

# A Rolling Perspective: Welcome Wagon 2.0 | CPD Blog

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Not so long ago, if you relocated you would receive a visit from Welcome Wagon hostesses. They brought coupons and freebies from local merchants, maps and area guides, and a list of really useful phone numbers. You could ask them anything about the town, and they would either know the answer, or find out for you. What a lovely custom! And what a great way to get new customers.

Fast forward to today's smart-phoner: no need for Welcome Wagons anymore. Just Google yourself into the system and Yelp when you don't like what you've been led to. In this age of supposed super-connection, we have lost *actual* connections to our communities, something Welcome Wagons provided until no one was home during the day anymore, and they switched to direct mail and email. It's time for Welcome Wagon 2.0: people who can provide the accessibility information wheelchair and assistive device patrons—[nearly seven million](#) now in the USA—need so desperately.

This is rather a personal crusade of mine, to raise business owners' awareness so they choose to make their places more wheelchair friendly. If you've ever been on crutches, or had to wheel screaming twins around in a double-wide stroller, you understand mobility impairment, too. You avoid certain stores; you do recon missions before attempting a "real" shop; you settle for spending your weekends at WalMart or McDonald's, places who cater for all walks (and wheels) of life.

In a store I used to frequent (note the past tense), a flyer inviting patrons to share their shopping experiences caught my eye. Just the ticket! While I loved that their electric carts usually worked, they had wide aisles, and the staff were super-helpful, there was room for improvement.

I left a phone message for the facilitator and expressed my eagerness to attend; I mentioned too that I used a wheelchair. When they called back, they regretfully informed me that the meeting would be held in an upstairs room and they had no elevator. I was taken aback. My first thought: *Um...move the meeting downstairs, maybe?* What came out: "So you have no disabled people working for you?" They gave the excuse that "the nature of grocery store work is too difficult and dangerous" for mobility-impaired workers. Even as they said them, they realized how lame (not to say *illegal!*) the words sounded. No one realizes how hollow an oft-repeated phrase is until it's said out loud.

This company, like so many others, caters to able-bodied customers. Their mindset excludes the financial possibilities of attracting and keeping mobility-impaired shoppers. I've noted staff everywhere are more than willing to help— *once you're inside the store*. Indeed, one employee told me: "We don't have a sign out there saying it, but we'll come out and get you if you call us."

There's a problem with this: they're "assuming facts not in evidence," as Perry Mason would say. They're assuming everyone has smartphones, internet access, cars—disabled persons are likely to be very poor and unable to afford them, for their costs are regressive. The more rural a person lives, the less chance there are public transport, affordable internet,

and accessible places to shop. Further, well-meaning staff assume we're not embarrassed to ask for help. The last thing we want to do is call attention to ourselves. If you had to call ahead every time you shopped, would *you* do it?

With Welcome Wagon 2.0, store representatives could visit shut-ins, disabled persons, and the elderly to let them know their assistive devices are welcome. Clearly visible-from-the-road signs could be placed *outside* stores so we know we're welcome before we go in. Businesses can only earn the sign if they successfully meet the following criteria:

1. *Getting there*: Can you be reached *safely* via public transport? If wheelchair users must navigate a parking lot or cross a busy road, it's not safe.
2. *Parking*: Just having a handicapped space is meaningless if there's no way to get a wheelchair out of either side of the car. The spaces need to be close to the store and should not have a big ol' curb next to them, either.
3. *Entrance*: Can wheelchair users enter your premises? I used to roll down Bountiful's sidewalks noting all the lovely places I couldn't shop: all steps; no ramps. Ramps can't be too steep, either. I once mistook the U's new wheelchair ramps for skateboard challenge courses. And drivers, don't block a store's level entry, or idle your engines. Those of us at exhaust-pipe level thank you.
4. *Electric carts*: Do you have them? Are they close to the entrance? Are they charged? Do they *work*? Carts strand us in the middle of ginormous stores with no way to get to checkout. Speaking of which...
5. *Checkout*: Is a lower counter available? An adjustable card reader? Nothing like having to give your PIN out loud to a checker. (True story.) Oh, and will an electric cart fit? We're embarrassed when we get stuck, especially with a line of angry people behind us.
6. *Aisles*: Will we fit? Are there so many displays that we can't get to what we need?
7. *Reachability*: Can most items be reached from a wheelchair? Stacks or cases in front of coolers or smack-dab in the middle of aisles force us to back up and make that dreadful beeping noise. (We hate it, too.)
8. *Toilets*: Are they accessible? 'Accessible' as in having a wide enough stall, yes; but also 'accessible' meaning it's not up a flight of stairs! I kid you not; I've seen it. I also had to leave a job I loved because my wheelchair didn't fit in their stalls. Contrary to popular opinion, it's not okay to "just leave the door open" with a promise you won't look.

We need able-bodied persons to implement Welcome Wagon 2.0. You can accompany a wheelchair user on a shopping trip and assess the factors I've provided, or you can get an electric cart and drive around yourself. Complete store surveys; talk to managers. I suggested to Holladay Sprouts they drive a cart down every aisle before the store opened to see if a wheelchair could pass, especially in the bulk and coffee sections. Can you imagine my surprise and delight when, less than forty-eight hours later, I returned to discover they had rearranged merchandise and cleared the spaces? They had the carts charged and ready at *both* entrances to the store, too. They listened *and* they acted. Tiny changes for them; big change for me.

Did I feel welcomed? Oh, yes. Do they have my custom? You betcha.

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Do you need an affordable device? The [Utah Assistive Technology Program](#) can help you obtain affordable wheelchairs, scooters and other high- and low-tech devices.

Jennifer Holland taught herself to read and write at age four and has been doing both ever since. Minnesota-born and Wisconsin-bred, she nonetheless inherited the Irish penchant for travel. Despite the shoestring budget, she visited a dozen countries before her disability, and even lived in Ireland for nearly fifteen years. Her encounters with other cultures inform the quirky insights into human behavior that find their expression in her poetry, novels, and non-fiction works. When she's not reading or writing, she enjoys chair yoga, video chats with her children and grandchildren, and living happily with MS on a tiny fixed income.

