

Design for All in the bathroom sector – creating awareness and opportunities

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Abstract. Targeted and co-ordinated measures can convince businesses of the benefits of barrier-free solutions and the concept of a *Design for All*. The concept is attractive to a wide range of consumer groups, and offers businesses clear potential for a commercially successful implementation.

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Introduction

As a result of demographic change a growing number of people find it difficult to live independently in their homes as their needs change and their physical abilities decline. Simultaneously, older people seem increasingly keen to continue living in their familiar home environment, and being able to look after themselves. The bathroom plays a central role in this – unsuitable bathrooms are often the main reason why older people have to move out of their homes. It would therefore be sensible to adapt bathrooms at an early stage and create potential for support in older age. However this idea has not yet been taken on widely enough. Customers usually react late and a little reluctantly, and so they miss the opportunity to avoid possible barriers by integrating functions as part of routine renovations or the construction of new bathrooms. They are usually put off by the connotation of ‘assistive equipment’ and find deficit-oriented solutions unappealing. For manufacturers and builders, there is an opportunity to support customers in a sustainable and commercially successful way by offering attractive solutions [1].

1 Initiatives by the trade association and its co-operation partners

The German Sanitation, Heating and Air-Conditioning Association (ZVSHK) has launched a number of initiatives for its 30,000 members in the bathroom sector, to raise awareness for the concept of a *Design for All* and the necessary changes. The central question was how to communicate the subject to manufacturers and builders, and encourage them to put ideas into practice. Co-operation with the European network of experts, *Design for All – Germany* (EDAD), has been crucial to the success of these initiatives. The aim was to present the theory behind *Design for All* in an attractive and

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accessible way, and help businesses to develop and test ideas. Recent studies which identified factors for a successful implementation of *Design for All* proved to be particularly useful [2]. Businesses tend to take on new ideas only when they look interesting conceptually *and* commercially. Part of the strategy was therefore to create an arena for businesses to measure themselves against their competitors. This was realised in the form of an international trade competition, the ZVSHK product design award *Bathroom Design for All* (www.zvshk-award.com). It provided a communicative anchor and resource for everyone involved.

1.1. Providing information for potential participants in the sector:

The competition criteria were communicated by experts in Universal Design, barrier-free solutions and the needs of older people. They used various formats (interviews and articles in trade journals, industry workshops, and communications through the Association) and a clear language, highlighting the need for a high quality implementation from ‘day one’. Success stories from other sectors were very helpful.

1.2. Challenging participants to compare themselves with competitors:

The competition’s main goal was to stress the importance of a user-focused development process, and the participants’ ability to create innovative products won much praise. A jury of experts was found through co-operation with EDAD. The two-step process allowed for different communicative approaches. The awards generated further incentives, such as a touring exhibition and journal articles, and award winners were able to utilise the benefits for their first projects. Businesses participated precisely because the advantages for themselves and their consumers were explained clearly and in a new context, in a distinct move away from deficit-oriented solutions.

1.3. Inspiration for further activities:

ZVSHK has supported accompanying research and teaching activities, conducted by the author [3]. These are all characterised by an inclusive approach, involving builders, manufacturers, and older users. Collaborations with higher education institutions (UdK Berlin/HfG Offenbach) resulted in innovative bathroom concepts (Badlabor 2020), which have shown how *Design for All* can enable people to live independently for longer in their own homes. It is now possible for businesses to implement a range of solutions, following through successfully from product development, consulting, and planning to installation and maintenance in the user’s home.

References

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