

Marketing Stadium Accessibility: New Legal Requirements and Anecdotes from College Athletic Department Websites

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Providing equal opportunity to people with disabilities is the fundamental principle of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). While the legal mandate to ensure facility accessibility for people with disabilities is clear, implementation of the ADA by the venue management industry has proven to be more of a challenge (Grady, 2005). In explaining the significance of the problem, the United States Department of Justice noted, “over the past 20 years, some public and private venues, ticket sellers, and distributors have not provided the same opportunity to purchase tickets for wheelchair-accessible seats and non-accessible seats” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Given the nuanced configurations of stadia and arenas as well as each venue’s approach to managing accessibility, this has resulted in widely differing policies and procedures for accommodating people with disabilities.

These new requirements, which went into effect on March 15, 2011 (ADA 2011), are the first set of major revisions since passage of the ADA in 1990, and are focused mainly on ticketing regulations which were previously absent or ambiguous in the original ADA. These regulations have a significant impact on college athletic venues and may challenge the ability to ensure accessibility, due, in part, to the frequent use of season tickets in college athletics as well as athletic donor priority systems which provide donors the opportunity to renew athletic season tickets for several generations. Under the 2011 requirements, athletic venues are now required to **sell tickets for accessible seats, defined in the law as seats specifically designed for wheelchairs, in the same manner and under the same conditions as all other ticket sales (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Sport venues must also provide the same information about accessible seats as provided about non-accessible seats, using the same text and visual representations**, including detailed maps or displays of seating configurations on its website or if it provides seating information in its pamphlets or brochures, including information for particular events or shows (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). The legislative update and resulting changes in sport marketing practice present a need for the current study.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) identify the marketing and ticketing requirements in the 2011 ADA requirements and (2) analyze college athletic department websites at two points in time to see whether the information presented about accessibility for people with disabilities changed due to the new requirements. By comparing the website presence soon after the law change with the website presence prior to the start of the 2011-12 football season, the researchers gauged whether athletic departments may have made changes to their policies, procedures, or marketing materials in an effort to comply with the 2011 requirements. Attention also was paid to whether athletic departments followed person-first language (e.g., placing

the person before the disability), which is often preferred by people with disabilities (Lynch, Thuli, & Groombridge, 1994; Titchkosky, 2001).

This study explored athletic department websites in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Big Ten conference for their marketing of the ticketing requirements addressed by the 2011 ADA changes. The SEC and Big Ten were selected for this study because of similarly high attendance, financial resources, and makeup of universities. A total of 24 websites were examined in June 2011, when no college sports took place, to record the content regarding accessible ticketing policies and seating options. The websites were revisited in October 2011 during football season to determine if changes had been made in an effort to adhere to the new ADA requirements.

This study is considered exploratory research and therefore anecdotal evidence from the websites was shown. Results were categorized in a “good,” “bad,” and “ugly” format. Good represented websites that changed in adherence to the ADA requirements. Bad represented those that did not change, displayed inconsistencies in language, yet were still informative. Ugly represented those that did not change, did not use person-first language, and were not informative.

Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio State, and South Carolina were the only athletic departments categorized as good by changing their online wording to comply with new ADA requirements. Anecdotal evidence from Michigan’s site displayed it as the most proactive in addressing accessible seating, with a dedicated page to accessibility, alignment with ADA changes, and use of person-first language. However, these changes can also be attributed as part of the settlement with the Department of Justice over modifications at Michigan Stadium. Categorized as “bad” were athletic departments such as Florida, Michigan State, and Northwestern where patrons were informed of accessible services; however, no changes per ADA regulation were advertised in the text and language use was inconsistent. Categorized as “ugly” were athletic departments such as Iowa, LSU, Minnesota, and Mississippi, where information was present but used indirect communication to visitors with instruction to call the ticket office (for which no number was given in Mississippi’s case) or to note special inquiries on ticket requests.

Big Ten athletic departments, in general, were more explanatory and proactive about informing prospective patrons of accessible seating and ticketing options. Still, with four of 24 athletic departments in the two most popular and financially stable football conferences adhering to the new ADA changes, the lack of response is concerning. Athletic departments such as Michigan and Ohio State displayed proactive action by dedicating entire pages and interactive documents to inform people with disabilities about accessible seating, and schools such as Nebraska and South Carolina made significant changes to their accessible seating information to better serve their ticket holders. Yet, the majority of athletic departments in this study displayed qualities of lagging behind on adhering to the ADA, not updating content with regard to accessible

seating, or a mixture of both, while using mixed language to address people with disabilities.

This presentation will address the background of the ADA changes for athletic facilities. Results of an exploratory study of athletic department websites will be provided to determine if schools adhered to the ADA changes and what information was provided to online visitors. Anecdotal findings show that while a small number of athletic departments updated their websites in a way that complied with the new requirements, the vast majority ignored marketing requirements by updating their websites. Athletic departments may be avoiding compliance with ADA changes with regard to accessible seating and ticketing, thereby preventing people with disabilities from being fully informed about their opportunities to attend events at their university.