Finding Useful Questions

This list of questions is supposed to serve as a starting point for reflecting on your audience/users.

They are questions a lot of people have, but usually don't ask. If you are organizing an event or running an organization, thinking about these and similar questions early on is a first step towards inclusive, accessible environments.

In this document, we have compiled a range of issues and small details that often remain painfully invisible - and some ideas on how to prevent that from happening.

Angela Prendl and Victoria Neumann

More information about this project can be found on the project website: www.angela.is/SocialTech

design by angela | Version 1.1

Finding Useful Questions

This is a list of questions a lot of people would like answers to, but often don't ask – or at least don't ask the people organizing an event or running an organization.
It is supposed to serve as an entry point to facilitate inclusive and accessible interactions, events and everyday communications.
We operate under the assumption that nobody excludes others deliberately. Regardless, a lot of relevant questions simply never reach the people with the ability to answer them: Because they're not an issue for those making decisions, or because there is no access point for people to reach out to.

Set Up

Below you can find a range of questions people may have when preparing a night out, booking tickets for an event or seeking to interact with a new-to-them business. This is not an exhaustive list, and it is unlikely that all of these questions will apply to your specific situation and audience – they are supposed to provide a starting point to challenge our tacit assumptions and consciously reflect on problems that are often perceived to be too minor to even be noticed by those in charge. What are the questions you need to provide answers to?

For ongoing operations
Questions relevant for any ongoing operation/service such as businesses, restaurants or organizations

1. Have you ever considered asking your customers/clients/audience what they would like to get from you?

   In the age of social media, this is easier than ever. If you already have some followers, just ask them what their access needs are and how they would like to be included!

2. Is there an easy way to access the information needed for preparing my visit/dinner/evening/shopping? Do you have a website?

3. Are there opening times? What are they, are they easy to find online?

4. Is there an easy way to contact you if I have questions?

   Make clear how people can reach you and where/how you will respond. Offer a text-based mode of communication in addition to a phone number if at all possible.

5. Is the location wheelchair accessible? What is/isn`t?

   Even if it is not it is, better to clearly state it so people don't have to work for that information.

6. Is this a smoke free venue/office?

This only applies to venues/offices where it is legally allowed to smoke, but there's a range of respiratory problems and allergies that are triggered by smoke on top of people simply disliking it.

7. Who can I contact with accessibility questions?

8. Who will be responsible for accessibility questions on site?

9. Is there an admission fee?

This depends on the circumstances. People will not expect that information for a restaurant, but probably for a club. If it is not obvious, make it clear both if its attendance is free AND if there is a fee. A lot of people can't afford to just hope it's not too expensive when they show up.

10. I have special dietary needs (for religious, medical or personal reasons), is will there be something for me to eat?

Special dietary needs can go beyond offering access to the standardized list of allergens, or having vegetarian and/or vegan options. Does your menu offer halal or koscher meals, for example? You don't have to (and usually can't) offer everything people might want, but let them know what to expect!

For further food related questions, see the food section below.

Additional questions to consider for events

Events for this purpose are endeavors that require more planning in advance on the side of visitors

11. When will it be?

If possible, include details. When do the doors open AND when will the event officially start? If it's a conference or something similar: When does it start every morning and end every evening? What about scheduled breaks or social evening events?

12. Where will it be?

13. How much are the tickets?

Again, if it is not obvious, make it clear both if attendance is free AND if there is a fee. A lot of people can't afford to just hope it's not too expensive after having taken days off before ticket sales start.

14. Is all the information needed to make a decision available before signing up/buying a ticket?

This is easy to forget, but many people need to know accessibility details, exact location, ticket price and dates long in advance to be able to arrange affordable travel, know if their needs are met enough to actually consider attending, organize help (childcare, carers for themselves in case of some disabilities).

15. What if I can't afford attendance fees?

Think about the options beforehand. Often, it's possible to fund extra tickets when they are in the budget early on. Are you offering free tickets to volunteers, and if

yes, how can people apply for that? Is there a low-income ticket? Is it easy to get free/reduced tickets for those who need them? There are many reasons for people not being able to afford attending expensive events, shaming anyone for that is a no-go. Consider this while budgeting your event! Often having corporate tickets, which cost a bit more, could keep prices for others without institutional backing affordable.

16. Is there anyone who will show me around?

In case of big, recurring events it can be nice to have mentoring or guides for first-time attendees. There are events that can be intimidating for first timers, why not offer them a little support to make them feel welcome?

Registration form

17. Are you explicitly asking for people's pronouns?

People might not be using the pronouns that seem obvious when you look at them. Ask everyone which pronouns they use.

18. What if my legal name is not the name I'm using in my everyday life?

Someone's legal name might be different from the name they use every day. This can be for personal safety reasons, because of a change in marital status, because they have a pen name or go by a pseudonym, because they have not been able to legally change their sex for documents or many other reasons. If you need legal names for official reasons, you can make 2 boxes where one is the Name to actually address people and put on name tags and the other one can be used only to process payments and such.

19. How are you dealing with names that do not fit the western first name + surname scheme?

Be aware that templates or other technology we're using without giving them a second thought might not work for everyone. Does the font you're using for your nametags and programmes have all the diacritics needed for your participants names?

20. Why are you asking for my gender?

Don't ask people if they're male or female. If you have to ask, at least add a free text field where people can fill in their gender. But do you really have to ask in the first place? Is this a relevant question for the event you're planning? If you need to ask for gender for statistical reasons, it is probably enough to add an "other" option. But watch out:

21. Mr. or Mrs.?

Again, asking this is not very inclusive. Address people with their names. Only giving Mr and Mrs as options is outdated since this binary does not reflect everyone's reality anymore. If you have asked people for their genders in an inclusive way you cannot just address them this way.

We're all human and it is easy to forget about making things explicit that seem obvious to those in charge. Take a moment to stop and consider this: What's the information that's missing because it's too obvious to the organizers after being so involved with a project?

It's not the point of this document to make anyone feel guilty. Whatever it is you are doing, only a part of the points brought up will be relevant for your project or business. And at the same time, it's very likely that you will come across a few specific questions that are not covered here. The point of this is taking a moment to ask ourselves what is relevant, and for whom.

Social Media

Accessibility on social media is more a social issue than a technical one.

If you are using social media for your business or community, there's a range of fairly recent developments to be considered. But what's surprising to a lot of folks is that a lot of the issues below are not actually technical problems that require someone to be tech-savvy and know all about all recent technological developments.
Most problems have simple, very low-tech solutions that make many people's lives easier without requiring much effort for content creators.

22. Are you adding image descriptions for pictures you post on social media?

Image descriptions are mostly for users that can't see the images and access content via e-readers. The goal is to describe the relevant parts of your picture or illustration so people can understand your content and participate online.

On a static website, this is done by setting the alt-text attribute on image elements. Many platforms like Wordpress have inbuilt text gadgets where one can save the alternative text with their image. This is also helpful for when users experience technical problems: If the image itself is broken, the alt text is shown instead.

Platforms like Instagram and Twitter also offer alt text features where the image descriptions can be added to every individual picture.

An older convention is to add image descriptions in your posts captions in square brackets, looking like this: [picture: A description that contains all the relevant information but isn't unnecessarily long and detailed. end.]

Many people add both descriptions in brackets and the in-built alt text features since not all readers are compatible with newer features.

23. Do you capitalize each word in a hashtag?

This is a very easy way to be more inclusive. E-readers have trouble distinguishing between words in hashtags.

#thisisnotsoeasytoread #ThisIsMuchEasierToReadBothForEReadersAndForPeople

24. Do you use "funny" alternative letters or mathematical symbols in your username or content? It could look sʅɥʇ ǝʞᴉl.

Since social media sites only have one font available to display content, all funny looking characters are mathematical symbols or letters from various alphabets. Assistive technologies do not understand when used in normal language since they are not part of the regular alphabet.

See this link for an example.

25. Do you caption your videos?

Not everyone can hear the audio that comes with your videos. Some folks because they are deaf or hard of hearing, some might not have the volume on due to sensory overload and others might simply be in situations where they can't use audio while browsing on their phones.

Captioning your videos is one of the things that usually do require special add-ons or apps, but speech recognition software is developing quickly these days.

It is steadily getting easier to have your captions generated for you by a piece of software. But keep in mind that most of those speech to text engines are trained in English, so they usually favour English as a language, and native speakers with certain dialects.

Play

Creating accessible, inclusive environments is a continuous effort during all stages of a project.

In this section, we bring up all sorts of questions that arise in various everyday situations. It is helpful to keep in mind that any initial planning likely didn't cover everything that needs to be dealt with, and unexpected situations will almost certainly arise. We are trying to cover the need for clear communication that works in situ, a wide range of topics relevant to everyday interactions, and help to deal with anything that might come up.

Basics

26. Who can I ask about this when I get there?

This is incredibly important. Planning an inclusive event or space is great, but you need to have the staff on site know about the measures you're taking.

We will not add this to every bullet, but it really applies to most of the questions we are posing here. All staff/volunteers/guests need to know about the measures you're taking to make your space more accessible and/or inclusive. Everyone interacting with guests, clients, customers or audience should know about these plans and protocols, otherwise they are not helping anyone. Being promised a ramp, just to find upon arriving that nobody at the venue has an idea where to find or how to install it is incredibly frustrating.

27. Is there someone who knows about the allergy list, and does everyone else know who to ask about it to at any given time?

28. If you put up a safe space policy before the event, who will be responsible for enforcing it on site? And how?

29. What do I do if I need help?

30. Who do I need to talk to in order to get what I need?

When implementing measures to accommodate a wider range of people, it is important for them to know who to talk to and who is responsible for dealing with their problems. Knowing that they have someone to turn to will make people feel welcome, and thus more likely to come into your space.

Physical access

We want to emphasize that there is no "one size fits all" guide to interacting with other people, no matter what their specific access requirements are. But one thing is for sure: living with a disability makes someone an expert in dealing with it.
Communication is key. Usually people know what they need, so just ask them.

31. Can I sit down somewhere?

Don't assume everyone can stand for long periods of time. Make sure people can sit down and provide at least a few chairs.

32. How do I best talk to someone that doesn't hear very well?

Talking very loudly is not necessarily helpful, but looking at someone while talking to them usually is. Seeing lip movements gives additional information, try to articulate your words clearly and don't speak too fast.

33. How do you offer navigation help to a blind person?

Never just grab a blind person's arm. Ask if they need help, and what exactly it is they need. Some people prefer to be guided just by voice or the sound of your shoes, but they will tell you that. If you are offering your arm to guide someone, do it in a way that puts them in charge. Offering your arm, the back of your hand facing the blind person, makes it their choice to grab you when/if they want to - not the other way around.

34. Does everyone on staff know that they are not supposed to move or touch someone's wheelchair without the wheelchair user's consent?

If you need to move it, you should ask for permission if the person isn't in the wheelchair at the time.

35. Does the venue provide wheelchairs for visitors who need them?

If it does, is this information available to your (potential) visitors? Does everyone on staff know it too? Do they know how the procedure to get one? Who is responsible?

36. Do we have any ramps staff/volunteers need to help with?

It's good for everyone to know about the accessibility aids on hand - and how to use them.

37. Do you have proof that this is a service dog?

It depends on where you are, but asking people to prove to you that they actually have a disability is illegal in many countries/cases. It is also rude. There are very few cases where someone is required to justify their needs or give you their medical history.

38. May I pet that service dog?

Service dogs are usually working when they are in public. Do not interact with the dog without the owner's permission. Do not offer the dog food or treats. Being approached by strangers is disruptive. The dog's and their human's safety often depends on the dog being able to work without interruptions. Always ignore the dog, except in one case: If a service dog is alone and approaches you, it likely means that the dog is trying to get your attention, and that its owner needs help!

39. Do you have a quiet space?

There is a range of conditions that require people to have a quiet, comfortable, not too bright space to rest a bit during an event. But it can also be helpful for people who breastfeed. Could you offer that? If you are doing it already, do your guests know about it?

40. Why are you touching me?

Be mindful about touching people without their consent. Personal space needs differ from person to person.

41. How do you teach your staff how to offer support respectfully?

Having protocols in place is only helpful if people actually know about them.

Gender

42. Why „Ladies and Gentlemen"?

Putting extra emphasis on the gender binary when addressing a group of people feels alienating to many. You could try „Hi folks", „dear colleagues", „dear guests" or „everyone" instead of using „Ladies and Gentlemen" or addressing a group of people as „guys" by default.

43. But that's not my actual name on my badge?

Give people an option to have an alternative to their legal name on badges and other communications (if you need to ask for their legal name in the first place. This is usually only relevant to process payments and such). Someone's legal name might be different from the name they use every day. This can be for personal safety reasons, because of a change in marital status, or because they are trans and have not been able to legally change their sex for documents.

44. Can you use the right pronouns, please?

Don't assume you know anyone's gender. Of course, that depends on the situation a bit, but choosing more gender-neutral language will be easy after doing it for a

while.

If the event has name badges, a nice way to go about this is having a mandatory pronouns field on the name badge. This also avoids singling out trans and non-binary folks who need a marker to avoid getting misgendered all the time. If someone asks to be addressed a certain way, do not disrespect that.

45. Which toilet?

If possible, provide at least one explicitly unisex restroom where people outside the gender binary can feel comfortable.

46. Where is the bin?

A lot of people have periods, and not everyone who gets periods is a woman. Make sure there's bins in all toilet stalls, not only in those for women.

Bodies are silly sometimes, and not everything can be planned all the time. If possible, provide tampons and menstrual pads in the bathrooms or toilet stalls. It's a small gesture that is usually very appreciated.

47. That dude won't leave me alone, can someone please help?

Most people have experienced (sexual) harassment over the course of their lives. So, while this is not a nice topic to deal with, it is a big concern for many. Are there rules in place that are transparent and known both by guests and staff? Openly communicating that violence is not being tolerated helps a lot of people feel safer. Of course, a big convention or night club has different needs than an office, but having a plan how to deal with such incidents is important wherever many people interact.

48. Do you have an anti-harassment policy?

It might seem obvious that you, your company or community won't tolerate harassment and discrimination, but those who had bad experiences will appreciate you making it explicit. Make sure everyone knows who is in charge and what to do if something does come up!

Food

49. But I don't drink?

Many people do not drink, and this can have many reasons beyond health and addiction. Having a glass of beer or wine together is so normal we don't even think about it. Don't make someone feel uncomfortable for not drinking alcohol, and do not make them justify their choice. Nobody has to drink if they don't want to! Another possibility is organizing explicitly alcohol-free events.

50. I can't eat onions, are there onions in this?

If you serve food, there should always be someone on staff that knows what is in the food. There are many regulations about this by now, but they don't help much if staff on site can't answer questions.

51. I'm vegetarian, what can I eat?

It is always good to have both vegetarian and vegan options available. Label them

as such! For events, is also helpful to inform people about food options beforehand. If you cannot provide vegan or vegetarian food (or anything else people might require), communicate that early on so people can at least bring their own food.

52. Will there be food? What should I expect?

If someone has to take medication with/around meals, or they have any other reason to specifically schedule their food intake, it can help knowing about the meals that are being served and the rough schedule in advance. Depending on the circumstances, this can mean including catering details for the coffee breaks, providing a list of food vendors at a convention, or compiling a list of nearby restaurants and supermarkets

53. Do I have to pay extra for food/participating in the dinner?

If someone needs to be careful with their expenses during an event, knowing about all potential costs upfront will make attending less stressful. Food is often a big factor when money is tight.

54. Will you join us for lunch in that fancy new restaurant that just opened across the street?

Financial and dietary restrictions as well as access needs as discussed above also apply to lunch hour and after work drinks.

55. What if I'm fasting right now?

Most Muslims who observe Ramadan do not eat during the day. Keep that in mind when organizing company lunches or other events including food.

Others

56. What about my kids?

If you can afford it, your event is big enough, or your target audience includes a lot of young parents, consider offering childcare during the event. Sometimes parents (especially single parents or those who cannot afford babysitters) cannot attend events because they have children to care for.

Rewind

Looking back is an important step in any learning process. Going through your experiences and reflecting with others on the different organisational aspects of your project will be invaluable for future endeavours.

In particular, it helps to build a sustainable communication network and can make it easier to hand over information and responsibilities if needed. It also helps to compile information that you might want to share with others in the future (e.g. with colleagues, new employees, collaborators, etc).

In the cycle of set-up, play, and rewind, getting feedback from your team and your audience can prove invaluable for creating better future experiences for everyone.

It's also important to acknowledge that the act of evaluation is an active one. So instead of highlighting the implicit assumptions no one questions, we will give some advice on how to approach the process in a meaningful way.

Questions you could ask yourself:

57. Did we succeed with what we set out to do?

58. Was there something surprising or unexpected that happened along the way?

59. How can we improve our efforts for the future?

A good opportunity to consider these sorts of questions is after an event is being wrapped up, but it also makes sense to incorporate reflextion and feedback loops in ongoing permanent operations. Experiences can be reflected on individually and/or discussed in group settings includiing a larger number of people involved.
Discussing what happened in a team will help to learn about what went well (or didn't) from everyone included in running a business, event or whatever it is you are doing.

Looking back on what has happened in the past can help to make positive changes for the future. Doing this in a group setting can also help as you will be getting more opinions. It will facilitate a learning process withing acommunity, and hopefully provide a venue to openly discuss any potential changes or problems with whoever is in charge.

Sharing thoughts and emotions openly can help to make sense of everything that happened, how things worked out in practice and the impact it had on the individuals involved in a given task or situation. For this process to be fruitful, it is important to listen to each other, to be interested in what everyone has to say, and to try and understand where everyone is coming from.

Feedback from outsiders

Getting feedback will get you outside perspectives on your actions and gives you the opportunity to improve.

60. What kind of feedback do I want/what would help me the most?

Depending on what you were organising, and if you plan to have the event recur, you might want to ask different types of questions targeted to separate audiences.

61. How can we get feedback from clients/attendees/followers on social media?

There are many different channels for feedback that depend on your situation. Generally, it is good to provide some mechanism that's both asynchronous and remote - such as follow up emails, an online survey or a text gadget on a website. The reason for this is that gives people time to process their experiences and think what they want to say.

62. Who could give feedback about the aspects we are actually interested in?

Ideally, everyone who was involved. If you are asking for feedback, don't expect people to respond and don't take it personally if/when they don't. The act of giving feedback requires effort and uses resources (e.g. time, energy) that not everyone has to give. This means that it's also important to be thankful if you get feedback.

Dealing with negative feedback

**Everyone makes mistakes, and that's okay.
The real question is not if we make mistakes, but how we deal with them when they inevitably happen.**

Sometimes feedback can be hard to process if it contains criticism. However, the poing of having a feedback loop is improving what we do – and how we do it. We often have very high expectations of ourselves. What is considered negative feedback is often about the recipient feeling underappreciated for the efforts they put in in the first place.

If negative feedback about issues surrounding diversity, includsion and accessibility feels like a personal attack, it is usually an indicator about our own insecurities. If people pointing to problems or issues they encountered makes us feel bad, we should take a step back and try to ask ourselves why that is the case.

When people are giving us feedback, they do this to help us. They are investing time and energy to be helpful, even though they don't have to do that. We should always try to see this as an act of caring.

After all, it means someone invests their time to teach us something and we should be grateful for their efforts. It means someone chose to productively use their frustation about interacting with a world that does not cater to their needs.

Not fitting in is painful, and when people trust us with their experiences, that's amazing. We should take this as a sign of trust, our community thinks that we can (and will) handle their problems with respect and care. In this sense, negative feedback is really a good thing as it gives us the opportunity to listen and learn from your community.

To summarise, this part of the cycle is about:

- obtaining feedback about your actions,

- interpreting this feedback productively and respectfully, and

- using what you've learned to improve things going forward.

The key take away from the feedback aspect of this cycle is that it is an opportunity to affect positive change on the environment you helped create.