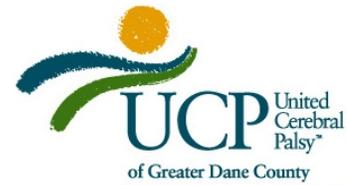


Person First Language - Client vs Consumer vs Customer

There is controversy in using the terms “client,” “consumer,” and “customer” in referring to the people we support. The School of Engineering refers to me as well as the recipient of their projects as their clients. Using client in that sense is fine as long as you are aware that different disability groups object to each of these terms and that it is best to use alternatives where possible. Below are two articles that help illustrate the issue:



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Houston Chronicle Small Business Section (Undated)

Strictly defined, a customer is someone who buys goods or services from a store or business. The word "client" can also mean "customer," according to the American Heritage Dictionary, but it has a separate definition as someone who receives professional services. In business, the two terms are often applied differently based on the types of relationships built. Customers are generally people who come to you mainly to buy products or services you supply. Clients buy your advice and solutions personalized to their particular needs.
<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/difference-between-customer-vs-client-56387.html>

Summary from the office of Disability Policy and Studies (DPS) of the School of Health Professions at the University of Missouri

There is controversy in vocational rehabilitation, independent living programs, and human services in general, over how to refer to persons with disabilities. At one time, persons were referred to as "patients" or by their disability ("epileptic"). Today, these are seen as inappropriate labels because they tend to depersonalize someone into a stereotype and imply that the person is passive.

In the 1950's people in human services began using the term "client" instead. Some people object to "client" because it implies a lower social or educational status for the person with a disability compared to the service provider. The term "consumer" is widely used today, but some people also object to it because it implies someone who consumes and uses up resources. Some groups are using the term "customer", to be part of the popular movement towards customer service and satisfaction. But even this term has opponents, who point out that people getting rehabilitation services do not purchase the services; the taxpayers or employers pay for it.

The term "disabled people" or "the disabled" also has problems, since it suggests that their disability is the person's defining feature. People can have a disability without being the disability. Limitations can be self-fulfilling - thinking they are limited by a disability can keep a person from even trying. Because of this, a person can think they are more "disabled" than they truly are. In general, we should try to focus on the person and see both disabilities and abilities from their point of view, instead of from a medical definition or stereotype. Although it may seem awkward at first, the phrase "person with a disability" is the phrase most widely used.

So there is still no perfect term to use, but most professionals favor "person with a disability", "customer", or "consumer". "Client" is still used when there is an actual (or perceived) difference in education or authority between the person receiving services and the provider - for example, in vocational rehabilitation counseling. We believe that, most of the time, none of these terms are perfect for focusing attention on the person and away from stereotypes about disabilities. People

with disabilities do not fit into simple categories, as the diversity in our case studies show. It is best to just refer to people by their names or, if you are talking about a group, to use "persons with disabilities".

<http://www.dps.missouri.edu/resources/orient/refrnc/encycl/client.htm>