



Bringing clarity to failing vision

Dealing with visually impaired customers

When your staff come into contact with people who are partially sighted or blind during their work, are they unsure how to behave?



Frontline staff who don't have experience of dealing with people who are visually impaired can lack the confidence to know what to say or how to help appropriately.

This guidance will help deal with some of these common uncertainties.

Ordinary people, difficult circumstances

Some of your customers who have sight problems will be happy people, and some will be having a bad day. Some will be easy to deal with, others will be more withdrawn. In other words, blind and partially sighted people are just like everyone else. They aren't a special kind of person, or have unusual characteristics. They are just ordinary people who don't happen to be able to see well. The law says your staff must treat them the same way as any other customer – the way you would like to be treated yourself.

Some people are totally blind and can't see anything, some have just a little sight that isn't much help, and others can see well enough to cope in familiar surroundings. The term visual impairment covers all these situations. Anyone with little or no sight is probably going to manage less well in unfamiliar places, or where it is especially bright or not very evenly lit.

Some visually impaired people may have dark glasses, thick glasses or no glasses at all. They may have a white stick or cane, and they may have a guide dog. Or they may have none of these. You will not be able to judge how much they can see from these things. So don't try to work out if someone needs assistance - ask them. Don't be afraid to ask: it's much better than making the wrong assumptions.

Some visually impaired people are young, but most are older: sight loss is most common in later life. Try to control your curiosity: asking how someone came to have impaired sight is about as intrusive as asking a stranger how much is in their bank account! If they want you to know, they'll tell you.

In conversation

Talk naturally.

- Don't address your remarks to a companion as though the blind or partially sighted person were not there. Questions like "Do they take sugar?" are a definite no-no.

- Don't be afraid of mentioning sight. Go ahead and say "See you again". Blind people say it too.
- The words to avoid are the pitying and sentimental ones like 'Oh, poor thing, what a terrible affliction'. Asking something like "Do you need any help to find what you want?" is OK.

When you go up to a blind or partially sighted person, tell them who you are. Even if you know them well - recognising voices is not as easy as you think. Address them by name if you know it. If not, a light touch on the arm will indicate that you are speaking to them. For example "Hello Mary, it's Jane" is a good approach. And before you move away, say you are about to leave. Anyone feels foolish talking to an empty space!

Offering to guide

Many blind people appreciate help, but don't barge in without asking first. Most blind people can tell you about the times they were marched across the road when they didn't need to cross! So if your offer of help is rejected don't feel snubbed. The next blind person you come across may well appreciate your assistance.

"I wish people would ask me if I need help - not just assume it and take over"

Simply ask if you can help, and if they would like to be guided.

Suggest they place their hand just above your elbow as you stand side by side. You will find you are walking half a pace ahead of the person you are guiding. They can feel from your movements when to turn or stop.

The basic principle is quite simple: you should always guide a blind person from in front; NEVER push him or her ahead of you. How can you see where you are both going from behind them! You can discreetly explain things they can't see – "we are just coming to the reception desk" – but don't over-fuss with too much information that isn't important. People don't want to become more conspicuous than they have to.

In the street

You may be asked to guide someone across a road. As you reach each kerb, pause and tell your companion whether it's 'kerb up' or 'kerb down'. Always cross roads at right angles to the kerb – don't take short cuts.

If you are negotiating steps or a slope, tell the blind person whether they will be going up or down. Give your companion time to find the first step and the handrail, if there is one. Then, with arms still linked, walk one step ahead of the blind person so they can tell from your position when you have reached the level again.

Indoors

Most blind people move about indoors without leaving a trail of destruction. They may need to know the basic layout of a room or shop, but knowing the way to the counter or door is often enough. If they need to take a seat, simply put their hand onto the back of the chair, tell them which way it is facing, and you can usually leave them to seat themselves. It's frightening to be pushed backwards into a chair, so *never* do that.

Try not to leave doors half open, or leave things lying around on the floor. If you visit their home or office, don't move anything unless absolutely necessary. If you have to move something, say where you put it.

Rely on your common sense

Being thoughtful in the way you provide your goods or services can help everyone, including those with little or no sight. For example, don't block aisles or leave tripping hazards. Check signage is well placed and clearly lit. Are the exits, stairs and lifts easy to locate? Make sure tills or reception desks stand out.

More information

The Seeing Sense website provides more details about how to work with blind people in various situations. We also run short courses to equip staff with the confidence to work effectively and without embarrassment with visually impaired customers. See www.seeing-sense.com for more information.

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