies have identified. Adding support for such an argument, another component are the 'hostile social attitudes' that PwD contend with on a daily basis. As a service industry, one of the significant determinants of the quality of tourism experience is the attitude of service providers. A less than ideal access situation can be made bearable through the accurate and detailed presentation of access information made in conjunction with a positive service attitude of providers to find solutions and make people feel that they are welcome (Darcy, 2010).

### 4. Research question

With this background, the study sought to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of accommodation managers to servicing the needs of PwD? and
2. What are their policies and practices towards their accessible accommodation stock?

### 5. Research design

An inductive, qualitative research design was undertaken utilising in-depth interviews, a focus group and an examination of any management information systems relating to disability. This study differed from those previously undertaken in that the population for this study was accommodation providers with rooms that comply to the Building Codes of Australia and the Australian Standards for access and mobility (Standards Australia, 2001). Using a sample frame of accommodation providers with compliant accessible rooms was considered critical, as it was believed that the operators of accessible premises could provide the best 'real world' insight into disability service provision as their experiences are based on a validated accommodation supply and, hence, PwD who have not been adversely affected by inaccessible rooms. This was an important delimitation of the study as it was recognised that many accommodation providers have facilities that predate the legislation with no immediate mandate requiring them to retrofit. Such premises are worthy of future research.

#### 5.1. Sample

A reliable accessible accommodation information source for the City of Sydney was used to make preliminary hotel selections (Cameron, 2000). One member of the research team was a qualified access auditor whose skills verified the compliance of the accessible rooms to the Australian Standards. Initially 30 premises were contacted with 15 later agreeing to be involved in the study. Due to scheduling difficulties, 12 field visits were undertaken with 10 premises included in the final sample. Interviews were requested with the staff member who had the greatest responsibility for accessible rooms and PwD. In-depth interviews were conducted with the following types of managers: 1 Front of Office Manager; 1 General Manager; 2 Reservations Manager; 2 Sales and Marketing Manager; 2 Director of Sales; 1 Director of Business Development; and 1 Public Relations Manager. Each interview lasted between 15 min to 2 h. The manager interviewed also showed the researcher the accessible features of the hotel and the accessible rooms. All accessible rooms of the hotels met access provisions but not all areas of the hotels were accessible. The population, rationales and questions addressed in the focus group were the same as for the in-depth interviews. The method differed for the focus groups in that a notice was placed in the association newsletter/discussion list about the proposed focus group, its location, time and date. People who expressed an interest were then sent an agenda. The sessions

were attended by 22 people from 14 separate Sydney hotels and included general managers, sales, marketing, promotion, building, maintenance and concierge services staff.

The focus group was facilitated by a nondisabled researcher to avoid any camouflaging of the managers' perceptions of disability that may have occurred if a PwD had facilitated the group (Ross, 1994, 2004). The focus group was observed by the principal researcher to allow for further note taking and issue preparation for the seminar. Minutes of the session were taken by another member of the research team and issues placed on a white board for participants to view as they emerged. The principal researcher, facilitator and second research team member then debriefed after the session and made further notes. The minutes were analysed for emergent themes by reading and keyword/phrase search.

## 5.2. Procedures and analysis

The interviews and focus group used an unstructured schedule interview as this format offers flexibility in conducting the interview by varying question order, the time spent on each category and, where appropriate, by investigating other avenues identified during the interview but not covered by the schedule (Denzin, 1989:105). Further, the unstructured schedule interview allows the interview to be constructed in a language that recognises individual differences or industry practices and hence, the experience of the individual managers and the sector in which they operate. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and spot-checked for accuracy. Each person interviewed who wished to receive a copy of the transcript was forwarded a copy for checking. Of the eight forwarded transcripts, two were returned. Both of the returned transcripts contained only minor editorial comments.

Initially, the data collected from the unstructured schedule interviews and open-ended survey responses were analysed using the qualitative research software, Leximancer. The Leximancer system is a new method utilising a software package to transform lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns. It uses a two stage process – semantic and relational – for extracting co-occurrence data using a different algorithm for each stage (A. Smith and Humphreys, 2006, p. 262). Importantly, its use as a means of text mining has been shown to lead to opportunities for hoteliers to develop competitive and strategic intelligence (Lau et al., 2005). With this in mind, software was used to analyse the study data to create a relational map. The intent of the generated map was to outline major concepts identified in the interviews as well as their relationship with other second tier variables. This initial phase of assessment, which effectively served as a means of filtering and categorising large amounts of raw data to offer the researchers some degree of insight into the respondents thoughts and views, was then followed by a more in-depth and traditional form of researcher intensive typological analysis. According to Howe and Brainerd (1988), typological analysis refers to the division of information into categories or groups '... on the basis of some canon for disaggregating a whole phenomenon' (1988:314). In turn, each of these typologies formed a category in which to place data. Henderson (1991) described this form of content analysis as a process used to analyse records, documents, letters, transcribed conversations or any textual item. Importantly, the form of analysis undertaken drew upon the social model theoretical perspective and discourses presented earlier in the paper.

## 6. Findings and discussion

This section documents the perceptions of managers from the accommodation sector towards the provision of services for PwD. The sample represented hotels and motels built from 1961 to 2000

in the greater Sydney area. The premises ranged from three to five stars with a wide range of associated facilities and services. Five themes that had not been encountered in the literature were identified. These were:

- inclusive attitudinal approach;
- safety;
- need for PwDs to communicate their needs to the hotel;
- perceptions of accessible rooms; and
- operational issues with assistive equipment.

The other emergent themes, had been discussed in the literature previously, had to do with a combination of customer service and technical considerations. They are:

- legislation, policy and building codes;
- PwD as a market segment;
- staff awareness/training; and
- language, marketing, and promotion information.

Each of the major considerations for the emergent themes will now be discussed. Table 1 provides a selection of representative quotes for each emergent theme and is presented instead of presenting the quotes as a narrative within the body of the text.

### 6.1. Inclusive attitudinal approach

The predominant finding from the interviews and the focus group was that there was a desire by those involved to provide a high quality experience for PwD. All managers recognised that providing high quality customer service for PwD required an understanding of their individual needs and that there should be no difference in servicing PwD and the nondisabled. This suggests that from a social model perspective, the manager's attitude toward service provision for the group was inclusive and could not be considered a constraint to an enabling tourism environment (Barnes et al., 2010; Swain et al., 2004). This is a good starting point for any form of service provision in the hotel sector (Kuo, 2009; Saleh and Ryan, 1991). Yet, a series of constraints, omissions, differences in service provision for PwD than other guests in the areas of technical aspects, built environment, communication, human resource management, and distribution were identified that did create a disabling tourism environment. These will be discussed as part of the discussion of the emergent themes.

### 6.2. Safety

The findings identified the importance of being aware of PwD (particularly mobility, hearing and vision) and communicating evacuation procedures from their rooms in cases of emergency. One member of the focus group identified planning issues related to hosting conferences attended by people with vision disabilities, including safety and way finding issues as critical to customer service. The hotel had undertaken a staff-training day facilitated by the Royal Blind Society where providing orientation and wayfinding assistance included understanding the safety and evacuation procedures. It was noted that the day had proven invaluable in ensuring the successful hosting of a conference and consequently the organisation guaranteed to hold its annual conference at the hotel for a five-year period.

All aspects of safety and emergency egress are a matter considered as being a critical consideration for the organisations (Fewell, 2008; Graham and Roberts, 2000). The advantage of compliance requirements of these considerations is that the issue must be addressed by the organisation's occupational health and safety programs, creating an awareness of disability issues with a resulting

**Table 1**  
Emergent themes and representative quotes.

Emergent theme	Representative quote
Inclusive attitudinal approach	"...it should be better than home so that we are delivering a memorable experience in that regard." "So in terms of the general holiday experience is that, if you have got someone in a chair, they need to be part of the whole experience".
Safety	"I have a liability as general manager of the hotel to ensure that everyone has safe access to use all the facilities of the hotel and whether that is a ramp or making sure that something that is broken or dangerous is fixed, or highlighted for repair". "...One particular example concerned the number of staff required to evacuate blind people in case of fire".
Communication of needs	"...difficult if they do not mention if they have a disability which makes it difficult to cater for their needs".
Public's perception of accessible rooms	"...the general public don't like to stay in those rooms." "...perception of market is that adapted rooms are of a lower standard". "They'll see that there's some water on the floor and realise it's the roll-in shower, and suddenly they find fault with the room, and once they have found something to complain about, they will keep going".
Assistive equipment	"...equipment which is specific for particular areas where access is poor like where we use stair climbers...all staff are trained to use this equipment".
Legislation	"I don't know anything specific but I know that certainly from a construction point of view there were guidelines that had to be followed". "...there are problems in the adherence to minimum building codes. Instead of designing to provide the best possible disabled room they designed to provide the minimum features required for an accessible room".
Market segment	"It's interesting that seniors market is one we're trying to tap into at the hotel and the reason for that is because they've got disposable income and they've got time off during the week... but we hadn't thought of the disabled". "...problems created by lack of information/knowledge rather than not wanting to do it".
Staff training	"...this training is mainly in cases of emergencies". "At induction staff are shown around the hotel, which includes the access rooms and its features are pointed out. There is no other formal training in respect of disability." "issues with staff training, the need to provide staff with the expertise to understand the dimensions of disabilities and provide the confidence for staff to be able to interact with people with disabilities"
Language, marketing and promotion	"we don't do anything specific to access apart from mentioning something on our brochure or a fact sheet that we have X number of suites that a wheelchair accessible." "...in chain of command between consumer and accommodation service provider the information concerning special needs the specific information concerning this needs tends to get lost in the chain".

advantage from the consumer's perspective (Graham and Roberts, 2000). Yet, while the safety of all guests is paramount to hotels, this consideration seemed to dominate the mindset of managers with respect to PwD. This theme may also have a connection to staff training where a greater familiarity with disability related issues may alleviate some of these concerns and provide a more robust understanding on which to operationalise emergency egress plans.

### 6.3. Individuals to identifying their needs to the hotel

Linked to safety was the issue of PwD identifying their disability type and access needs direct to the hotel staff. As Fewell (2008) noted, he had spent hundreds of nights in hotels while undertaking his professional commitments as a marketing executive, he had only once been asked about whether he required assistance in the event of a fire. Even if staff are vigilant at checking with people with visible disabilities, self-identification of people with *invisible* disabilities, or those travelling with partners or attendants, and who therefore did not have direct contact with hotel staff is far more problematic. The example was given by one interviewee of a Deaf person staying independently but who did not indicate to staff that they have a disability. If a fire alarm was to be activated and the staff were not aware of the individual, how would staff know that this person would not respond to the alarm or know to knock on the door?

This issue also concerns PwD taking responsibility for their individual safety. These findings are interesting in context to Drabek's (2000) North American survey of manager and customer atti-

tudes towards disaster evacuations, which found that managers queried whether there is an obligation to provide assistance to PwD. Interestingly, there were major gaps between the expectation of customers and the policy of managers for disaster evacuations (Drabek, 2000, p. 55). For people with hearing impairments, they are unable to hear audible alarms and require the installation of visual alarm systems within their rooms. Within the Australian context, the Deafness Forum developed a relationship with an accommodation association to agree on a minimum set of inclusions for the group. Those hotels who comply, are listed on a website that collaboratively markets to this sector of the disability community (Deafness Forum & HMAA, 2005).

### 6.4. Perception of accessible rooms by the nondisabled

When PwD are not using accessible rooms, they may be allocated to nondisabled guests, often on a 'last sale' basis. However, managers indicated that this can cause problems. They acknowledged that many accessible rooms had historically been located in the parts of hotels with poorer vistas and were not offered across all classes of accommodation (Darcy and Taylor, 2009; Goodall, 2002). All managers in this study reported that the nondisabled had made negative comments or complained about having to use a 'disabled room'. When probed further, the managers offered examples of the nondisabled perceptions of the rooms were of an inferior standard. For example, the inclusion of a hobless roll-in shower within an accessible bathroom was disliked because the lack of a fixed shower screen and hob creates a sense of 'openness' that affects the per-

ception of 'privacy' of those using the room. Further, due to the lack of a hob, if the builders had not got the gradient of the bathroom floor correct there was a tendency for water to 'flood' the whole of the bathroom floor and spill over into the hotel room. As a manager stated, "It can make (nondisabled) guests feel like they are idiots!"

Due to the need for greater circulation space for mobility aids the provision of a hobless, accessible shower is generally made at the expense of a bath/spa. What many nondisabled guests expect is missing in accessible rooms. Further, the design of many accessible bathrooms is of a rudimentary and 'clinical' nature with managers reporting that nondisabled guests commented that the 'disabled room' had an aesthetically unpleasant look. These considerations led to the perception of nondisabled guests that they were being 'ripped off' or disadvantaged by being given the 'disabled room' that did not have the same facilities as a standard room.

Apart from the belief that the rooms were of an inferior standard, a number of managers described an unexplained *fear* or aversion associated with the rooms with nondisabled people being offered the 'disabled room'. This attitude can be explained through the stigma and aversion literature and where people wish to avoid contact with others of difference (Goffman, 1997; Young, 2000). For whatever reason, these rooms were confronting to the nondisabled. The nondisabled subconsciously associated the use of an accessible room as being inferior in nature or with a belief that it was below their status as nondisabled people. These attitudes or perceptions of disability as difference or 'fear' or aversion have been theoretically investigated through the concept of *stigma* or *otherness* (Goffman, 1997; Young, 2000). These ideas will be explored further in the language, marketing and promotion theme.

#### 6.5. Operational issues

A number of premises used assistive equipment where some areas were not compliant with the Building Code of Australia and the referenced Australian Standards for access and mobility (Standards Australia, 2001). The equipment included ramps, stair climbers, inclinators and porch lifts. Managers reported that staff were trained in the use of the equipment during their induction program at the hotel and customers were told upon check-in of the areas of the hotel that required assistive equipment and how to contact staff to deploy such equipment if needed.

These procedures were put in place to provide PwD with a comparable level of access and service to other customers. Staff from one hotel reported that it regularly had groups of wheelchair users who did require the use of portable ramps to reach one of the hospitality areas. The ramp was fixed in place upon their arrival until after they had booked out of the premises. When probed as to why they had not made that area accessible on a more permanent basis, the manager stated that "we hadn't considered doing that". This statement serves to support the argument raised previously by social model approaches that often the constraints facing PwD are a product of the disabling tourism environment rather than anything related specifically to the individual with disability. Yet, rather than proactively addressing the identified built environment constraint by creating an enabling environment (Barnes et al., 2010; Swain et al., 2004), management placed this group at a disadvantage by having to ask for "special provisions" each time they wanted to access an area, which compromised the equality of experience and independence of access.

#### 6.6. Legislation, policy and building codes

Unlike the research findings reported by O'Neill and Ali Knight (2000), most managers involved in this study recognised that the DDA and building regulations dictated that modern hotels should have 'disabled rooms'. The understanding of what consti-

tuted *accessible* rooms varied greatly and was very much dependent on the role and previous employment history of the manager. By and large, building/maintenance managers were more aware of disability related standards than were their sales, marketing and reception colleagues. Yet, there was no recognition that access extended beyond the rooms to all areas of the hotel (e.g. gymnasiums, swimming pools, outdoor environments, nightclubs and bars). Many managers recognised problems with the accessibility of their general facilities but only a few had a strategy in place to address these issues. There was also less awareness of how the legislation and policy affected all areas of service provision so that PwD should have an equality of experience to that of the nondisabled, which is the basis of the international convention (United Nations, 2006).

It was clear from the responses that some managers (particularly general, building and maintenance managers) had detailed experience and understanding of the Building Codes of Australia. One general manager was directly involved with an initiative a Western Australian initiative to raise disability awareness amongst the sector (Disability Services Commission (WA), 1997). This manager recognised the importance of the age of the premise, the degree of interaction of staff with PwD, and the approach taken by management to incorporate disability issues into staff training. The hotel had a decade-long involvement with a major disability-sporting event and this on-going experience had helped develop a greater staff understanding about their responsibilities under the legislation. For example, the manager recognised that the premises had a number of substantial access-related constraints. Yet, these significant structural constraints to an enabling tourism environment were considered easy to overcome in the Turkish context (Ozturk et al., 2008), which suggests a clear lack of understanding of the complexity of the built environment context (Darcy, 2010).

While there will always be access issues to be addressed for individuals, the manager of the hotel highlighted above also recognised that operationally they had extra responsibility to accurately inform PwD as to the premises level of provision and to make whatever 'modifications or adjustments' were necessary to facilitate a more satisfying experience. Successful operations had been noted for their detailed access information provision to provide PwD with an informed position on which to make a decision about the suitability of the accommodation for their needs (Eichhorn et al., 2008). Interestingly, many of these adaptations reported by the various hotel managers were relatively simple in nature (e.g. raising the height of beds or removing bathroom doors to increase circulation space) yet were critical to meeting the expressed needs of the customer. As the manager noted, his level of understanding and responsibility would not have been possible without his involvement in an educative program and on-going experiences with PwD through the hotel's activities.

#### 6.7. PwD as a market segment

While there was generally a greater level of awareness of relevant disability legislation from an operational perspective, this could not be said of the reception, sales and marketing staff. Not surprisingly given this observation, was that there was little development of PwD as a market segment despite a series of studies on the economic contribution of disability to tourism (Buhalis et al., 2005; Darcy, 2003; Dwyer and Darcy, 2008; HarrisInteractive Market Research, 2005; Neumann and Reuber, 2004; Van Horn, 2007). The most common response was that if there were an expressed demand by PwD then they would see if this could be accommodated within the hotel. When probed further about what constituted accommodating this group the responses were vague. None of the hotels had actively pursued disability as a market segment. While four managers who had experience with PwD wheelchair sporting events and hosting a conference for people

who were blind, this involvement was reactive rather than strategic as the managers had responded to approaches by disability organisations.

The different dimensions of disability were unequally recognised by the managers. The focus of access issues was on access for wheelchair users, which is consistent with the requirements under the Australian Building Codes and relevant standards for access and mobility. There was some recognition of the needs of people with vision impairment or who are blind and to a lesser extent people with hearing impairments or who are Deaf. However, there was no recognition of people with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities. The management information systems of the premises reflected this narrow consideration of the four major dimensions of access requirements. The major industry association that provides accommodation information, also only focused on mobility access until the withdrawal of even this limited system of access awareness in 2006 (AAA Tourism, 2006).

A number of managers recognised the link between ageing and disability, and the substantial market that seniors offer. This was based on the demand from some seniors for accessible accommodation. One manager saw adapted rooms as having extra features to market in a very positive way to seniors. The features that seniors liked in accessible rooms were the handrails for mobility support, the hobless shower as a safety feature and the extra circulation space in rooms. These features that people with ambulant disabilities were fully examined in other Australian studies (Darcy, 2010; Ruys and Wei, 1998). It appears that a series of industry awareness strategies promoted by the Commonwealth and state governments appeared to have had little impact on the managers interviewed (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009; Disability Services Commission (WA), 2000; Office of National Tourism, 1998). These findings were supported a decade earlier by the observation of the CEO of the Tourism Task Force, who stated: 'To date, the tourism industry has not been smart enough to tap into the potential of the market or not good enough in meeting its moral responsibility in providing access for PwD' (Brown, 1999). For the majority of those interviewed, little appears to have changed up to 2010.

#### 6.8. Staff awareness and training

One manager stated, 'Staff training is crucial to the way PwD are treated' and went on to explain that if staff have not had experience of PwD then they were unsure of how to approach people or act in an appropriate manner. Having accessible premises was the starting point for providing services for PwD but if the staff themselves were ill prepared to provide appropriate customer service then a customer's needs cannot be adequately addressed. Three hotels had undertaken disability awareness training. Another manager noted that any training must be undertaken at all levels of the hotel to ensure a 'quality management' approach to servicing PwD. This was particularly important for managers of front line staff who were the ones in most contact with guests but which are also the positions that had the highest rate of staff turnover. It was observed that, unless managers discuss disability issues with new staff or formally have in place an orientation program that includes disability awareness, these issues could become lost with staff turnover, which is a noted industry-wide issue (Weaver and Opperman, 2000). Yet, despite this recognition, and consistent with the arguments presented in Stumbo and Pegg (2005), it was clear from the study findings that the majority of managers interviewed had not previously planned any disability awareness training.

Training issues have been discussed in the Australian context in the literature (Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005; Ross, 2004) but the extent to which disability issues are included in hospitality and tourism training curricula is unknown. The UN Convention and the DDA place a high value on education but there has been relatively

little investment by tourism industry associations in disability related training.

#### 6.9. Language, marketing, promotion and information distribution

A binding element of the findings is the interconnection between language, marketing, promotion and distribution channels as the way that accessible rooms are presented to PwD. Language is an important signifier of the conceptual approach to disability and has been identified as a priority area to claim and create an appropriate disability discourse (Corker and French, 1999; Linton, 1998). This issue became very apparent in regard to the managers' use of language when contrasted to appropriate language in the Australian context (e.g. Physical Disability Council of NSW, 2008). Generally, most of the managers interviewed referred to the disabled, the handicapped or to their disabled rooms or facilities. The language used by managers links back to the fear and aversion in using accessible rooms identified in the section on nondisabled perceptions of accessible rooms. These feelings are argued to directly stem from stigmatising language that creates a sense of otherness (Goffman, 1997; Young, 2000). Some used person-first language, discussing the needs of PwD and referred to their facilities as being accessible or our accessible rooms. Some sought to avoid direct reference to PwD at all. These contrasting uses of language have important marketing implications as one manager discussed the way that he positively markets the hotel's adapted rooms as having extra features, while another told the nondisabled guests that they would have to make do as 'all that's left is the disabled room'. These examples show how the language used and staff training were essential to the contribution to a positive marketing of accessible rooms.

An extension of the role of language and the basis for marketing was the absence of documentation of the accessible features of the premise or the accessible room. Most managers recognise that they had one or a number of 'disabled rooms' but had no further information available to describe the rooms in any detail. For example, none had developed a system of access audit or information collation. Consequently, it had not occurred to any of those interviewed to undertake marketing, promotion or distribution of information relating to the accessible features of the premises to PwD. For example, one manager, whose hotel has nine accessible rooms, was unaware that a hotel with this number of accessible rooms had a competitive advantage in attracting business groups of PwD, the response was: 'I hadn't thought about it that way before'. Most managers had no idea that there were commercially available access guides that they could use to market their rooms. The process for dealing with an inquiry from PwD was to respond to see if they could cater for the group within their own establishment on a case-by-case basis rather than developing a systematic approach to accessible information dissemination (see Eichhorn et al., 2008).

Consistent with the findings of McKercher et al. (2003), with respect to travel agents perceptions of PwD, for the managers interviewed the issue of 'accessible accommodation' meant accessibility of a hotel's 'disabled rooms'. Most recognised some key components rooms as the width of doorways, circulation space in the rooms, hobless shower and bed height. Yet, when asked what information they provided when they received an inquiry for an accessible room, they all stated that they simply confirmed that the hotel had 'disabled rooms'. No other information was provided on the accessible features of the premises including the recreational facilities that are so much part of the tourism experience. Some reported that people would ask very specific information (e.g. measurements) and they would try and provide that information to the customer if they could. Yet, even when these specifics were asked for, the information was only provided on an ad hoc basis

without the thought of developing a detailed information system of information provision for PwD as outlined by the literature as a foundation for servicing the market (Eichhorn et al., 2008).

With respect to information networks used by the accommodation sector, these extend beyond the consumer and the accommodation provider to the value chain between the consumer, wholesale and retail intermediaries. While accommodation providers expressed a trust in their intermediaries to showcase their premises, they were uncertain as to how the intermediaries represented their accessible product. This situation is perplexing as the managers did not provide the intermediaries with any information as to the accessibility of their premises. Again this is consistent with findings relating to travel agents where they often tell PwD that they would be best advised to organise the trip and accommodation themselves (Darcy, 1998; McKercher et al., 2003). What other group would be told by travel agents that their business was unwanted?

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has presented an investigation into the perceptions of managers toward service provision for PwD. The predominant finding from the interviews and the focus group were that, regardless of legislation and policy, there was a desire by those involved to provide a high quality experience for PwD. All managers recognised that providing high quality customer service required an understanding of their individual needs and that there should be no difference in servicing PwD and the nondisabled. This is critical as servicing disability is more than just a question of law and ethics. Rather, by creating enabling accommodation environments and welcoming service attitudes towards PwD ensures a competitive advantage due to the ageing population and the need to be at the forefront of innovation in a dynamic business environment.

While the managers had an inclusive attitude towards the group, there were other practices and omissions that saw service provision for PwD treated differently to that of other customers. This in itself suggests that either disability was not high on the agenda of managers or that they were camouflaging their attitudes towards the group (Ross, 1994; Ross, 2004). Five issues were identified by the managers that had not previously been found in the literature. These were: safety; the need for people with a disability to communicate their needs to the hotel; the perception of the accessible rooms by the nondisabled; and operational nature of assistive equipment. These issues are important considerations that identified a more sophisticated understanding of PwD and the nature of accessible accommodation than had been identified in past literature. Yet, this study has shown that far from embracing disability there are still a series of omissions that maintain a disabling accommodation environment. These include: no pro active approach to developing disability as a market segment; low levels of disability awareness/training; and no specific marketing and promotion information central to inform decision making for their access needs. Not surprisingly, Gröschl (2007) came to the conclusion that disability was overlooked as an essential component of hotel operations. By overlooking the detail of their needs, their inclusive attitude will not be supported by an enabling accommodation environment (Barnes et al., 2010; Swain et al., 2004).

Significantly, the study findings showed a lack of understanding by managers in what constitutes suitable accessible accommodation and an omission to document, market and promote this information to the group and their distribution channels. This distributive environment is as important as the physical environment in establishing enabling practices to change the constraints of poor quality information provision to the group. While other studies have identified the constraints that online environments create for people with vision impairments, this lack of detailed accom-

modation information specifically targeted to the planning needs of PwD is just as disabling to accommodation and, hence, destination choice (Eichhorn et al., 2008). This notion is not lost on tourism authorities in South Africa (Els, 2009), Australia (Dickson and Hurrell, 2008) and Finland (Downen and Smith, 2007) who have recently sought to better educate the sector about the opportunities this market presents and the enabling online and destination environment that they require. It is in the business interests of managers of hotels to better align their practices and services with the consumer interests of PwD and work towards creating enabling accommodation environments. This is more so given the implications of the United Nations (2006) *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities*. This research suggests that managers require a strategic intent on which to base a virtual access information, marketing and distribution system that value adds to the physical presence of the accessible features of their establishments.

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