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Organising cultural events for all

Cultural events have the power to bring people together, celebrate diversity, and create shared experiences. However, for individuals with disabilities, particularly those with sensory impairments, these experiences can often be limited or inaccessible. As event organisers, it is not only our responsibility but our privilege to ensure that cultural events are accessible to everyone—especially to those with sensory disabilities. By embracing inclusivity, you can enhance the experience for all attendees and create an environment where diversity is celebrated, and every individual feels welcomed.

A. Why make an event inclusive

The human rights perspective

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasises the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate fully in cultural, recreational, and sporting activities. Organising inclusive events aligns with human rights principles by ensuring that all people, regardless of ability, have equal access to cultural experiences. This fosters inclusion and dignity, while also promoting social participation. For cultural event organizers, embracing accessibility isn't just about meeting legal obligations—it's about enriching society and empowering every individual to engage in shared cultural expressions without barriers.

Reaching a larger target audience

By making your cultural event inclusive, you are broadening your potential audience. According to global estimates, approximately 15% of the population lives with some form of disability, and sensory impairments are among the most common. Sensory disabilities include vision impairments, hearing loss, and conditions like autism or sensory processing disorders, which can make traditional event experiences challenging or overwhelming. By designing events that meet their needs, you open the door to a broader, more diverse audience—one that includes individuals, families, and communities who may have previously felt excluded. Moreover, inclusive events generate goodwill, foster a positive reputation, and help to cultivate a loyal, engaged audience.

B. How to make an event inclusive

Universal design

Universal design is an approach that aims to create spaces and experiences that are accessible and usable by all people, regardless of their abilities. When applied to cultural events, universal design ensures that your event is welcoming to attendees with sensory disabilities. For example:



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- **Visual Accessibility:** Offer clear signage, use high-contrast colours for ease of reading, and provide large-print programs or tactile materials for people with visual impairments.
- **Auditory Accessibility:** Use captions, or subtitles for performances or films. Provide assistive listening devices, such as hearing loops or FM systems, for attendees who are hard of hearing.
- **Lighting and Sound Adjustments:** Adjust lighting and sound levels to accommodate those with sensory sensitivities. For example, reduce loud noises or sudden lighting changes for individuals with autism or sensory processing disorders.
- **Quiet Spaces:** Designate "quiet zones" or sensory-friendly spaces where people can take a break from the crowd, bright lights, or loud sounds.

Reasonable accommodation

In addition to universal design, providing reasonable accommodations means making specific adjustments to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. For people with sensory impairments, reasonable accommodations may include:

- Providing **sign language interpreters, deaf performers**, or real-time captioning for performances and talks.
- Offering **audio description services** for those with visual impairments, so they can enjoy visual arts, theatre, or exhibits.
- Ensuring **flexibility in participation**, such as allowing extra time for people with cognitive or sensory disabilities to engage with exhibits or activities.
- Allowing **support persons** or service animals, as needed, to help individuals with sensory disabilities navigate the event comfortably.

C. Examples of inspiring practices

Across the globe, cultural institutions and event organisers are leading the way by implementing creative, inclusive practices that make their events accessible to people with sensory disabilities. Here are a few examples to inspire you:

- **Sensory-Friendly Theatre Performances:** Many theatres have introduced sensory-friendly performances, where sound and lighting are adjusted, and patrons are encouraged to move around or take breaks if needed. These performances often feature a more relaxed environment and accommodations such as earplugs or noise-cancelling headphones.
- **Museums with Sensory-Friendly Hours:** Some museums have introduced "sensory-friendly" hours where the lights are dimmed, the volume is reduced, and



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crowds are minimized. These events are designed specifically for people with autism or other sensory processing challenges but are open to everyone.

- **Accessible Outdoor Festivals:** Major outdoor festivals are increasingly offering sensory-friendly spaces, where attendees with sensory disabilities can retreat if the environment becomes too overwhelming. These spaces are equipped with calming visuals, soft lighting, and low sound levels, allowing people to enjoy the event without feeling overstimulated.
- **Inclusive Art Exhibits:** Art galleries are now offering tactile tours, where blind or visually impaired visitors can touch sculptures or use Braille descriptions. Some exhibitions also offer "audio-guided" tours, allowing people to hear descriptive commentary about artwork.

The [Sencity Festival](#) is a great example of an inclusive event that integrates **universal design, reasonable accommodation, and inspiring practices** to ensure accessibility for people with sensory disabilities.

Universal Design

- **Multisensory Experience:** Uses **vibrating dance floors, scent experiences, and visual storytelling** to make music accessible beyond sound.
- **Visual & Auditory Accessibility:** Features **sign language interpreters, light shows, and video projections** for Deaf attendees.
- **Sensory-Friendly Adjustments:** Offers **quiet zones** and balances lighting and sound for those with sensory sensitivities.

Reasonable Accommodation

- **Sign Language & Tactile Experiences:** Provides **live interpreters, Deaf performers, and scent-based storytelling** for accessibility.
- **Support Persons & Service Animals:** Welcomes assistance to ensure comfort and participation.
- **Flexible Participation:** Allows attendees to **engage at their own pace** with breaks and movement-friendly spaces.

Inspiring Practices

- **Innovative Concerts:** Reimagines performances through **touch, taste, scent, and visuals** for a fully immersive experience.
- **Inclusive Programming:** Actively **collaborates with Deaf and disabled artists** to ensure representation.



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- **Accessible Venue Design:** Ensures **wheelchair accessibility and easy navigation** for all attendees.

The **Revelland Project** stands as a groundbreaking example of how **multisensory performances** can transform live music into an accessible and immersive experience for all. Designed to break down accessibility barriers at major **European festivals**, the project worked closely with **musicians and disability advocates** to develop creative solutions that enhance inclusivity while enriching artistic expression.

The project redefined accessibility in live music through a **multisensory and co-creative approach**. Six bands from six European countries received **specialised training in immersion, accessibility, and sensory effects**, equipping them to design performances that engage multiple senses. By **integrating scent, taste, visuals, vibrations, and sign language interpretation**, Revelland ensured that concerts were accessible to Deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences, as well as those with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, the project actively involved **local Inclusion Boards**, composed of individuals with intellectual disabilities, who provided **direct feedback to refine performances, ensuring a truly inclusive and immersive experience for all**.

After debuting at the Sencity Festival, the immersive live shows toured festivals across Europe: Roskilde Festival (Denmark), Colours of Ostrava (Czech Republic), Sziget (Hungary), Cooltural Fest (Spain), KeepON LIVE FEST (Italy), and ESNS (Netherlands). The inclusion of **universal design principles** and **reasonable accommodations** has created a **deeper emotional connection between performers and audiences**, making concerts more immersive and engaging for all.

Costs of organising inclusive events

1. **Initial Setup and Modifications** When designing an inclusive event, there may be upfront costs involved in making physical and digital modifications to the venue, programs, or content. These can include:
 - **Accessible Venues:** If the venue is not already accessible, you may need to make adjustments such as adding ramps, wider doorways, or accessible restrooms.
 - **Assistive Technologies:** Providing services like captioning, audio descriptions, or sign language interpreters involves additional technical setup and costs. This can include the rental or purchase of devices such as hearing loops, FM systems, or specialized equipment for people with visual impairments.
 - **Printed Materials:** Creating large-print programs, tactile guides, or braille materials for attendees with visual impairments can incur additional printing costs.



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- **Sensory Adjustments:** For people with sensory sensitivities, reducing the intensity of lights, sound, and visual stimuli may require adjustments to event staging, lighting systems, and sound equipment.
2. **Ongoing Operational Costs** Once your event is designed with accessibility in mind, there will be ongoing costs associated with providing support services during the event itself, such as:
- **Staff Training:** Training staff and volunteers on accessibility needs and how to assist attendees with disabilities is essential to ensure a welcoming experience. This may involve hiring specialists or conducting workshops.
 - **Sign Language Interpreters and Guides:** Depending on the size and scope of your event, interpreters or guides may be required throughout the event to facilitate communication with guests who are deaf or blind.
 - **Transportation and Accommodation:** For larger events or those attracting people from out of town, providing accessible transport options, parking spaces, and accommodations may involve additional logistical planning and cost.

Return on investment

While the costs may initially appear high, the return on investment for hosting inclusive events can be substantial, both in terms of tangible financial returns and long-term benefits for your brand and community. Here's how:

1. **Expanding Your Audience** By making your event inclusive, you tap into an underserved and often overlooked market—people with disabilities and their families. According to estimates from the World Health Organization, **over 15% of the global population** lives with some form of disability, including many with sensory impairments. This includes people with visual impairments, hearing loss, and sensory processing disorders.
 - **Increased Attendance:** Accessible events attract a wider audience, from individuals with disabilities to their families and caregivers, who may otherwise avoid events due to accessibility barriers.
 - **Repeat Customers:** Offering a consistently accessible experience increases the likelihood of people returning to future events. Inclusive events build customer loyalty, leading to higher attendance in subsequent years.
2. **Enhancing Brand Reputation and Public Image** The public increasingly values brands and organizations that prioritize inclusion and diversity. By hosting accessible events, you demonstrate a commitment to corporate social responsibility and human



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rights, which can improve your reputation within the community and across social media platforms. This can lead to:

- **Positive Media Coverage:** Inclusive events often attract media attention, especially if you are one of the first to adopt accessibility measures in your community. Coverage can enhance your visibility and draw in new audiences.
 - **Increased Sponsorship and Partnerships:** Many corporate sponsors and grant-giving organizations now prioritize inclusion and accessibility in their funding decisions. Hosting accessible events can open the door to new partnerships and sponsorships that can help offset costs.
3. **Legal and Compliance Benefits** Depending on your location, laws regarding accessibility in public events may require you to make accommodations for persons with disabilities. Failing to comply with these regulations can result in legal consequences or fines.
- By proactively organizing inclusive events, you minimize the risk of legal issues and ensure that your events align with **local and international disability rights laws**, such as the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**.
 - Compliance also reduces the potential for reputational damage that can arise from being perceived as exclusionary or discriminatory.
4. **Social Impact and Community Engagement** Beyond financial returns, hosting inclusive events fosters a sense of community and promotes the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities. When people with disabilities have equal access to cultural, social, and artistic experiences, it benefits the broader society by:
- **Promoting Equality and Social Cohesion:** Inclusive events serve as platforms for people of all abilities to connect, learn from one another, and build shared experiences.
 - **Long-term Advocacy and Support:** Hosting events that cater to persons with disabilities positions you as a leader in accessibility advocacy, helping to drive long-term cultural and societal change.
5. **Increased Accessibility as an Ongoing Investment** Once you have set up accessibility measures for one event, many of these adjustments can be reused and refined for future events. For example, having a system in place for assistive listening devices, interpreters, or sensory-friendly spaces can be integrated into all future events with minimal additional investment. This makes future events easier and less costly to execute.



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Organizing events that are inclusive of persons with disabilities, particularly those with sensory disabilities, may involve an initial financial outlay, but the returns far outweigh the costs. By creating accessible experiences, you expand your audience, increase brand loyalty, and enhance your public image, all while making a positive social impact.

In the long run, inclusive events help build a more equitable and diverse society, where everyone—regardless of ability—can participate, enjoy, and contribute. The value of that kind of community engagement and social responsibility is immeasurable.

Ultimately, embracing inclusion isn't just good ethics—it's good business. By investing in accessibility, you are investing in a sustainable, positive future for your event, your audience, and your community.

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive event for people with sensory disabilities requires thoughtful planning, creativity, and a commitment to accessibility. But the rewards are immense: by embracing inclusivity, you not only enrich the experience for attendees with disabilities but also create a more welcoming, diverse, and supportive cultural environment for all.

As you plan your next event, we encourage you to take steps to include persons with sensory disabilities. Whether it's by offering sensory-friendly accommodations, using universal design principles, or collaborating with organizations that support disability access, every little effort makes a big difference. Together, we can create cultural events that truly belong to everyone, where every person—no matter their ability—can engage, celebrate, and be part of the community.

Let's ensure that culture is accessible to all. **Discover, enjoy, and share the arts without barriers.**



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