

Independent Living - an overview of the industry

Frances Leckie, editor of the Independent Living website, www.independentliving.co.uk, takes a look at developments in the fields of assistive technology and aids to independent living.

The Independent Living website was set up at the latter end of the 1990s, when the internet was still unfamiliar territory to most people. We had been involved in disabled living products since the beginning of the decade, as marketing consultants within the healthcare industry. I still have vivid memories from that time, of how depressing the products available were: our first visit to Naidex, the annual specialist exhibition, was a real shock for anybody accustomed to the choice, variety and style of "mainstream" design.

Wheelchairs were invariably grey, heavy and unwieldy. Baths wouldn't have looked out of place in a Victorian sanatorium. As for the furniture - between veneers reminiscent of nicotine-stained pub ceilings and ugly flowered chintzes, there were few pieces that you would want to find a place for. Almost without exception, the products available to disabled people were presented on the basis of need, not want. If you need a shower cubicle that you can wheel a chair into, this is it. Don't expect it to look attractive, be grateful that we are providing something that works for you. And if you need help getting out of an armchair, your sitting room should ideally have been decorated in the 1930s, because that's the only way the rise and recline chairs on offer would feel at home.

It wasn't that the people involved in the industry didn't care - on the contrary, there were, and still are, great numbers of extremely dedicated individuals working hard to make products that did the job that was needed, safely and reliably. It just seemed that as soon as something was perceived as a product for 'the disabled market', its potential was limited. It must function - as a chair, bed, whatever - and it must be even stronger than an equivalent item used by an able-bodied person. It must be durable and safe to use. But attractive? Imaginatively styled? All the product development energy went into making something functional, and there didn't seem to be any juice left over for the creative, dare I say fun, side of manufacturing.

This lack of choice went together with a rather paternalistic attitude towards disabled people; that they would have the products selected for them by healthcare professionals who knew what was appropriate.

Probably uniquely as a market, here manufacturers were selling their goods not to the people who would use them, but to specifiers, who wouldn't have to live with their choices. Because an occupational therapist would never recommend a shower stool on the basis that it was a funky colour, nobody made one that was. And it is absolutely right that healthcare professionals are concerned primarily with the security and well-being of their clients. It is their duty to ensure that the products they recommend work properly and meet each individual's needs. But all the time that disabled people were being viewed as recipients, rather than partners with opinions and experience of their own to contribute, the status quo was bound to continue, with specifiers concerned only with function and manufacturers therefore meeting just that requirement.

Look how the world has turned since 1990!

Browse the pages of the Independent Living website, and you will see beautiful cars; sleek, lightweight wheelchairs; elegantly minimalist bathrooms; Italian-styled kitchens - all made specifically to meet the demands of disabled users.

Tentatively to begin with, and then with an unstoppable momentum, the disabled market has changed out of all recognition over the last few years.

A number of events have come together to trigger this change - probably the single most important factor was the arrival of the anti-discrimination legislation, the DDA, which came fully into force in October 2004, though its impact was being felt much earlier than that.

Although it has not resulted in buildings and businesses across the land becoming universally accessible - as witness the recent case of a High Street chain proposing to a customer in a wheelchair that she might like to do her shopping out on the pavement - it has made planners and designers think about the needs of the whole population, rather than selected parts. This is something we all benefit from: a well-designed space functions efficiently and is a pleasure for everybody to use. Enthusiastic and talented students are now likely to tackle inclusive design projects as part of their coursework, which should ensure that fresh young minds will help to keep the design process moving forward.

The fact that government and social commentators were talking about the rights and needs of disabled people; the fact that businesses were

encouraged to focus on satisfying a market estimated at £60 billion; crucially, the fact that disabled people were suddenly being talked about as customers, clients, consumers, all helped to shake up a rather humdrum industry.

Because of increased awareness of the market potential, lots more companies gave it their attention. Where once there was a small handful of firms supplying adapted bathrooms, now there are dozens. It is the same with every aspect of mobility and independent living. And the long-established specialists are having to compete with not only the lively new entrepreneurial businesses, but also the mainstream heavyweights, most of whom now have a "special needs" range alongside their traditional offerings, be it bathrooms or three piece suites. There aren't so many ways in which a company can make its products stand out from the competition's: eye-catching design is an obvious one.

Equally, as disabled people have become more assertive, the old readiness to accept products that are dreary, ugly, just adequately functional, is also disappearing. You can still find them, of course: the heavy, unmanageable wheelchairs; the uncomfortable crutches; the armchairs with hideous upholstery. But they are no longer the only - or even the majority - option. We are all consumers and we all have aspirations. There is probably as much eye candy on display now at the Mobility Roadshow as the Motor Show. Most of us will never drive a Ferrari - or a Martin Conquest - but it doesn't stop us dreaming, and more importantly, our dreams raise the bar for those products that are part of our daily life, whether it's a family hatchback, a wheelchair or even a kitchen cabinet.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes yet another obstacle to overcome: some healthcare professionals - who are still often responsible for the recommendation of independent living products - seem to believe that aspirations are somehow unsafe for anybody with less than 100% mobility. The MD of a highly successful company was not long ago taken to task by an Occupational Therapist who objected to the fact that his latest catalogue showed wheelchairs in stylish surroundings, rather than a dull little adapted bungalow which was, she believed, the reality of living with a disability. That the MD was a wheelchair user himself and the photographs were shot in his own home added an extra dimension. The underlying message, from somebody working with disabled clients, was clear and unambiguous: if you are disabled, you should expect life to be a struggle, and there's no point aiming high because you will only be

disappointed. Many of us have faced this sort of put-down at some stage, perhaps from a teacher who only saw our failings, and sometimes it has even proved to be the catalyst that actually pushes us to achieve. But it is more likely that you will believe the assessment of the professional and accept less than the best for yourself, unless you are constantly surrounded by positive, confident images and aspirational messages. Happily, disabled high achievers, in sport, arts and business are beginning to be much more visible as a new spirit of inclusiveness gradually spreads.

The concept of consumer choice is steadily becoming embedded in the provision of adapted products. In the same way that ugly NHS specs have been replaced by vouchers that can be used towards the cost of a pair of glasses you choose to wear, a standard NHS-supplied wheelchair is no longer the only option, when a voucher can be used at any approved supplier to pay part or all of the cost of a chair that really pleases you. The possibilities for an adapted vehicle are really wide: a quick visit to the Motability website will show you nearly 3000 eligible models, ranging from a nifty little Smart car to a sporty coupé, and taking in all the sensible, family-sized options on the way. Then Direct Payments really enshrined the notion of consumer choice, with management of all care services finally passing to the person who actually uses them.

And who would have predicted the difference that the internet would make to our lives? There is no doubt that one of the reasons for greatly improved choice in all markets for goods and services is the ease with which we can now make quick comparisons of what is available around the world, not just in our local mobility store. Once again, instead of having to rely on someone else to make a selection for us, we can go looking for exactly what we want. It is difficult for a supplier to insist that grab rails only come in white when you can see a whole range of bright colours on a Scandinavian website. Pretty soon British stores are stocking the stylish imported products, and British manufacturers are rushing to design their own equivalents. Tiny companies can now afford to produce boutique products that their local market could probably not support, because they can open their shop window on the net and sell to the world. Internet sales are increasing all the time as more people appreciate the convenience of shopping without the crowds or the parking problems. But even those who are wary about buying on the net, perhaps because of security concerns or a preference for more personal service, will generally make it the first place they look for product, stockist and price information. It really has transformed the

market place.

Another factor that has no doubt played a role in product development is the huge demographic shift that we are currently experiencing in Europe. Better healthcare and declining birth rates have led to a burgeoning elderly population. After decades of chasing the youth market, advertisers finally woke up to the strength of the grey pound, and vast amounts of money are being invested in developing goods and services that will appeal to ageing baby boomers.

Yesterday's young trend-setters are tomorrow's pensioners, and they aren't about to be shuffled off into the twilight zone. Their parents and grandparents might have accepted that life after 65 meant a dwindling of interests and influence, but this generation sees no reason not to continue enjoying all the activities that have been open to them throughout their lives. Whether that means holidays in exotic locations, shopping for designer clothes, or wading through the mud at Glastonbury, old ideas about age-appropriate activities have been shaken up. Many of us develop conditions with age that reduce our mobility, dexterity, vision or hearing, but that doesn't stop us wanting to travel, dress stylishly, embellish our homes and gardens.

Increasingly, these demands are being met. Look for an automatic rise and recline armchair, and you will find soft black leather alongside the traditional velours and damasks.

Stairlift manufacturers are vying with each other to produce ever more sleek and stylish models to appeal to the design-conscious individual. No longer are we grateful that something is there to help us get upstairs - it has to look good and make us feel better about ourselves too.

The bathroom is probably the single room that has had the most attention lavished on it, in terms of adaptations to help with independence. Not surprising when you consider that whether or not you are a wheelchair user, a typical British bathroom with its modest dimensions and traditional bath, basin and loo, is not a very user-friendly place.

Showers are replacing baths in many homes, and are much easier from an access point of view. A shower tray that has been set into the floor to provide completely level access, or a shallow tray on the surface with a gentle ramp up, can both be managed with confidence. Poky little

enclosures are also a thing of the past; it is now easy to find trays as big as a bath, where you can manoeuvre a showerchair without breaking a sweat. Or if you really enjoy wide open spaces, pick up on the current trend for wet rooms. You need to give this one some thought in the planning stages, though - even if it is possible to turn the whole bathroom into a shower area, you don't really want a wet loo roll and towels when you emerge from the water. Better to use the principals of wetroom design, with a stylish, non-slip waterproof floor-covering, generous access and discreet drainage, combined with an elegant glass screen to keep the spray contained. If you need help in the shower, then a half-height door or screen will save your carer from a drenching.

Of course, however smooth and easy a shower might be, some people are just committed to their bath, and with the luxurious hydrotherapy options now available, it isn't hard to see why. A walk-in tub is easier to get in and out of, provided you have some mobility. You should make sure that it is quick to fill and empty, though, as you will be sitting there the while... A powered lift that carries you up over the side of the bath is an alternative: they may be electric or water powered, and there are models with an integral leg lifter.

Perhaps the most luxurious upgrade available in the bathroom is an automatic toilet, which combines a loo with bidet and warm air drying, offering the possibility of considerably enhanced independence, especially as there are various remote control options available. Once again, a sense of style is much in evidence: no hint of 'special needs adaptation' here, they are very definitely aspirational bathroom products, as you can see.

Surprisingly, kitchens - usually the first stop on the makeover trail - have remained the poor relation of accessible design until quite recently. Not the gadgets and gizmos; those are very widely available, to make chores like peeling, chopping and grating a bit easier, if not more exciting. No, it is the kitchen itself that has lagged behind, with inaccessible work surfaces, cupboards you can't reach into, sinks and ovens that are hazardous or unusable. Perhaps designers have finally realised that disabled people like food too! Whatever the reason, instead of a rather cranky height adjustable work surface, you can now find a range of barrier-free designs, with features like low-level wall mounted worksurfaces, without too many legs to get in the way, shallow sinks that allow you to reach the washing up from a wheelchair, pullout storage units and ironing boards: even pull down racks that make use of those

high level cupboards.

Technology is increasingly playing a role in independent living. Thanks in part to the way that computers have now become integrated into our lives, the luxury high tech home and the adapted home can be very similar, with control systems programmed for everything from opening and closing doors, curtains and windows, to adjusting the lighting and heating, as well as controlling the television, radio and dvd player.

We are all now familiar with the automatically adjustable beds and armchairs that can be tweaked into just the right position for a comfortable rest: there is now a bed - also available as part of a double bed configuration - that will rotate itself between sitting and sleeping positions, using a one button remote control, so that you can get in and out without hoists or assistance. Not to mention chairs that raise you up to a standing position and flatten out into a comfortable bed, as required.

On a smaller scale, too, hi-tech products can help keep us safe, well and entertained.

Automatic entry systems ensure that nobody gets into the house unless we want them to. Callers can be viewed and interrogated on the doorstep before you decide to open the door - all without leaving your chair. Other monitors can be set up to detect smoke, fire, gas, carbon monoxide - and deliver a warning in the way that suits you best, including making an automatic phone call to a designated number.

Many of us now enjoy the help of a parking monitor, to protect us from the consequences of our own incompetence behind the steering wheel. We find our way to our destination by following spoken instructions from a satnav system: in fact, in ten years' time, the skill of navigating from one town to another by reading a map will probably be as arcane as that of following animal trails in the wild. The same technology that guides you to your destination is now beginning to help blind people to negotiate the pavements of their city, as the accuracy of European satellites has improved to less than two metres, compared with the 15 - 20 metre tolerance of the standard US GPS system (something to bear in mind if you are in danger of becoming too dependent on that bossy voice telling you to move ahead xx metres).

Monitors that summon help if you should fall are well-accepted by many people who live alone and want the extra reassurance; these have now

been joined by epilepsy alarms that will be triggered by a grand mal (Toni-Clonic) seizure. In fact, it is possible to install monitors around the home, detecting movement, even changes in blood pressure, temperature and other vital signs, in such a way that the occupant's well-being can be constantly checked, from a distance. Telecare is the buzzword in many cash-strapped local authorities, where it is seen as a cost-effective way to enable people to live independently in their own homes. Whether you view this development as a welcome means of feeling looked-after without a continuous procession of concerned visitors, or a sinister Big Brother watching your every move, rather depends on individual temperament. But there is no doubt that the general principle is here to stay.

I guess that mention of Big Brother brings us back to the internet. Orwell's nightmare vision of the future included the television that could never be switched off, through which the authorities could keep an eye on everybody. We've willingly embraced its more benign manifestation, the home computer with permanently-on connection to the world-wide web. Increasing numbers of us add a webcam to our set-up, making exchanges across cyberspace feel more personal, and then there is the extraordinary phenomenon of the blog. Now anyone can publish their own opinions and experiences in a sort of stream-of-consciousness diary. Sometimes this provides valuable insights into an extraordinary life (the Baghdad Blogger, for example). Sometimes it allows the world to find out quickly about product problems that the manufacturers would really rather we didn't, such as Apple's infamous iPod Nano screen debacle. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of blogs are just mind-numbingly dull. It is another good example of the adage "Just because you can, doesn't mean you should". Perhaps more of us than would care to admit it hanker after our 15 minutes of fame; an external verification that we really do exist. Modesty doesn't seem to figure on the list of cardinal virtues any more: why keep your trivial achievements to yourself when you can tell the whole world with a few mouse clicks?

All this frantic activity means that the internet becomes daily more crowded and confusing. Finding useful and relevant information gets harder, in spite of the improvements in search engine performance. In the commercial world as in the personal sphere, every business knows that they need a website, even if they aren't quite sure what to do with it once they have it. Not surprisingly, given the overwhelming amount of stuff out there, when you find a website that answers your questions, you tend to keep going back. It is much quicker to look around one site

that you are familiar with, than to sift through the first page or two of results from Google, MSN or whatever your favourite search engine happens to be.

And that is really how Independent Living has grown into the site that it is today. Quite simply, we have been on-line for a very long time (in internet terms!) in a very recognisable format. We have thousands of pages of information, ranging from nutrition to fitness to alternative therapies. We cover care legislation and accessing benefits. And perhaps most importantly, we have a great deal of in-depth product information about each and every aspect of living independently, some of it general, some relating to specific suppliers. So whether you are looking for a stair-climbing wheelchair; an alert to warn you when the bathwater is too hot; a hoist that you could sling in the boot of the car and take on holiday with you; or an ergonomic mouse - you are almost certain to be able to find out about it on Independent Living.

The site also has extensive coverage of industry news and exhibitions, so we always hear about the latest developments, whether in Britain or further afield, perhaps at Medtrade in the United States or Rehacare in Germany. In fact, our exhibition features are considerably more popular than the events themselves, attracting many times more visitors. Though I am being a little unfair to the exhibition organisers, as our "show" is of course available at any time, anywhere to suit the customer, not confined to one place for a couple of days once a year...

The amount of information contained on Independent Living grows day by day, largely in response to the interests of our visitors. Because the internet is a fairly instant medium, we can respond quickly to any requests: for example, we were asked a few months ago by a couple of site visitors for information about beds and chairs for extremely heavy people. We decided to put together an area specifically for bariatric (heavyweight) products, and it soon became one of the most popular parts of the site, no doubt reflecting the national trend of growing obesity, and incidentally encouraging other websites to follow suit.

Dealing with enquiries from visitors is another big part of the workload, for which we are lucky enough to be able to depend on help from volunteers. However much information we include, there is always somebody looking for an answer that isn't there, or that they haven't found. Frequently, the questions are straightforward and easy to deal with, often by referring the enquirer to the right part of the site. Some,

usually legal or benefit-related, take quite a lot of research to answer - occasionally we even get a thank-you. And some are just so strange, we wonder whether the writer knows who they are emailing, or even what planet they are on!

Sometimes public-spirited people write to warn us about companies or products that have let them down. And that is one of the negative consequences of the huge growth in the independent living market: inevitably a number of cowboy operations are attracted by the possibility of making some easy money. It takes a special kind of individual to scam somebody who is buying a mobility scooter or bathlift, but I'm afraid they do exist. There are businesses employing very high-pressure selling techniques, and others encouraging people to buy expensive products without prior assessment, which may well not be suitable for them at all. One or two mail order businesses are a lot faster at taking payment than delivering goods.

We make sure as far as we can, that any companies on Independent Living are trustworthy and reliable. Many of them belong to trade associations, such as the BHTA (British Health Trades Association), which have a code of conduct governing the way that their members do business. And there are other ways that you can protect yourself, like asking friends to recommend companies that they have dealt with successfully, or searching on Google for "problem" and the name of the business or product you're checking - you may turn up a thread on a bulletin board somewhere that you would never find ordinarily. Look for companies that let you try before you buy, and offer no-quibble returns and guarantee policies - all signs of reliability. And finally, be cautious about setting up appointments for salespeople to visit you at home, certainly as a preliminary move. There are some extremely tenacious salespeople who will take root on your sofa until they exhaust you into signing a contract. Even with the "cooling off" period enshrined in consumer protection legislation, it is not an experience you want to subject yourself to. Better to research the market first, know what's available and how prices compare. Then by all means invite your selected supplier to demonstrate their products - with a friend or partner for moral support if you are worried that you may prove too easy to sell to!

If you would like to contact me about this article, or you have any questions about independent living products or services, I'd be very pleased to hear from you - you can email me on editor@independentliving.co.uk. Or visit the website,

www.independentliving.co.uk

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