Making change count:

The power & importance of offering your customers SEN Sessions: : the autism and sensory processing edition

What you need to know to be part of the inclusion revolution

One small change can make a significant difference

Working towards a brighter, more inclusive future

Definition of neurodivergent:

Adjective: ***"***displaying or characterised by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour; **not neurotypical.***"*

Definition of neurotypical:

Adjective: "**not** displaying or characterised by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour; **not neurodivergent.**"

Did you know? Between 30% and 40% of the population is considered neurodiverse.

That's a significant number of people. Yet, the world still moves, largely, to the beat of a neurotypical drum. The majority still takes priority in almost all facets of everyday existence.

Is this right? No. **Can it change for the better?** Yes.

By offering people SEN sessions, you will give SEND (Special educational needs and disability) children and their parents a chance to access your services or enjoy what you have to offer in a safe, calming, environment, free from worry or judgement.

Navigating the world is difficult as a SEND child—and with so many sensory needs, physical needs or possible scenarios to consider—experiencing a shop, cinema, bowling alley, play space, museum, restaurant...the list goes on—can become an uphill struggle.

So, what happens? SEND parents lose confidence; their options diminish; their world shrinks; their children miss out on so much.

But, by offering your autistic customers and customers with sensory processing challenges a regular SEN session, you can become part of the change. Businesses of all shapes and sizes currently offer SEN sessions—their neurodivergent customers benefit—and they do, too. It's a win-win.

The SEN session is a powerful thing that can add a new layer of value to your business—and here we're going to tell you why. We're also going to give you tips on how to launch a successful SEN session.

Ready? Let's start our journey.

What is a SEN session?

*"I believe it's our responsibility to show our communities the value of all people, to celebrate differences, and to take a stand for acceptance and inclusion."—**Julie Foudy***

At its core, a SEN session is a practical act of inclusion—a commitment to empowering everyone to enjoy what you have to offer without worry or judgement.

SEN sessions are times during the week dedicated to SEND children and their families. Typically one to four hours long (although there is no specific time limit), a SEN session offers people the chance to access your setting and enjoy your facilities in a space open to reasonable adjustments (we'll talk more about this later).

It's an opportunity for SEND children to be themselves safely, and without being judged or misunderstood. And, it means the world to countless people—(literally) thousands upon thousands.

A SEN session comes in many forms, including:

- Autism or sensory-friendly cinema screenings with reduced noise, mellow lighting, and the freedom for children to walk around or move if needed.

- Soft play sessions for SEND children and their families: *dedicated one to two hours slots with small adjustments including noise cancelling headphones on-hand or a few extra safety measures in place.*

- Certain days of the month where a cafe or restaurant cordons off a dimmer, quieter area equipped with reasonable adjustments, suitable toilet and disabled access, and

resources where parents can enjoy a meal out with their children in a more relaxed, less stressful environment.

When it comes to setting up a SEN session, there are no rigid rules. All you have to do is consider the nature of your business, decide what you can offer regarding inclusivity, and map out the reasonable adjustments you will need to make—which brings us onto our next subject.

What are reasonable adjustments & how do I make them?

"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is a process; working together is a success."—**Henry Ford**

Under the Equality Act, schools are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' so that every child can access their facilities and services.

While your business isn't not legally accountable to make reasonable adjustments, by adopting this mindset, you can include everyone.

A reasonable adjustment is an action you can take to enable SEND children and their families to access your facilities, services or amenities in a suitable way.

Reasonable adjustments don't always have to be extensive—sometimes even the smallest tweaks can make a real difference. Dimming your lights and turning down the volume of your music by 30% is, for example, a reasonable adjustment that many people with sensory issues would appreciate.

If you're thinking about running a regular SEN session for your clients or customers, you don't have to move mountains to help those with additional needs access your services or facilities.

Reasonable is the key term here. There are several practical measures you can take to be more inclusive—and we're going to explore them now.

How to host a successful SEN session: practical tips & advice

"The worst thing you can do is nothing."—**Temple Grandin**

Now that you understand the value of offering your customers SEN sessions and the importance of making reasonable adjustments, let's look at some top tips.

When launching SEN sessions, it's important that you offer time slots that are not only accessible to your prospective attendees, but also suit your business. If you offer realistic days and time slots for your sessions, you'll be able to keep running them.

Many businesses, for instance, run a two to three hour Saturday or Sunday slot once or twice a month.

While this doesn't sound like much, it's significantly better than offering no outlet for inclusion—and by leaving an ample amount of time between each session, you can focus on getting everything right. Plus, if your SEN sessions prove to be a roaring success, you can alway scale them up.

To help your SEN sessions be the best they can be, here are some top tips:

1. Check your health & safety points

While it may sound obvious, when hosting a SEN session checking all of your health & safety points is vital.

Before running your first session, consult your local council or authority to check over any compulsory health & safety measures you will need to consider. When planning your sessions,

you should also make sure all of your emergency exits as well as toilets are fully-accessible and clearly labelled with large text and visual signage.

If you want to ensure your SEN sessions are inclusive to participants with sensory impairments (including hearing or visual) and physical disabilities, you should also consider whether you have appropriate ramps, railings, facilities, and if you can accommodate assistance dogs.

2. Consider sensory needs & stimulants

Toning down your sensory stimulants is one of the most effective measures you can take when running a SEN session.

Most neurodiverse people have sensory processing differences or sensitivities that can impact their daily lives. Sensory needs count across all settings, both indoors and outdoors.

When looking at how to meet peoples' sensory needs at your SEND sessions, you should consider these four elements:

1. **Sight**
2. **Smell**
3. **Sound**
4. **Touch**

There is no one-size-fits all solution for meeting the sensory needs of your SEN session participants, but here are some measures that will help:

- **Dimming bright lights and turning off any 'visually busy' electric signs (unless they are for safety) or artwork.**

- **Lowering or turning off music and creating a ‘quiet area’ for anyone that needs to take time out or self-regulate.**

- **Check any surfaces that reflect light and result in a bright ‘shimmer’. Block out natural light in these areas where possible or place cloth coverings on shiny tables.**

- **Try not to overwhelm your participants with too much information. Keep your instructions, greetings, and briefings (if required) as concise and practical as possible.**

- **Avoid clutter and make sure any internal routes or pathways are clearly marked and provide enough movement space.**

- **If you can, try to eliminate any particularly strong smells during your sessions (cleaning products, air fresheners, paint, etc.) as aromas can affect some SEND participants.**

- **Provide sensory ‘fidget’ toys and noise cancelling earphones in case your participants find the setting a little too noisy or overwhelming at times.**

- **Offer Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) cards to aid communication during your sessions.**

- **Use a live-speech-to-text app to aid communication with participants with hearing impairments.**

- **Provide braille menus or communication documents to make your setting more inclusive for blind participants.**

"I have massive sensory sensitivity. Especially to light and sound. My sensitivity fluctuates depending on how overloaded I am. If I'm not overloaded, then I can tolerate a lot more."— Alexis' Story

3. Make sure you can deliver on your promises

Once you've planned your SEN session, curated your resources, and made your reasonable adjustments, it's vital that you're honest with exactly what you can deliver.

If your premises and the nature of your business has certain limitations concerning certain types of disabled access—or there are certain resources you simply cannot offer—**make sure you're as clear about this as possible.**

Inclusivity here is the aim—and if there are reasonable adjustments you can't fulfil, being honest with your potential customers will build trust while avoiding disappointment.

4. Get additional inclusion advice for your SEN sessions

As our advice is primarily centered around catering for autistic participants and those with sensory challenges or differences—if you're looking to accommodate customers with physical disabilities or sight and hearing impairments, you should seek advice from specialist institutions.

Here are a few resources to get you started:

- **SENSE**
- **The Partially Sighted Society**
- **RNIB**
- **British Deaf Association**
- **The Disabilities Trust**

If you would like us to help you plan your SEN sessions and communicate with any of these organisations on your behalf, just drop us a line.

5. Gather feedback & keep learning

Without a doubt, the most important part of running successful SEN sessions is gathering feedback.

By reaching out to your customers post-session via a communication method of their choice or launching social media polls, you will uncover invaluable insights that will make your SEN sessions the best they can be.

SEND parents are an invaluable source of insight and when it comes to practical wisdom, neurodivergent children, teens, and adults are the very best people to communicate with—they are the experts, afterall.

"The involvement of autistic people in reviewing and changing the sensory environment will support the identification of things that are not visible or audible to their neurotypical counterparts. We strongly encourage this wherever possible."

SEN session spotlight: A chat with Apple Tree Town's Sarah Peach

Here we catch up with Sarah Peach—the founder of Apple Tree Town in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Sarah runs regular SEN sessions that provide a safe, judgement-free environment where children can roam the miniature play town's facilities at their leisure. Let's find out more.

What inspired you to offer a SEN session?

We feel it's very important to be inclusive to all and offer every child the opportunity to access Apple Tree Town. We understand for some children, accessing the town as part of a normal session would not suit their needs as they need it to be quieter with fewer people than normal.

Based on feedback from customers with SEN children, we've discovered they prefer a session where there are children with similar needs to theirs sometimes, as they can feel nervous to take them to regular play sessions in case they can't cope.

What preparation or research did you do before launching the session?

I've previously worked in schools teaching children with SEN needs and I'm lucky enough to have two friends that run a nursery that caters for both mainstream and SEND children. I can use their expert knowledge to guide me on how we should run our SEN sessions. We also gather regular feedback from our SEN session attendees.

Have you received a positive response so far?

We've received a very positive response. It seems customers are very grateful that we offer the sessions. We feel it is so important that Apple Tree Town is accessible to all.

Saying this, we would also like to look out how we can be more inclusive during our regular sessions. We have thought about possibly having ear defenders or using some kind of aid like PECs cards to support SEND children attending our regular sessions.

What have you learned?

The vital importance of continuing to host SEN sessions and what it means to families of SEND children. We are surprised that some places still do not cater for all.

Do you have any advice for businesses looking to offer a SEN session?

Ask your customers what they would like from a session. Offer your sessions on a regular basis. Keep on going.

SEN session success: what people want

"My father literally fought his entire life to ensure the inclusion of all people because he understood that we were intertwined and connected together in humanity."—**Bernice King**

Knowing what people want or expect from SEN sessions will give you direction when you're in your development and planning phases.

While the needs and preferences of participants are always subject to change, we've taken out some of the guesswork by asking our community what they want from SEN sessions.

According to studies carried out across our network of SEND advocates, parents & individuals, 100% of respondents would like to see more SEN sessions in their area—and would be willing to pay for them.

Here are the main categories that people are crying out for when it comes to fun, inclusive SEN sessions:

- ☐ **Sports & leisure**
- ☐ **Cinema & theatre**
- ☐ **Museums & cultural attractions**
- ☐ **Restaurants**

Here is a mix of additional insights we've gathered:

"I would love to see more SEN sessions held during peak hours and times."

“Sessions that last at least two to three hours.”

“It would be great to see more swimming pools and bowling alleys offering SEN sessions.”

“More visuals and PECs cards available in the setting.”

“SEN sessions that are truly safe, non-judgmental, and make me feel valued when I’m there.”

Naturally, everyone is an individual and as such, have slightly different needs, preferences, and ideas. But, we hope these insights offer you a solid starting block for your SEN sessions.

The everlasting importance of inclusion

"Wanting to be free. Wanting to be me. Trying to make people see. And accept the real me."—**Scott Lentine**

Inclusion shouldn't be a far-flung luxury or an optional add-on—it should be a standard across our society.

We've seen societal progress, but there's still a long way to go: *a hard-trodden journey clad with conflict, confusion, and cultural roadblocks.* But, SEN sessions are a bonafide part of a brighter, better, and more inclusive future.

One in seven people in the UK are neurodivergent. There are also 14 million disabled people living in the UK. That's a significant chunk of the population. By diminishing the notion that the able-bodied or neurotypical outlook is the only valid way of experiencing the world, more people can have their seat at the table (and actually **be heard**).

With a genuine shift towards inclusivity in every facet of society, everyone can thrive. Real change will happen.

Reasonable adjustments are pivotal in creating change—and **that's where you come in**.

Hosting regular SEN sessions will make you part of a brighter, more inclusive future while extending your services to new, highly-engaged audiences. You will gain more customer loyalty, **boost your brand reputation—and most importantly—be doing the right thing.**

Arranging a SEN session may feel daunting at first, but it is more than possible. We hope that this guide helps you on your journey and if you need free help or advice on getting set up, **get in touch**—we'll be happy to help.

Get in touch:

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Personal / Planning Notes: