

Virtual Disability Manager: accessibility is a matter of services

Presentation abstract

Virtual Disability Manager (VDM) is a service developed by Village for All (V4A) and Bed&Care (B&C), the main goal of the project is to provide to tourism sector players a unique contact point able to fulfil all the requests that might be expressed by travellers with special needs.

The project merges the expertise of V4A, the International Quality and Hospitality Brand that provides reliable information about accommodations and itineraries all over Italy, and the services proposed by B&C, a startup that integrates the existing tourism offer with all the services (rental of mobility aids, nurses, caregivers, adapted transportation services) proposed by local healthcare services providers.

The idea comes from 3 main considerations:

- 1) Accessible tourism has always been approached focusing on the accessibility of the accommodation and on the improvement of the skills of travel sector operators. Little to none attention has been paid to the companies already working with disabled and elderly people at final destination and on the impact that these companies might have in delivering targeted services to travellers with special needs;
- 2) Tourism sector operators are not aware of the specific needs of guests with disabilities or chronic illnesses and their families. This lack of skills makes them uncomfortable in dealing with this target and decreases their propensity to increment the number of services dedicated to them;
- 3) Accessibility is a complex issue. WHO has estimated that 1 Billion people all over the world has some kind of access need, however this large mass of people is highly fragmented and each sub group expresses different needs. This makes difficult to travel sector operators to get oriented and to provide the right service to everyone.

VDM builds a bridge between the tourism industry and the third sector in order to create a network able to respond effectively to the needs of both travellers with special needs and tourism sector operators.

VDM is a consultancy service provided to all the players of the tourism industry (travel agencies, tour operators and accommodations) and to all the travellers with special needs.

For what concerns the players of the tourism industry VDM offers the possibility to:

- 1) Take advantage of a unique contact point for all their requests related with accessibility: rental of mobility aids, healthcare assistance, training, accessibility assessment and certification, consultancy services to make the accommodation compliant with the current legislation and about the procedures that must be activated when dealing with travel carriers;
- 2) Delegate, totally or partially, the phase of assessment of the needs of the guest: our team of experts can be activated by the accommodation or by the travel agency during the reservation phase. Our consultants help the guest to verify if the accommodation has all the services needed and to request additional services in case something was missed at final destination;
- 3) Integrate their offer with the services of local healthcare companies working every day with elderly and disabled people (rental of mobility aids, healthcare assistance, transportation with adapted vehicles): when VDM receives a specific request, activates the most suitable local company. All the additional services are provided/delivered in the accommodation chosen by the traveller.

On the side of the travellers VDM offers the possibility to:

- 1) Get reliable information about the accommodation chosen;
- 2) Activate all the ancillary services that might make the vacation more enjoyable;
- 3) Relax during the vacation in a safe environment.

The service is provided for free and the cost of the service is covered by the fee paid by all the player involved (accommodation, local healthcare services providers and travel agencies). The fee is due only if the customer finalizes the reservation.

The project has started on January 2018 and has been welcomed by the third sector and the tourism sector:

- 80% of the local healthcare services providers that we have contacted have joined the project and our network counts over 500 firms in Italy;
- Tour operators, travel agencies and accommodation owners feel relieved and protected because they can completely delegate the assessment of the needs and the identification of the services to be made available to travellers with special needs;
- Elderly and disabled people feel more comfortable about the quality of the service because their interlocutor is an experienced healthcare assistant able to understand their needs in terms of both accessibility and services needed.

We are currently collecting all the data about the satisfaction of the travellers and tourism players and about the type of services more requested by the travellers.

The final paper will focus on the following issues: possibility to widespread the model adopted all over Europe, strengths and drawbacks of this first Italian experience.

Lead speaker : Roberto Vitali

Organisation : Village for All srl

City (Country) : Ravenna(Italia)

Biography : Born in Ferrara, since 1992 he has been involved in Accessible Tourism. He is CEO of Village for All, a company specialized in "Accessible Tourism" that aims to assist Public and Private Companies or no profit organizations in all the activities related with accessible tourism: from concept development to product creation and marketing. He is component and spokesman of the Commission for the Promotion of Accessible Tourism at the Ministry of Tourism.

2nd speaker : Serena Stefanoni

Organisation : Bed&Care srl

City (Country) : Anzio (Italia)

Biography : Born in Rome, is one of the co-founder of Bed&Care a startup working in the accessible tourism. Bed &Care is a reservation system that allows travel agencies and tour operators to book the mobility aids and the healthcare assistance services needed to fulfil the



requests of disabled and elderly travelers. Our network includes more than 500 Italian companies working day by day with people with special needs and we currently support more than 100 tourism sector operators. Our goal is to boost the accessibility of the existing tourism offer making it more usable and accessible for all.