

1 Season 3 Episode 9 – Accessible Events and Expos

1.1 Introduction

Narelle:

Hello. I nearly said good morning. I have been doing that a lot lately. And welcome to The Digital Access Show. I am Narelle and for my sins, I am the host.

The people I want to introduce you to today really have some interesting knowledge to share. It is important knowledge with what is coming up in the next year, particularly in the disability sector. It happens every year. Your expos. Your networking events.

A lot of people with disability go to these events. But in my experience, they are not accessible.

So I have asked Sue Wickham from Sue Wickham Consulting, and Rosie Putland from Modality Co, to come along and have a conversation with me and explore this. What can be done? What are the simple things that can be done to make life easier for people with disability to attend an expo, learn about new services, and explore new products without barriers?

Sue, Rosie, thank you so much for coming on.

Rosie:

Thanks for having us, Narelle.

Sue:

Yes, thanks Narelle. It is great to be here.

1.2 Sue's Background in Accessible Events

Narelle:

Sue, can you tell me a bit about yourself and how you got into the work that you are doing?

Sue:

I have been working in event management for over 30 years. In 2022, I worked on an event where the sole focus was making sure it was as accessible as possible.

After speaking to a range of people with disability about their requirements, I realised what we did at that event should be standard across all events.

It sparked something in me. I thought, why are we not making all events accessible?

Since then, I have focused on helping clients design accessible events. Whether I am working directly with clients or delivering accessible event design training with Rosie, the focus is always on creating events that are accessible from the start.

1.3 Rosie's Journey into Accessibility

Narelle:

Rosie, what about you? How did you get into this work?

Rosie:

I am a proudly disabled person who lives with multiple disabilities that affect different areas of my life.

I started in digital accessibility as a website auditor. Over time, I moved into communications and marketing accessibility. Websites were being discussed, but marketing and communications were not being considered.

Yet everyone uses social media. Everyone has the ability to make something accessible. It is not just the job of a website developer.

For many years I delivered training in accessible communications and marketing. That is where I met Sue. She attended a training session, and we connected over our shared interest.

Later, we reconnected and began talking about accessible events. With Sue's event management knowledge and my digital accessibility experience, plus lived experience of inaccessible conferences, we combined our expertise and started delivering training together.

More people need to be talking about this.

1.4 Why Are Disability Expos Not Accessible?

Narelle:

I attend many networking meetings and disability expos. I have a severe vision impairment. Every one of them is inaccessible to me. I cannot find where I am. I cannot find booths. The noise is overwhelming.

Why are disability expos not more accessible?

Sue:

Event managers often do not realise their events are inaccessible. They do not know what they do not know.

If they are not speaking to people with disability or asking about requirements, they may not understand the barriers that exist.

Rosie:

There is also systemic ableism.

Sometimes organisers say they do not see disabled people at their events. But maybe disabled people are not attending because the event is inaccessible.

There is also a narrow view of disability. People assume accessibility only means wheelchair access. But many disabilities are invisible.

1.5 Why People Do Not Speak Up

Narelle:

People with disability often do not speak up. Older generations were taught to accept things. Others are scared to speak up. Younger people are starting to say this is not good enough.

How much does that impact change?

Rosie:

It impacts a lot. It is also exhausting to constantly educate people. Many of us are dealing with medical issues and paid work. We do not always have the energy to advocate.

And often when you do speak up, people expect free advice. That would not happen in other industries.

1.6 Making Events Accessible

Narelle:

Let us turn this positive. What can be done?

Sue:

Events can absolutely be made accessible.

Break the planning process into sections. Look at venue selection, program design, presenters, suppliers, budget, and communications.

Accessibility must be considered from the start.

Then review what happens on the day. After the event, capture feedback for improvement.

It must be considered across the whole planning cycle.

Rosie:

My number one tip is this. Give more information than you think people need.

Do not just list the venue address. Provide details about access, transport, layout, noise levels, and facilities.

That information allows disabled people to decide whether they can attend and how to prepare.

Even if a venue is not accessible, just say so. Transparency builds trust.

1.7 Guide Dogs and Assistive Dogs

Narelle:

One thing that is never considered is toileting areas for guide dogs and assistive dogs.

Rosie:

Yes. It costs very little to provide a small turf mat or puppy pad in a designated area. But organisers rarely think about it.

These are simple changes that make a big difference.

1.8 Marketing and Communication Accessibility

Narelle:

What about communications and marketing?

Rosie:

Accessible marketing is critical.

Use alternative text for images. Ensure programs are available in accessible formats.

Avoid untagged PDFs.

Provide speaker information in formats that screen readers can access.

Prepare presenters. Give them accessibility guidelines. Encourage good colour contrast and inclusive language.

Accessibility expectations should be part of the presenter brief.

Sue:

Registration forms should include clear questions about access requirements.

Provide space for people to add their specific needs.

This allows organisers to plan properly and respond in advance.

1.9 Do Not Make Assumptions

Narelle:

It is important not to make assumptions. Many disabilities are invisible.

1.10 Practical Advice for Event Organisers

Narelle:

What are two key pieces of advice for event organisers starting this year?

Sue:

Do not be afraid of accessibility. Start with one thing.

Maybe it is improving your website information. Maybe it is updating your registration form.

Accessibility does not always mean extra cost. Sometimes it is about better planning and clearer communication.

Rosie:

Pick one thing and build from there.

Also commit long term. Do not measure success only by usage.

For example, if you create a quiet room and no one uses it, that does not mean it failed. Its presence may have enabled someone to attend.

Accessibility builds trust over time. It must be a genuine commitment.

1.11 Closing Remarks

Narelle:

Thank you both. I always learn something from these conversations.

Sue, how can people contact you?

Sue:

Through Sue Wickham Consulting. My website has all the details, including information about our accessible event training.

Narelle:

Rosie?

Rosie:

You can visit modalityco.com to find out about our services and upcoming training sessions.

Narelle:

Thank you both for your time.

If you like what we do here at The Digital Access Show, please like, subscribe, share, and review. Feedback is always welcome.

We will see you next time.

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