

THE STRAIGHT DOPE

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A **Straight Dope Classic** from Cecil's storehouse of human knowledge

Why is there braille on drive-up teller machines?

20-May-1994

Dear Cecil:

A question gnaws at me. We've all used those drive-up teller machines at banks. Why are the buttons identified with braille? --Vox Populi, Baltimore

Cecil replies:

Congratulations, Vox, you are the one millionth person to ask this question! Please send us your address so we can burn down your house.

Hey, just kidding! Although if you ask ever why we park on the driveway and drive on the parkway, you won't get lucky twice.

Anyway, you asked a question, and by God you are going to get an answer. Drive-up ATM buttons are marked with braille because federal regulations require it. To be specific, section 4.34.4 of the *ADA Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities* (Appendix to Part 1191, 36 CFR Chapter XI, issued pursuant to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990) says, "Instructions and all information for use [of an automated teller machine] shall be made accessible to and independently usable by persons with vision impairments." Drive-up ATMs, unlike the walk-up variety, don't need to be wheelchair accessible, but the rules make no exception regarding accessibility by the blind.

You're now thinking: boy, those federal bureaucrats sure are stupid. Don't they realize a blind person isn't going to be able to drive to a drive-up ATM? Cecil reserves judgment on the



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stupidity question, but even if the feds weren't smart enough to notice this little problem on their own, there were plenty of people who pointed it out for them before the rule was finalized. The American Bankers Association, for one, asked that drive-up machines be exempt from the visually-impaired requirement, arguing that a blind person using a drive-up ATM would have to be a passenger and that the driver of the vehicle could help with the transaction.

No dice, said the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, reasoning that driver assistance "would not allow the [blind] individual to use the ATM independently." This may sound like one of those absurd points of principle, but ATM manufacturers say a fair number of blind people do take cabs to drive-up ATMs, and nobody wants to ask a total stranger to help with a financial transaction.

Your question does point to a more serious problem, which other readers have also raised: how the hell is a blind person supposed to use any kind of ATM? Whether the keypad numbers are identified with braille or not, there isn't any braille translation of the on-screen instructions, without which the machine is useless. Maybe, you're thinking, the problem isn't the brainless bureaucrats, it's the brainless (or cynical) bankers and ATM builders, who figure a pretense of accessibility will get them off the hook.

But that isn't it either. At the time the accessibility rules were written, and to a great extent still today, there was no agreement on the best way to make ATMs accessible to the blind. More than 50 ideas have been proposed, including a "talking machine," detailed braille instructions, an automated "bank-by-phone" setup with a telephone handset and a keypad, and so on. (Sample problem: if you use a "voice guided" ATM, how do you keep others from overhearing?) Another difficulty was retrofitting the thousands of machines already installed.

The bankers and ATM builders argued that the best thing to do was leave the federal rules vague until the industry figured out a practical approach. The not-entirely-satisfactory solution in the interim has been to (1) mark ATM keypads, input and output slots, etc., with braille, and (2) send braille ATM instruction brochures or audio cassettes to blind bank patrons requesting them. The theory is that while ATM operation varies from machine to machine, people conduct most of their transactions at just a few locations, the operating sequences for which they can memorize. The drawback of this approach is that you have to know that the special instructions are available and you can only use the machines you have instructions for.

Happily, the banks and ATM builders have been reasonably diligent in trying to come up with more accessible equipment, some of which is starting to show up in the marketplace now. About time, say some advocacy groups. "We don't want to see information technology [e.g., ATMs] become the new curb," says Elga Joffe of the American Foundation for the Blind. "There's certainly no reason to squelch evolving technology. I just wish they'd hurry up and evolve it."

AND NOW FOR THE FUNNY VERSION

Dear Cecil:

The question of why they have braille on drive-up ATMs once showed up in the Internet Oracle a couple years back (you could probably search the Oracle archives for it), and the answer was something like: "Because the dog can't be expected to drive and use the ATM machine!" --Rishi Fish, via AOL

Dear Cecil:

That's right up there with: "Why don't blind people bungee jump? Because it scares the heck out of the dogs." --Seal TX, via AOL

Cecil replies:

You gotta love the Internet Oracle (<http://cgi.cs.indiana.edu/~oracle/index.cgi>). It proves that if the Teeming Millions combine their resources and answer each other's questions, they can be just as funny as me.

--CECIL ADAMS

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