**Virtual Concerts & Festivals**

**A Guidebook to**

**Accessibility Accommodations & Building Inclusion**

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**Introduction**

2020: the Year of the Virtual Event. As COVID-19 made its way around the world, concerts, festivals, and tours came to a screeching halt. Artists ranging from the local cover band all the way to Billboard-charting stars switched on to live stream, and festivals all around the globe moved to virtual formats. For years, people with disabilities have been advocating for greater online access to the arts, and when the entire world finally needed it, their request was granted at long last.

But just simply clicking “Go Live” on Facebook doesn’t mean that a virtual event is fully accessible: there are issues of closed captioning and translators, of modified programming for people with intellectual disabilities, text descriptions to allow for screen reading software to work for those with visual impairments. In the research for creating this guidebook, surveys indicated that 71% of virtual event attendees participated in an event they never would have without a virtual option. While virtual events present many challenges, they also present many opportunities to connect with new people in new ways. This guidebook is intended to help you, as an online event planner, navigate the world of virtual accommodations and create an inclusive online festival.

*Team Buy-In and Planning Ahead*

Every online event is unique, so the decision to move partially or totally online has to be decided according to the particular situation at hand. The most important element of all is having buy-in among the planning team: if those leading the event don’t fully understand or support the accessibility and inclusion accommodations in place, those elements won’t be well-executed. The team’s attitude towards these changes will also be hard to hide.

Consider how you will approach your team to introduce the ideas in this guidebook. If your team understands why accessibility and inclusion are important, they are more likely to fully support necessary changes and modifications. One important step could be defining disability and how widely it impacts everyone around us. In a broad sense, a disability is any condition of the mind or body that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities and to interact with the world around them. The World Health Organization estimates that about 15% of the global population has some form of disability[[1]](#footnote-1), with approximately 19% of the United States population represented by individuals with disabilities[[2]](#footnote-2): around 56.7 million people[[3]](#footnote-3).

Explaining how important festivals and concerts are to developing a sense of self and a sense of community can help further underline the importance of helping those with disabilities feel like they are welcome and celebrated. Establishing social relationships and connections to their community have proved challenging for individuals with disabilities, due in part to mobilization and communication challenges but also the stigma attached to disability[[4]](#footnote-4). While providing accessibility accommodation to ensure that people with disabilities are able to participate in an event, considerations should also be made to look for ways to help all attendees to make meaningful connections, build relationships, and feel a part of something larger than themselves. Translating a song with sign language makes it accessible, including performers with disabilities makes it inclusive.

The key to successfully creating an accessible and inclusive event is to incorporate accommodations into the initial planning phase, instead of scrambling to fix issues after the event is already rolling. This guidebook is intended to help you consider accessibility and inclusion at various stages of planning to help predict needs, issues, and possibilities with enough time to plan. Implementing every idea in this book is probably not feasible or realistic, especially all at once: the goal is moving the needle and including more voices at the table.

When everyone can participate, everyone benefits.

**In the Planning Phase**

**Assign a Lead**

Research has shown that events with limited accessibility but good customer service generally receive positive reports from attendees who desire to return. On the flip side, if an event has great accessibility accommodations but poor customer service attendees will generally be much angrier and much less likely to attend again. Committing to and preparing for great customer service may be the most cost-effective approach to improving the accessibility of your event.

The first step to building great customer service for accessibility accommodations is to designate a point person. This person should oversee all pre-event questions and communications regarding accommodations, real-time issues, and oversee staff and volunteer training regarding disabilities.

**Consider the Digital Platform**

Before you begin planning a virtual event, you will need to know what accessibility features are available on a platform. Below are some questions to consider when you are selecting a platform to use to host your event.

* Does the platform have information available about its accessibility options? If so, what options are available?
* Does the platform function with screen readers or screen enlargement software, external closed-captioning applications, etc?
* Are there reviews by users with different types of disabilities?
* Does the platform offer real-time captioning or support manual capturing by an outside source? Is captioning available on the live screen or require a separate window?
* Does the platform allow for sign language interpreters to stay visible throughout different viewing formats?
* Does the platform support keyboard shortcuts for those who may not use a mouse?
* Does the platform allow for computer-based or phone-based listening/speaking?
* Does the platform support screen readers or screen magnification via customizable interfaces?
* Does the platform provide multiple ways for attendees to ask questions or contribute to discussions?
* Does logging into the platform require inputting information to join or require multiple steps to sign in? Does the platform require creating an account?

**Consider the Format for a Virtual Event**

We all know that attending a virtual event can’t fully capture what it is like to attend an event in person, but there are several formatting considerations that can help enhance an attendee’s experience. Many people attend concerts and other events not just for their personal experience, but to engage with those around them as well. Below are some ideas to help foster feelings of social inclusion and community throughout a virtual event.

* **Built-In Breaks:** People with many different disabilities may need extra time to process information or to rest during an event. Having a ten-minute break once every hour gives everyone time to use the restroom or take a breather before soaking up more content.
* **Small Viewing Parties**: While some may not feel comfortable or be physically able to attend a large-scale event, they may be able to view the event with a small group of people in a home or other location. Presenting “viewing party” options encourages small groups of people to watch together and help recreate some of the communal experience that festivals typically bring. A special registration option for viewing parties might include a “festival in a box” option that provides select event merchandise, supplemental event items, or hosting tips.
* **“Speed Dating” Sessions**: Set aside some time in the schedule for randomized breakout rooms. Several platforms support opt-in sessions where event attendees are randomly paired in time-limited sessions. At in-person events often some of the best conversations and new friendships happen while waiting in line for food or walking from the parking lot. Providing an opportunity for spontaneous meetings can help foster new relationships among attendees no matter their location.
* **Real-Time Chat**: Dedicate an event member to be available for live chat features during all live content. This increases the opportunity for engagement with event attendees, and allows help to be sought out quickly and directly. While some challenges with this feature are discussed later on in the guidebook, it is an option to consider for those with platforms that support the option.

**Elements of Design**

* Ensure that fonts are easy to read, that text is large, and all colors have sufficient contrast (a good guide to check your colors is <https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/> )
* Provide all information in text format (not just graphics) so that it can be read by a screen reader
* Eliminate flashing or strobing lights or animations. If it absolutely must be included, put warnings at the beginning of any sessions containing this feature.
* Limit the number of website pages and click-throughs: this allows augmented communication device users to navigate and access information with ease
* A printable site map can help clarify all processes and communication
* Include accessibility symbols (see below) where appropriate

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|  | Sign Language Interpretation |
|  | Large print (size 18 and higher) available |
|  | Closed Captioning (subtitles) |
|  | Open Captioning (live transcription) |

**Training Staff & Volunteers**

There are several options available for preparing your staff and volunteers in creating an accessible and inclusive environment. If you have a local disability rights organization or service provider, reaching out to see what trainings they have available is a great option. This helps build community relations and allows your team to hear from trained professionals and often people with disabilities themselves.

If receiving training from an outside organization or group is not possible, below are some helpful thoughts to discuss with your team as a whole when you prepare for the event:

* Everyone is a person first. While preference may vary between individuals or certain identities, refer to individuals as a person first, their disability second (i.e. person with a disability vs disabled person, a child with Down Syndrome vs. a Down Syndrome child).
* Disability is never derogatory: referring to someone as “retarded,” “crippled,” or “idiotic” is harmful and offensive.
* Be mindful of jargon and slang: not everyone may be as familiar with the terminology of online events or the type of festival you are hosting. Explain acronyms and technical terms.
* Exercise patience and kindness when explaining to attendees how to use and engage with the online platform, especially if it is a new experience for them. Repetition, rephrasing, and demonstrating may all be necessary.

For anyone who will be involved in leading sessions, speaking publicly, or performing, here are some additional guidelines to share. Providing the list below as a checklist may be helpful to encourage accessibility and inclusion while allowing these speakers to thoroughly prepare.

* Caption any videos: If you are providing any video content not made by event staff, make sure they are captioned.
* Check color contrast: Slides should have a strong contrast between the background and font. Please contact (Accessibility Lead’s Name) if you would like assistance.
* In every session, be sure to introduce yourself and anyone else speaking. The best practice is for everyone to say their name each time they speak.
* Describe your slides/visuals: Summarize any information and important features out loud.
* Read questions, chats, and polls out loud: If polls or chat responses are included in the program, be sure to read conversations aloud. Pause long enough for everyone to respond between questions, knowing that it may take some longer than others.
* Provide your slides and resource lists as early before the event as possible: This allows us to offer printable versions to attendees who would benefit from a hard copy to follow along with.
* Be Ok with No Attendee Video: Please do not pressure or shame people about having their video features turned off. If attendees are comfortable turning their cameras on, they will do so.

**Consider the Budget**

* If the selected platform does not automatically support translation, what are the estimated costs of closed captioning or sign language interpreters?
* If you have your event materials and platform tested by people with disabilities before launching, what will you be compensating them for their time?
* Is your design team capable of implementing strong contrast, image descriptions, and alternative text? Are these elements able to be reasonably outsourced?

**Hiring Sign Language Interpreters**

If you decide that interpreters are the best fit for your event’s accommodations, here are some things to keep in mind:

* Hiring any interpreters should be done as early as possible
* Confirm that hired interpreters are certified and experienced. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) keeps a searchable directory of interpreters and their certifications (see Additional Resources for the link)
* Provide a detailed schedule and disclosure of how the event will be shared with the interpreters

**Notes on Captions & Subtitles**

There are key differences between subtitles, closed captions, and open captions, as they provide different benefits and often serve different functions.

* Subtitles only reflect the words being spoken in a video.
* Open captions are always visible and provide not just the words, but other important elements of a video such as emotional responses such as laughter, applause, descriptions of music, and sound effects.
* Closed captions provide the same content as open captions, but closed captions can be turned on or off by the viewer. Many platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, now offer closed captioning services as a basic feature.

**The Pre-Event Phase**

**Pause:**

Before you go public with your plans and materials, pause for a final evaluation. Consider reaching out to a disability rights organization or service provider to look over everything one last time before you hit publish: they may catch something no one else on your team has or be able to provide valuable insight. What information is assumed or biased? What functions are inaccessible or exclusive? Are the images you’re using to promote the event reflecting the accessibility and inclusivity you’ve been working hard towards?

**Point of Purpose:**

Publicly share all accessibility plans as early as possible. Include how accessibility will be implemented into the festival, what options are available, and how to contact the Accessibility Lead. Don’t just share it once: if you feel like you’re overcommunicating, you’re doing a great job.

Make sure any social media posts and emails include image descriptions and alternative text. Including an option to click a link to access a plain text version of event emails can be very helpful for people with visual disabilities.

**Preview:**

Provide a pre-event release informative video (with closed captions or sign language interpretation) demonstrating how to buy a ticket, interact with the platform, and find information on the website. The video should include different segments of the event, what accessibility accommodations are available, the schedule, and which events will be sensory-friendly.

Create a one-stop page on the event website for all information regarding accessibility information and accommodations. This page should be available before, during, and after the event, and in a printable format. Helpful items to include are:

* What accommodations are offered and how to access them
* The Accessibility Lead’s contact information
* A glossary of terms used frequently during the event
* A clear schedule
* Step-by-step information about how to use the platform
* Detailed descriptions of each event segment, including the format (Q&A, live performance, audience participation, etc.), age-appropriateness, special effects (especially strobe lighting), and length

**Process:**

When it comes to purchasing a ticket, aim for simplicity. If possible, avoid platforms that require attendees to make a new account or enter information over multiple pages. This is also a great time to get a better picture of what accommodations might best serve your audience: use it as an opportunity to include a brief survey about what each attendee requires. Include the Accessibility Lead’s contact information with the survey. It is also reasonable to set a deadline of 48 hours before the event to request any accommodations. See a sample of survey language below.

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| In order to fully participate in this event, I require:  Session interpretation in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Captioning: yes / no  Printable materials: yes / no  Other: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  For any questions or more information, contact (Accessibility Lead) at [accessibilitylead@eventname.com](mailto:accessibilitylead@eventname.com) or 123-456-7890 any time before or during the event. |

**Post-Event**

Consider offering an on-demand option to be accessed after the live event: some with disabilities find comfort in repetition and could benefit from being able to watch multiple times or being able to take breaks as needed. Others may find the real-time schedule too demanding or exhausting to keep up with.

The most important post-production item for accessibility and inclusion is a survey. This anonymous, simple tool can help you gather feedback on what your attendees appreciated, used, or didn’t find helpful about the accommodations provided. Some things to keep in mind before creating your survey:

* **Will you send it to all attendees, or just those who purchased an accessible ticket/indicated they had a disability?** Sending it to everyone may give you feedback from those who didn’t identify as disabled, but may provide you with an extensive amount of data to comb through.
* **Will you have selection-only responses or open responses?** Requiring a selection for answers means that you are looking for definitive answers and can be helpful in knowing exactly what services were utilized. Open responses will help you gain an understanding of how the event made people feel or allow them to write in their own ideas or suggestions.
* **Will you incentivize taking the survey?** Consider having a discount code for future tickets or merchandise in exchange for completing the survey to thank attendees for their time and thoughts.
* **How long will the survey be?** The longer the survey, the less likely people will be to complete it. Try to keep the survey brief, focusing on questions that will best inform next year’s planning.
* **What will you do with the responses?** Share the feedback with your staff and volunteers so they can know the impact of their work. Also think about sharing survey results on your social media or other public platforms alongside what adjustment you will make in the future based on the feedback.

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| Sample Survey  Thank you for taking the time to give us feedback on Event Name’s Accessibility & Inclusion services. We appreciate your thoughtfulness and honesty.   1. What accommodations did you access during the event? (answers should be accommodations your event provided) 2. What accommodations were not offered that would have helped you better access the event? (open response) 3. Did you feel included during the event? (yes/no/sometimes) 4. What could we do next year to help you feel more included? (open response) 5. Do you have any other feedback about the event this year? (open response) |

**The Big Idea**

Accessibility may seem an intimidating endeavor for those who are new to the process, terminology, and considerations. What it all really boils down to is being open to feedback from those who offer considerations on how your online events can be more accessible and inclusive. Creating an accessible and inclusive environment isn’t as simple as checking items off of a list, nor does it have a definitive stage of completion. Being inclusive is a matter of emphasis: there is no end destination to solving inequality or ableism.

As much as having a list of goals to have might help event planners consider accommodations they might otherwise not have, keeping accessibility in mind in all that we do is the ultimate goal. The work of storytellers and songwriters and event planners means always keeping innovation and adaptability at the forefront. Real and lasting change in the arts will only occur when we are always asking ourselves the question: Who is missing–from the audience to the stage– and how can we include them?

**Additional Resources**

* accessIbe: a web-based product providing streamlined accessibility compliance. https://accessibe.com/
* Accessible Festivals: We offer online training for event organizers, staff, and promoters, non-profit organizations, businesses, and creators of all kinds. Training sessions provide information, tips, and strategies for interacting with all people in a respectful, caring manner. <https://accessiblefestivals.org/>
* Americans with Disabilities Act: information and technical assistance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. <https://www.ada.gov/>
* Half Access: a nonprofit organization dedicated to making live music accessible by providing a database of accessibility features at venues worldwide. <https://halfaccess.org/>
* Minds Eye Audio: building a more inclusive community by translating vision into audio for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. https://mindseyeradio.org/
* Registry of Interpreters for the Blind: advocates for best practices in interpreting, professional development for practitioners, and for the highest standards in the provisions of interpreting services for diverse users of languages that are signed or spoken. <https://www.rid.org>

1. World Health Organization. (2017). Disability and health. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs352/en/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brault, M. W. (2012). Americans with disabilities: 2010 Household Economic Studies*. Current Population Reports*, 70‐131. Web. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sweet, K.S., LeBlanc, J.K., Stough, L.M., & Sweany, N. W. (2020). Community building and knowledge sharing by individuals with disabilities using social media. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 36*(1), 1-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stough, L. M., Ducy, E. M., & Holt, J. M. (2017). Changes in the social relationships of individuals with disabilities displaced by disaster. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *24*(1), 474– 481. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)