

## Marketing Audio Description to visually impaired audiences

### How do I reach visually impaired people?

- **Local societies for visually impaired people and self help groups.** Developing a good relationship with local societies can be invaluable. Societies may publicise your service to individuals through their newsletter or mailing list. The society may also be interested in organising group visits. A special event such as a touch tour of the stage set might help to attract local groups. Alternatively, offer to go along to one of their meetings and talk about the new audio description service. RNIB can supply you with the addresses of your nearest local societies.
- **Talking newspapers.** The Talking Newspaper Association of the UK (TNAUK) publishes a directory of all local talking newspapers. Ask your local talking newspaper if they would like to send a visually impaired person along to write a review. You could also offer talking newspapers a demonstration tape which they could incorporate into their publication.
- **Local social services.** Your local authority may know of visually impaired people in the area who are interested in the theatre.
- **Organisations of and for older people.** The majority of visually impaired people are older people. Market your service to local organisations, clubs and day centres for older people. There will inevitably be some visually impaired people who attend these groups.

- **Your existing theatre mailing list.** ~~One person in sixty has a visual impairment so it is highly likely that there are visually impaired people already coming to your theatre who would benefit from an audio description service.~~ Existing patrons may have visually impaired friends and family who they could tell about the service.
- **The media.** 94% of visually impaired people watch television and 91% listen to radio, so do make use of your existing media contacts. Sighted friends and family also relay information from newspapers and magazines. If you have already established links with local groups, see if visually impaired people would be prepared to give interviews from a user perspective. A few facts and figures, such as those on page 4, may help to sell your story.
- **Specialist publications.** RNIB Holiday and Leisure Services compiles a calendar of events for RNIB's monthly magazine "New Beacon". New Beacon has a circulation of 5-6,000 and is available in large print, braille and on tape. Whenever space permits, details of audio described performances are included.

Let's Go! is a calendar of events in the UK for visually impaired children and teenagers. It is produced each term by RNIB's Education Information Service.

### **Make your publicity welcoming**

Avoid using terms such as "the blind" or "the disabled". Blind and partially sighted people or visually impaired people are much more welcoming and accurate. Try to include photographs of visually impaired people, older people and disabled people in your leaflets.

### **What information do visually impaired people need?**

Remember that audio description is still a relatively new concept. Regular theatre goers and the more active members of local societies will probably be familiar with it. There are however, a lot of visually impaired people who have never experienced it. Explain what audio description is in all your publicity, for example:  
 "Audio description is a description of stage set, characters, costume, facial expression, body language and action. It makes theatre come to life for visually impaired audiences".

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Explain how the system works - do visually impaired people need to arrive early to listen to an introduction before the play begins? Do they have to pay a deposit for headsets? Can they sit anywhere in the auditorium? Are guide dogs welcome in the auditorium or can a member of staff look after them during the performance?

Think about all the "extras" - not just the performance itself. Can interval drinks be brought to visually impaired people who may find it difficult to find their way to the bar?

Make sure that all box office and front of house staff are familiar with audio description and how it works.

Transport can also be a major obstacle for visually impaired people. Include details of public transport on your literature. Local groups may need details of parking for mini-buses and coaches. You might also like to examine the possibility of providing transport for specific performances or events to attract visually impaired people.

Some theatres offer concessionary rates for visually impaired people and/or their carers. Your policy should be clearly indicated on all publicity.

The Partially Sighted Society's shaded eye symbol is used by many venues to indicate services for blind and partially sighted people. It is recognised by the majority of visually impaired people, so do use it.

Along with all your access information, don't forget information on the plays! After all, these are what the audience is interested in - audio description is the facilitator!

### **How can I make information accessible?**

Following clear print guidelines and producing information in other formats such as large print, braille and cassette will help you to reach visually impaired people. RNIB has a number of free "See it Right" factsheets on producing information in accessible formats. If you keep a mail-list, ask visually impaired people which format they prefer.

## **A few newsworthy facts**

There are one million blind and partially sighted people in the country and nearly 80% are over 65. Visually impaired people face a number of barriers that prevent them from fully enjoying the arts. As a result they go to the theatre less than sighted people. 15% of visually impaired people, as opposed to 22.6% of sighted people, go to the theatre at least once a year. Audio description is a way of improving access.

Audio description has a profoundly liberating dimension. It dispenses with embarrassing whispering. Both visually impaired people and their companions gain a higher level of independence.

Audio description is a skill. It can take a describer approximately forty hours to prepare for one play. Describers see the play several times before describing to an audience.

### **Contact addresses:**

RNIB Holiday and Leisure Services  
224 Great Portland Street  
London W1N 6AA  
Tel: 0171-388 1266

Let's Go! Co-ordinator, RNIB Education Information Service  
224 Great Portland Street  
London W1N 6AA  
Tel: 0171-388 1266

RNIB Campaigns Officer (See it Right), Public Policy Office  
224 Great Portland Street  
London W1N 6AA  
Tel: 0171-388 1266

Partially Sighted Society  
PO Box 322  
Doncaster DN1 2XA  
Tel: 01302-323132

Talking Newspaper Association of the UK  
90 High Street  
Heathfield  
East Sussex TN21 8DB  
Tel: 01435-86610

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## MEETING THE NEEDS OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED AUDIENCES THE AUDIO DESCRIPTION MARKETING SURVEY

### FINDINGS

#### 1. Background

More than 40 theatres provide audio description. During 1996, RNIB and AUDEST (Audio Description Training for Theatres) conducted a survey as to how theatres manage and market the audio description service.

The objectives of the survey were to identify:

- good and innovative practice
- criteria for high quality service
- best marketing and audience development
- training needs of theatres

The survey examined key features of theatre:

- audio description services
- accessibility for visually impaired people
- audience development and marketing

#### 2. Method

The survey was sent to 32 theatres known by RNIB to have an audio description service. 24 replies were received (this represents a high 75% response rate).

### **3. Findings**

#### **The audio description service**

The theatres who responded have typically between 1-4 years of experience of audio description (19/24).

The majority put on 1-2 audio described performances per play month (15). The forerunner is Chichester Festival Theatre with more than 5 audio described performances per month.

20 theatres put on audio descriptions at matinee performances. Most theatres have between 10-40 headsets (20). There is good cooperation between theatres and several borrow from each other for very popular shows. 5 theatres provide single earpieces as an option.

Attendance varies enormously but is typically between 10-40 (18). One theatre commented, "The performances vary from 10 people for straight plays and up to 40 for our pantomimes and musicals". Highest attendance rates are in the region of 80 (for a pantomime). Three theatres have consistently low audiences of less than 5.

2 theatres experienced a decrease in audience, in the 12 months prior to the survey. A little less than half experienced a levelling off (10) and half an audience increase (12).

#### **Accessibility**

18 theatres do not require a deposit for the loan of an earpiece.

20 operate a concessionary fee policy.

20 theatres allow guide dogs into the auditorium. 3/4 venues which do not allow guide dogs in the auditorium are music venues, but they take care of guide dogs during the performance.

The vast majority of theatres (22) offer to escort visually impaired people to their seat, to the bar (or to deliver ice cream in the interval), toilets and to the exit.

18 theatres have provided visual awareness training to front of house staff. 12 of these provide it to all new members of staff.

Less than half of the theatres report improvements in the physical environment, eg colour contrast, accessible signage, uniform lighting, audio and tactile information. However, all theatres who are in the process of undertaking redecoration or building work (4) indicate that they will plan for their visually impaired audiences.

#### **Audience development and promotion**

19 theatres have a mailing list of visually impaired audiences. 13 provide information in braille, 16 on cassette and 17 in large print.

22 theatres publicise audio description in programme leaflets and in event diaries. 20 use talking newspapers. 1 theatre provides an audio description sampling post in the theatre foyer.

21 theatres encourage visually impaired audiences to comment on the audio description, customer care and venue accessibility.

20 theatres intend to work on increasing their audience. The most mentioned ideas are to increase number of described performances (1), offer touch tours etc (2), gain more focused audience feedback (3), improve venue access (6), strengthen promotion through publicity, improve data-bases and networking (21).

#### **4. Conclusions**

A few general conclusions can be drawn from the results of the questionnaire:

- \* audio description services are mostly well established or expanding.

- \* where theatres provide headsets and single earpieces as an option, audience choice is enhanced.
- \* most theatres provide audio description for evening and matinee performances. This extends choice and matinee performances are popular with older people and ease transport problems during winter months.
- \* most theatres with audio description see no difficulty in accommodating guide dogs in the auditorium. This is a highly encouraging finding, given that guide dogs are not welcome in many entertainment venues.
- \* most theatres are working toward global customer care, and provide escorting in the venue in addition to audio description. They are also audience feedback oriented.
- \* only slightly more than half of the theatres provide information in three formats accessible to visually impaired people, and there is room for improvement here. An information access policy is an essential dimension of marketing.
- \* theatres with an audio description service are more likely than others to plan improvements in venue access for visually impaired people.

The findings of the survey do not allow one to draw definitive conclusions on why some theatres have a thriving audio description audience whilst a small number experience audience development problems. Many factors are usually involved, including: location and ease of access, the level of popularity of the play, support from local organisations for visually impaired people and a pro-active and inventive approach to promotion. A comprehensive and planned approach will bring the best results for each venue.



## 5. A few ideas for promoting the audio description service

The completed questionnaires did not contain many specific suggestions for audience development, but ideas mentioned in subsequent discussions with theatres include:

- \* sending out venue access information and programme notes prior to the performance
- \* promotion through sighted audiences, some of whom will know a visually impaired person
- \* generating mainstream media interest in audio description
- \* many visually impaired people do not know what 'audio description' means. Some local talking newspapers would publish extracts of audio described performances
- \* prepare an audio description demonstration tape and send out to groups or through their mailing lists
- \* visits to self help groups, clubs and organisations of visually impaired people, talk about audio description and demonstrations of audio description at meetings
- \* strengthen the audio description focus, eg through publicity for the RNIB sales and rental 'Home Video Service', which has over thirty audio described videos.
- \* cooperate with local organisations on the provision of transport, which remains one of the biggest access obstacles.

The first National Audio Description Conference held in March 1997 at Nottingham Playhouse produced many examples of good practice. The conference looked at key aspects of the management of an audio description service, including describer training and user involvement in service design. The conference report will be available early in the new year.

Marcus Weisen, 12 November 1997