

Small Business Management Toolbox

Coordinate implementation of customer service strategies

People with hearing and vision impairments

Communicating with people who have hearing or vision impairments will require patience and understanding. Elderly people may experience both vision and hearing impairments which makes communication more challenging.

With any disability, each person's needs and abilities will be different. Always respect this and ask, rather than guess, what assistance is required.

Degree of blindness

Very few people who are vision impaired are totally blind. For these people vision loss may mean:

- tunnel vision
- difficulty seeing detail
- sensitivity to glare
- blurring or blind spots in their field of vision.

Providing assistance to the vision impaired

- Use the name of the person and touch him or her on the shoulder or hand to make contact.
- Introduce yourself.
- Use your normal voice and speak clearly. There is no need to yell.
- Speak naturally and say exactly what you mean. A vision impaired person uses words such as 'see', 'look' and 'sight' so you can too.
- Assistance with filling in forms (where the information is of a private nature) should be done where others cannot overhear.
- If you are acting as a guide, offer your arm and lead the way. Give directions as you go and describe the way ahead.
- When the person wants to sit down, guide them to a chair, place their hand on the back of it and mention which way the chair is facing.
- If the person has a guide dog do not pat or feed it. This may distract the dog and endanger the owner.
- Say when you are going away or leaving the room.

Communicating with the hearing impaired

Hearing impairment is often invisible and only noticed when speaking to someone for the first time.

It is a misconception that all hearing impaired people can lipread and therefore understand what is being said. Only 30% of what we say can be seen on the lips and mouth. Usually the hearing impaired rely on hearing aids and other visual clues to communicate effectively.

People with hearing aids have an increased sensitivity to loud sounds and background noise. For this reason:

- do not shout (shouting also distorts facial expression)
- avoid background noise and if possible move to a quiet area.
- People with profound hearing loss may receive no benefit from hearing aids and most will choose to communicate using Australian Sign Language (Auslan). This may require the use of an Auslan interpreter.

Guidelines for providing assistance

- Gain the person's attention before speaking.
- Speak clearly and at a slow to moderate pace, but do not over emphasize words. This will distort lip movements making lipreading more difficult.
- Look directly at the person while speaking. Even a slight turn of the head can obscure vision.
- Maximise visual cues and use gestures to enhance your speech.
- Write down key words if necessary.
- Support what you are saying with signs, directions, handouts and notes.

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