

Electronic Access to Businesses and Organizations for People with Electrical Hypersensitivity

by Larry Newman

People with electromagnetic hypersensitivity (“EHS”) are commonly excluded from visiting stores and offices of businesses and organizations. Society’s increased reliance on the World Wide Web for making information available is an additional barrier, as many EHS sufferers are unable to use a computer.

Below is some background information, as well as a few simple methods which, at little or no cost, may make it possible for an EHS sufferer to be a customer or access the information provided by an organization.

Symptoms of EHS

People living with EHS experience debilitating symptoms from exposures to electromagnetic fields (“EMFs”), such as those emitted by electrical wires and equipment such as computers, telephones, fax machines and all sorts of wireless devices. Acute symptoms vary but are likely to include flushing of exposed skin, tingling and burning sensations, joint pains and stiffness, head pain, a feeling of being “wired” and sometimes mental confusion, restlessness and irritability. A variety of other neurological symptoms are possible, including seizures.

People with EHS commonly also have Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (“MCS”), that is, they are sickened by pesticides, fragrances and other chemicals, even at concentrations commonly considered safe. This worsens the barrier for in-person visits to businesses and offices.

The level of sensitivity varies with the person as it does with conventional allergies. Some individuals may have immediate symptoms upon exposure, while others’ reactions may not manifest for hours.

Accommodating people with EHS

Being unable to use a computer is a very common problem for people with electrical sensitivities, constituting a barrier to information and shopping.

Many people with EHS are able to briefly use a telephone for a few minutes each day. It is extremely frustrating to squander a day’s “allowance” of phone time waiting for a human to answer the phone — maybe having to hang up because the wait is too long — and then having incapacitating symptoms for no gain.

To improve access, consider the following measures:

- Automatic telephone exchanges could periodically announce the expected wait for an operator, or perhaps how many callers are ahead in the line.
- The phone system announces the best time of the day/week to call, for shorter waiting time.
- The phone system can be programmed so the caller can press a button and there will be silence — no music, no advertising, nothing. Music and unnecessary chatter can be disturbing to people with neurological damage. The occasional announcement of the waiting time is fine.
- Accept orders and inquiries by fax and postal mail. Sending a fax may be a much shorter exposure for people with EHS than using a telephone.
- Train the staff to accept that some people cannot use a computer — that it is not a question of “just go to the library” or “just learn how to use one”. That is like telling a wheelchair user it is only a few stairs.
- Train staff to not simply respond to a mail/fax inquiry with “our web address is . . .”
- If the information is only available on the web, structure the site so it is printable. Both lists of documents and the documents themselves should be printable, then the EHS person’s helper or your staff member can print it out. It works best to have a PDF-version of a document besides the regular version. It is unfortunately very common that dynamic pages, such as pages generated by querying a database, are not printable – or only partly printable.