



# Access for All

Welcoming Guide Dog Owners

Simply Etiquette -  
or Good Business Sense?

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The Blind Leading the Informed

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## Forewords

This is training material, and while I've tried to lighten it with interesting anecdotes, there is no getting away from the fact that this is serious stuff and I just can't see a way round it. Mind you, I've got a guide dog and I can't see my way round much these days. So if you feel lectured at, at times, then I'm sorry - but I do not regard this subject as optional (and neither for that matter does DDA). I encourage you to read and engage with this material if you wish to fully understand the issues of visual impairment.

*Dave Lucas*

# 1 - Etiquette of Visual Impairment

## Visual Impairment - some facts

Contrary to popular belief most blind and partially sighted people can see something. This may mean they can only distinguish light and dark or it may mean more than that. Nonetheless fewer than 10% of those registered as legally blind see nothing at all. This usually comes as a surprise to sighted people. If you have a cane or a dog then people tend to assume that you see nothing at all.

The RNIB tell us that there are over 2.1 million people with a severe visual impairment in the UK, and that for every one person on the register, there are a further two who simply go unregistered. These are only the people with a registerable visual impairment. Who knows how many people there are with poor vision that is not quite so severe? The BBC tell us that one in three people currently driving would fail a driving test on grounds of poor vision. Statistics such as these suggest that at least a quarter of your customers would be helped significantly by the adoption of these guidelines - or at least some of them. What business can afford to ignore a quarter of its customer base?

A minority of visually impaired people can distinguish light but nothing else. Others have no

central vision, while others have no peripheral vision (like me). Some people see everything as a vague blur. I've got friends like that, they're not visually impaired they just drink a lot. Others see a patchwork of blanks and defined spaces.

There are many different eye conditions that can lead to more serious problems, too many to list here. Some people are born blind or with reduced vision, others suffer sight loss through accident or simply the ageing process. The effects vary widely depending on the condition, its progress and how the person is coping at that point in time. Therefore it is of vital importance that we speak to the individual about the effects of their impairment and how they cope, so that their individual needs can be met.

Trying to anticipate the problems of a visually impaired person without first discussing it with them can cause hurt and offence where none may have been meant. If in doubt, ask! Like our dogs, we don't bite. For example, please don't lead us across the road without first asking if we want to go there and that we need your help to do so. You may not think so but this kind of thing happens all the time.

When you meet a visually impaired person there is no need to feel ill at ease. Awestruck is fine, but not ill at ease. Remember that visual impairment is not an infectious disease, you cannot catch it and therefore there is no need to hold visually impaired people at arms length.

# Models of Visual Impairment

We'd like to take a little time to talk about models of visual impairment.

We think it is important that we all understand how visually impaired people experience their disability, as this experience is what influences both the behaviour of visually impaired people and in turn our behaviour towards visually impaired people and how it impacts on them. These models will also help when it comes to implementing these guidelines.

There are two main models of visual impairment, the medical and the social.

## *The Medical Model*

In the medical model, visually impaired people are defined by their visual impairment.

Medical diagnosis is used to control access to benefits such as housing, education, leisure and finance etc and yes, even to literature.

This has the effect of disempowering the visually impaired person, leading eventually to lives of poverty, isolation and loneliness.

This model sees the visually impaired person as dependent and needing to be either cured, or cared for - thus it sees the visually impaired person as burdensome, as problematic and a drain on resources.

It seeks to justify the way visually impaired people have been systematically excluded from society.

It sees the visually impaired person as a problem for society to deal with.

Control resides firmly in the hands of the professionals, choices for the individual with the visual impairment are limited to the options provided and approved by these so called experts.

Far too often, services for visually impaired people are being run by sighted people who determine the agenda.

The medical model insists that the visually impaired person must adapt to society and the way it is organised and constructed.

The medical model is vigorously rejected by visually impaired people and the bodies that represent them; yet, it still pervades many attitudes towards visually impaired people, even today, in the UK, in the 21st century.

### *The Social Model*

The social model has been developed by visually impaired people themselves as a response to the medical model and the impact it has had on their lives.

Under this model, visually impaired people are disabled by society and the way that it operates.

It's no longer the fault of the visually impaired person, nor is it a consequence of their limitations.

No - visually impaired people are being disabled by the physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers,

present within our society. Barriers which lead to visually impaired people being discriminated against - barriers like badly designed, inaccessible literature.

This discrimination will only end when society changes its way of thinking and approach towards people with a visual impairment.

The social model enables us to take account of visually impaired people as a full part of our economic, environmental and cultural society.

The barriers that prevent a visually impaired person playing a full part in society are the problem, not the visually impaired person themselves.

Barriers still exist even in the 21st century, the so-called "Age of Equality". Barriers of education, information, working environments, communications systems, technology, health and social support services, transport, housing, public buildings and amenities. The devaluing of visually impaired people in the media, films, television and newspapers also acts as a barrier. Read any newspaper article about a blind person and it is likely to contain the words "tragic victim". This is

not how visually impaired people perceive themselves.

The social model aims to give visually impaired people the same opportunities as everyone else by the removal of these barriers. It believes that visually impaired people should have the right to determine their own lives.

In a world where all literature was produced in accordance with these guidelines, many more visually impaired people would be on equal terms with everyone else.

The social model is now being used to influence legislation such as DDA.

## Life as a Guide Dog Owner

For the sake of this exercise, let's say that the visually impaired person you are going to meet is me. You should be so lucky.

I'm an ordinary person, I just happen to be visually impaired. Remember that this is an exercise and I don't want you thinking of me as ordinary outside the bounds of this exercise. For now at least, please treat me as you would anyone else.

I neither want nor need your pity. Beer, chocolate and money are fine but please no pity. Read any article about a guide dog owner and it will probably contain the words "tragic victim". Just remember this is not how we see ourselves and we are not looking for pity.

Please don't talk to me about the wonderful compensations of visual impairment. My senses of smell, touch and hearing and for that matter my sense of humour did not automatically improve as my sight worsened. It is true that I rely on them more than you and therefore I may obtain more information in this way than you do, but that is all.

If you are curious about visual impairment I will discuss it with you but you must remember that it's an old story to me and I have just as many other interests as you.

It's important that you speak to me in a normal tone of voice. You don't need to shout or address me as you would a child. It's only visual impairment; it's not a lack of intellect. It's important that you remember I may still have enough useful sight to deliver a blow accurately.

Talk directly to me, not through my friends or companions and especially not through my dog.

If you ever think that I may need some help, ask me. Let me be the one to decide - and please don't grab my dog's harness. To me, my dog's harness is a sensitive instrument in much the same way that your nose is to you. How would you like it if I grabbed you by the nose?

Let me take your left arm. I'll keep half a step behind you so as to anticipate kerbs and steps etc.

If you should ever have me as a house guest, then please show me the bathroom, the cupboards, the windows and the light switches too, it's important

that I feel orientated just as you do. For my part, I'll try to behave as well as I can so you don't feel the need to show me the door.

Don't be afraid to use everyday expressions such as "look" or "did you see that programme on TV". I know that such phrases are accepted as part of our language and I am not some delicate little creature who needs to be kept in some politically correct crèche.

Always leave doors all the way open or all the way closed, a half open door is a hazard to me. You will often see me sporting various cuts and bruises as a result of walking in to a half open door.

If you ever have to leave me in an unfamiliar area, make sure it's near something I can touch such as a wall or a table. Being left out in an open space can be both uncomfortable and disorientating for me.

If I should ever ask you for directions, please give useful instructions such as across the street and left at the next junction. These are a lot more helpful than vague descriptions like 'over there'. Pointing is of no earthly use to a blind person - yet you'd be surprised how many people still do it.

If we are in a pub or a restaurant then clear directions to available seats would be much appreciated. While I find my way there, you will have time to get me a pint from the bar. Please avoid the temptation to draw other customers' attention to the dog (e.g. saying "look, isn't he cute" etc). This may cause as much embarrassment to the guide owner as saying 'look at the shiny wheels on the wheelchair' would cause to a wheelchair user.

Always be considerate, if you should notice a spot or a stain on my clothing; please tell me privately as you would wish to be told.

Never refer to a visually impaired person as a "VIP". This is a particularly patronising term and will almost certainly cause offence and you may not like the response you get. My usual response to the term VIP is "FU2"!

Never ever distract a guide dog when he's working. You wouldn't believe the number of people who try to talk to Jarvis as we're crossing the road.

Many members of the public think that you should never talk to a guide dog under any circumstances. This is not a view to which the Guide Dogs for the

Blind association subscribe. Their advice is that you exercise some judgment. Wait until the guide dog owner is in a place of safety before asking them if you may fuss their dog.

Approach the owner first, not the dog. Remember there may be a vital reason why the owner does not want you fussing their dog at that particular time. It may be that their dog is somewhat distracted at the time and fussing may cause the dog to become over excited. It may be something much more mundane. Maybe the owner is simply running late and you may not have been the first one to ask to fuss the dog on this journey, after all these are very popular dogs.

A simple trip to the local shop which may take a sighted person ten minutes can take me twice as long simply because of the number of people who want to make a fuss of Jarvis.

Sometimes this is fine, and no-one enjoys it more than me. Then there are days when time is at a premium and I need to press on. There have been several occasions when people's feelings have been hurt because I didn't have time for them to fuss over Jarvis.

If you should see a guide dog owner standing still with the dog's harness laid flat on the dog's back, this may be a sign that they are in difficulties and you could offer to help. Guide dog owners often carry a little sign with the word "help" on it. If you ever see one of us holding such a sign, then please help.

## The Outside Environment

Motorists, never park your car on the pavement. You are breaking the law and, what is worse, you are placing visually impaired people in danger. Neither long cane users nor guide dog owners can negotiate their way through the narrow gap that is left behind, and you are forcing them to have to walk on the road. This is simply unacceptable behaviour and visually impaired people are campaigning vigorously against it. Why wait until the police start enforcing it more vigorously? You know it's the right thing to do, why not just do it? Many people who would never dream of drink driving or speeding in a built up area will, however, park on the pavement. Why? It's no less dangerous and the consequences are no less severe for

anyone who may be affected by such a crime.  
**DON'T DO IT!**

Parking your car on the pavement is doubly hurtful. It's sending a message that says 'you blindies can't drive but I can, and what's more I'll park where I like'. Think of it this way - the road is your highway, your means of access - the pavement is ours.

Never leave obstacles such as wheelie bins, push chairs or bicycles in the middle of the pavement. Again these are hazardous. How many times have you had to negotiate your way around and over a bike or pushchair to gain access to a shop? Imagine how much more difficult it must be for a visually impaired person. I've often had to wait outside a shop and wait for someone to come out and move such an obstacle so that I could get in. You've no idea how frustrating this can be.

Street furniture such as waste bins and bollards or benches can also be hazardous. I would urge anyone placing such items to think carefully about their location.

There is a current trend for more and more cyclists to use the pavement. My best advice would be never cycle on the pavement. It's illegal, just like

parking on the pavement, and it's equally inconsiderate to pedestrians, including the visually impaired. If you must be so inconsiderate, then at least have the good sense to dismount when approaching a visually impaired person. Many guide dogs have been startled by cyclists on the pavement. At best it can frighten a dog badly and at worst it can ruin its career. Rest assured that if this were to happen to Jarvis, myself and all of his fan club would hunt said cyclist down.

Town planners are slowly sneaking in a new practice of painting a white line down the centre of a pavement and thus designating one side for cyclists and one for pedestrians. Have you spotted the problem yet? Yes, you've guessed it; visually impaired people can't see the line - so we don't know which side we're supposed to be on. If it was so obvious to you, why couldn't the idiots at the town hall work it out?

Another practice that town planners seem enthusiastic about is the creation of what they call "shared streets". This practice originated in Holland and is being adopted more and more in the UK. Here in Newcastle, you can see it all around the area of Grey's Monument and parts of Grainger Street, Grey Street, Dean Street and the Quayside

to name but a few. For those of you who haven't noticed what "shared streets" are, it means the removal of kerbs and road markings so that pedestrians and motorists share the same surface. The research that came from Holland showed that this had the effect of greatly reducing vehicle speeds, making it safer for some pedestrians. However, guide dogs are trained to follow the line of a kerb. If you remove the kerb, the guide dog has nothing to follow. In "shared street" spaces, not only is there no line for the dog to follow, but the dog is being encouraged to mingle with traffic - which is entirely against all of its training. Some dogs have become so confused and stressed by this that they are no longer able to work. When you consider that a guide dog costs in excess of £50,000 to provide across its lifetime, this is an incredible financial waste - and who can put a price on the stress caused to the dog itself? Guide dog owners often have to wait over a year to find the right match between them and a new dog, and then can spend many months building up the strong bond that is needed to provide a successful partnership. To have to give up this partnership is very distressing, and can potentially lead to a visually impaired person becoming housebound until a new match is found.

**If you have trees and bushes that overhang a pavement, please keep them trimmed back. Guide dog owners and long cane users cannot account for these or other obstacles - and at head height they may cause injury.**

## **2 - Restaurants and Visually Impaired People**

## Arrival and Queuing

A great many visually impaired people suffer from balance problems, and standing in one place for any length of time is often difficult - especially if there is nothing to hold on to. If the queuing area is also a thoroughfare then visually impaired people are often unaware of people approaching them and are therefore unable to get out of the way. We recommend that, where possible, you provide some seating for customers who are waiting. Please also bear in mind that space for a guide dog may also be necessary. When placing tables in such areas, please bear in mind that guide dogs have tails - if there is a low table on which people may place drink etc, then a guide dog's tail can become a significant hazard, particularly when the dog needs to turn round in a confined space. It is important to also remember that guide dogs are trained to go under a table so that they are out of the way. If the table is too low, the dog will not be able to do this. Where it seems to the dog that there is just enough room under the table, it will obey its training and try to get under the table, which may upset things placed upon it.

Areas of queuing tend to be just inside the entrance, for obvious reasons. It's important to try

and balance the lighting in such areas with whatever the lighting conditions are outside. Sudden changes in light levels cause problems for many visually impaired people, leading to dizziness and loss of balance. We understand that many restaurants use lower levels of lighting to create an ambience, and we would not want to change this, however we would recommend that wherever possible the change from full light to low light is done in a gradual manner. It often takes a visually impaired person several minutes for their vision to adapt to a change in light level. It may be important that you do not attempt to rush a visually impaired person to their table - they may need a few moments for their vision to adjust to the level of light in your premises. Before setting off to the table, ask the visually impaired person if they are ready to proceed or if they need to take a moment to adjust. The same can be true when moving from a low-light area into a higher level of lighting. Many restaurants have steps - up or down - from the entrance/waiting area to the main body of the restaurant. These steps generally occur just at the point where the light level changes, making them particularly difficult for a visually impaired person to negotiate. It is important that you make the visually impaired person aware of these steps,

noting whether they are going up or down and how many steps there are.

## **Rights not favours**

It is vital that you remember in all your dealings with guide dog owners and visually impaired people in general , that you are not doing them a favour by allowing them into your premises; it is simply their right, like any other customer, to patronise your business. The DDA gives the right to all assistance dogs to accompany their owner while visiting your premises. All guide dogs wear the official harness and a medal on their collar which is engraved with their identification number. Guide dog owners are issued with ID and are encouraged to carry this with them at all times.

When a guide dog owner qualifies with their dog, they sign a contract with the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. Part of that contract is an agreement to groom the dog every day. It is also part of that agreement that the dog receives a veterinary health check every six months. All dogs are wormed and have anti-flea treatments regularly. A key part of the dog's training relates to

“spending” on command. Guide dogs will only spend away from their designated area at home under extreme circumstances, and in such cases will always let the owner know that they need to go outside to a suitable place. A guide dog owner will not be given a dog if they are not capable of dealing with the dog’s need in such a a situation, including cleaning up after it.

The Guide Dogs association monitors all of these requirements stringently - if a guide dog owner fails to honour these obligations then the dog will be removed. All this means that you can be very confident that a guide dog is clean, healthy, hygienic and poses far less of a health risk than most humans!

## **Menus**

It is a legal requirement that every restaurant holds at least one Braille and one large print copy of their menu. You should also be prepared to have someone read out the menu to a customer should they request it.

## **Puppies in Training**

Before a puppy can qualify as a guide, it spends a year being 'puppy walked', which consists of being taken everywhere it is likely to go as a working dog - everything from restaurants to aeroplanes.

Although there is no legal obligation on businesses to allow access to puppies in training, it is extremely helpful if they are made welcome and the experience they will gain is invaluable - in addition, you can be very proud of the part you are playing in helping to train the next generation of guide dogs.

## **Menu Design**

We have already mentioned the legal obligations regarding Braille and large print - now let's talk about producing a menu that is well-designed and easy to read, making it accessible to the greatest number of customers while still attractive to look at.

When designing your menu, it is important to remember the conditions under which it is likely to be read. It is likely to be read in lower light conditions, often in shadow, and often under

lighting of a particular colour. Something that looks great on your computer screen or in an office during daylight, can become much less user-friendly in real-life restaurant conditions.

Things to consider:

- Contrast & colour
- Text and background
- Font sizes
- Font styles
- Appeal - what's cool
- Lamination / coating
- Clear Print

## **Disabled Facilities**

Many guide dog owners have been challenged when asking to use the disabled facilities - this may seem surprising to you, but it happens regularly. Guide dog owners need extra turning space. The guide dog and its owner are one unit, and move as one. Confined spaces make this impossible. Therefore, disabled facilities are the only accessible option open to guide dog owners.

All too often, disabled facilities are mis-used by staff. Guide dog owners regularly report having to negotiate their way past cleaning equipment or other items being stored in the disabled facility. This is not acceptable, and is in fact illegal. It simply must not happen.

Many premises insist on keeping the key to the disabled toilet behind the counter. When was the last time you had to ask someone for permission to go to the toilet? It was probably when you were a child. If you don't have to endure the embarrassment of being treated like a child in this respect, then neither should any disabled person.

## **Signage**

We would recommend that you develop two distinct categories of signage - those that are related to health and safety, and those that are advertising. There should be clear differentiation between the two - e.g. signs to the toilets should not look similar to the specials board!

Information signs, e.g. directional, health & safety, etc, need to adhere strictly to the Clear Print

guidelines (supplied with this pack). They should be very obvious and large enough to be read from a distance. Standard pictograms should be used, rather than bespoke, “arty” substitutes which are more difficult to spot and decipher.

Signage should always be well-lit and not placed in an area of shadow. Not only should you take account of good colour contrast on the sign itself, but you should also pay attention to the contrast between the sign and the background on which it is placed. E.g. a blue sign on a blue wall will not stand out well.

There is a judgement call to be made when producing ‘advertising’ signs such as a specials board. Signs written in chalk will always be difficult for visually impaired people to read. Many visually impaired people cannot read moving digital displays, and these should be avoided. Eye-catching, attractive and yet accessible signage is within everyone’s reach with a little thought and planning. Nothing looks better than accessible, cool design. Go into any Apple Store, for example, and look at the signage and the lighting, the way the furniture is laid out. Signs are always bold with good colour contrast, lighting is always good without causing glare or areas of shadow. There are

clear access paths between areas of furniture. We are not saying Apple is perfect, of course - nobody is - but after you have been in some stores which do less well at accessibility, you soon notice how much easier it is to navigate your way around an Apple Store. While this environment may not translate directly into a different setting, for example a restaurant, there are good principles on show which should be borne in mind.

## Outside Signage

By and large, the same rules apply to signage outside your premises. However, there are some things which need special consideration. The placing of signage is important - is it likely to be obscured by street furniture, parked cars, trees, etc? Have you made sure it is not in an area of shadow? Is it made from weatherproof material which will retain legibility long term - e.g. will it fade in the sun? Is it on or behind a highly polished or reflective surface, which will reflect the glare of the sky and obscure the text? Is it well-lit? Are free-standing signs placed so as not to present an obstacle to movement? (particularly important to the visually impaired).

## Temporary signage, posters etc

If you have need to make a temporary sign, e.g. “wet floor” or similar, you still need to have an in-house style that retains accessibility. Often, you will see several signs that have been made, sometimes on a computer, in several different styles, in close proximity to one another. This is very confusing for many visually-impaired people. Many of these signs are often either laminated or placed in plastic wallets - both of which cause glare from reflections and are much harder to read. It is possible to get matt laminates and wallets which do not reflect the light and so avoid this problem.

## Preferences?

Whenever you meet a guide dog owner, it is important to take your lead from them. It is good practice to offer some of the options below, however you must not assume that you know what

the guide dog owner will want, nor must you make a decision for them or without asking. Most guide dog owners will be thrilled to have these things offered to them, and very encouraged by your level of awareness. On the other hand, most guide dog owners will be hurt or offended if you just assume they want these things.

Things you might offer a guide dog owner include:

- A seat near a window (for better light)
- A seat in another well-lit area
- A table with more space around it
- A table not in a high-traffic area (eg next to the toilet or kitchen doors etc). A lot of noise and activity close by could distract the dog. Also, dogs' tails can be trodden on. The dog will not bite, but the owner might!
- Booths are difficult for guide dog owners as limited legroom makes it harder for the dog to get underneath, which is where it has been trained to go.
- Before sitting a guide dog owner at a table, it would be very helpful for the waiter to check underneath to make sure there is nothing there that the dog could swallow, or

which might injure the dog. Butter wrappers, milk cartons, bits of food and even cutlery are often found under tables. Guide dogs are on a very strict diet to ensure their good health, and eating scraps is very bad for them. This is why you must never offer a guide dog a 'treat'. It is, however, helpful if you offer the guide dog owner a bowl of fresh water for the dog, and pay attention to ventilation on hot days.

- It is good to offer a visually impaired person the choice of a Braille or large print menu. It is not good to assume that they will need one and give it without asking. If your standard menu is well-designed, many visually impaired people may be very content to use that. Be prepared to read out the menu if asked, or give other assistance that may be requested.
- If you have a specials board, offer to read out what's on it.
- When proffering the bill, ask the customer if they would like it read to them. Standard till receipts etc are often very difficult to read and many people may welcome assistance

with this. The size of your tip may depend on it!

- Once the meal has been paid for, make sure the customer is able to make their own way to the exit. Leaving a visually impaired customer stranded at the till point is not good for encouraging repeat business. Offering to make sure that the customer gets out safely, and perhaps to their transport, might build a relationship which leads to a return visit.
- Many restaurants have a very heavy door, or double doors, leading to the outside. A guide dog owner needs their left hand to work the dog's harness and may therefore find your lobby area difficult. It is always good for someone to hold the door(s) open for them.
- If a guide dog owner is part of a party, it is not an acceptable option to offer to seat him/her away from that party.
- Guide Dogs for the Blind encourage guide dog owners to make bookings whenever possible and to mention their access needs. However, like anyone else, a guide dog owner might make a last minute decision to visit your business and should never be

required or expected to adhere to a bookings policy that doesn't apply to everyone.

## The Layout of your premises

When tables and chairs are laid too close together and clear access routes between them are not immediately visible, this can be very confusing for many types of visual impairment. Many visual impairments can only distinguish between objects when there is clear space between them. Putting too many objects too close together will mean that it is just a blur to many visually impaired people.

Aisles should be kept clear at all times. Often, the space in an aisle is seen as an opportunity to store things such as high chairs, sweet trollies etc., or to place display stands and items for sale. This should never be an option.

It is important to achieve good contrast between the floor surface, the furniture, doors and walls. A common mistake is to change a floor surface in the middle of a room - e.g. from tiles to carpet. When visually impaired people are given mobility training, they are taught to discreetly rub their toes over the floor surface on entering a room, as they pass through the door. This gives them an indication of the kind of surface they are going to be walking on. They will not be expecting to have to do this again until they pass through another doorway. Therefore, a change of surface within the room is a significant trip/slip hazard for visually impaired people and would be better avoided.

The best way to avoid issues with your premises that may cause problems, hurt or offence to customers with visual impairments or other disabilities, is to have an access audit carried out by a qualified person who can advise on both the legal requirements and what represents best practice.

## Parking

If you have a parking area, be aware that guide dog owners are often Blue Badge holders. The reason for this is that guide dog owners need extra space to get their dogs out of the car and into harness safely before setting off.

## Your Reputation

Guide dog owners share information, both good and bad - not only with their fellow guide dog owners but with family, friends and the broader Guide Dogs community including Guide Dogs staff, puppy walkers, branch members, boarders, corporate sponsors and other supporters. Social networks enable this to happen very rapidly. To a community such as the visually impaired, social networks are particularly important as they tend to have limited mobility. Younger visually impaired people tend to

rely on the use of social networks even more than their sighted peers.

When a visually impaired person encounters a business that understands their needs, and has a very good experience, they will pass this on to this large network of people - and those people are known for supporting businesses that treat guide dog owners and other visually impaired customers well. To give someone a good experience that can be shared will only benefit your business.

However, the reverse is also true. If you should offend a guide dog owner or other visually impaired person, they will share this experience with the wider network, and you may find yourself being inundated with comments in response. The effects on your business cannot be good. Recent events at your Grey Street, Newcastle branch have shown that even an honest mistake can cause great offence.

It is important to remember that customers' experiences will often be shared around this great Guide Dogs network, all of whom feel passionately about the rights of guide dog owners, so it's better to give good experiences than bad!

The Guide Dogs family and all their supporters - their families, friends, etc - are greatly influenced by how well or badly you treat your customers. It is one thing to risk losing the business of one guide dog owner, it's another to alienate a significant section of society.

# 3 - Case Studies

## Good & Bad Restaurants

Let us take you on two imaginary evenings out with Jarvis, my guide dog. The first is to a restaurant where the staff have had no training and are not aware of the needs of visually impaired people. The second is to a restaurant like yours, where the staff are well-informed, aware and friendly to their visually impaired customers.

### The First Evening

We arrive at the car park and my driver spends the first five minutes trying to find the sign to the disabled parking, only to find that there isn't one. However, we do find the disabled bays but they are all full. On closer inspection we notice that none of them are occupied by cars displaying a blue badge. It turns out that, as these bays are the closest to the door, they are being used by members of staff. Apparently "we never get any disabled customers here anyway" - hardly surprising, is it? To add insult to injury, I'm told "anyway, you're not in a wheelchair"!

We decide to persevere and try to find our way to the entrance. There is a sign, but it's a dark night and no-one has bothered to turn on the floodlights.

Eventually, we find our way to the door - after crashing into the A-board that has been left outside in the middle of the path - only to find that it's a lobby with double doors, and someone has left a pushchair between them at the waiter's suggestion. In order to get past, I have to drop Jarvis's harness, and he has to follow me through the doors - so I'm now in a position where I'm guiding my dog rather than him guiding me.

Once through these doors, we are greeted by a waiter, who asks if we'd like a table. I reply, "a table for two, please", at which point he turns to my driver and asks if that's correct. When my driver tells him yes, that is correct, the waiter proceeds to tell him that 'that gentleman' cannot bring his dog in here, as it's unhygienic. When I try to explain to the waiter that it is the law, and being allowed access with my guide dog is my legal right, I'm told that if I don't leave, he will have me removed. At this point, he proceeds to place a hand on my shoulder. This constitutes an assault. I ask to speak to the manager. Eventually, the manager arrives. By the time he gets here, the waiter and I have already had a heated exchange which is attracting the attention of other diners and I am already starting to feel like a freak-show exhibit. When the manager does arrive, I show him my Guide Dogs ID, which

clearly states that it is my legal right to enter with my guide dog. The manager proceeds to tell me that he believes the waiter to be correct, however in this case he will make an exception.

The manager asks us to follow him to the waiting area while he sees whether a table is available, and points over his shoulder. Fortunately, my driver is far better informed and gives me clear directions to follow. I find myself in a small waiting area where the two chairs next to the low coffee table are already occupied, so I need to stand. No-one offers me a seat, and already I can feel that I'm starting to lose my balance. There isn't even anything that I can hold onto. Meanwhile, Jarvis is aware that he's blocking an aisle and spots the table. He tries to get himself under it (which is what he's been trained to do) but unfortunately the table is a bit too low and Jarvis has nudged it, causing the drinks on it to spill. The customers sitting at this table complain that I ought to 'watch what I'm doing'. Oh that I could!

Eventually, a waiter comes to tell us that our table is ready, and if we'd like to follow him, he'll take us there. He sets off without saying another word, leaving me stranded, not knowing where he has gone. Once again, it's left to my companion to lead

me to the table. En route to the table, we suddenly encounter three steps down, just as the light level drops dramatically. There are no nosings on the edge of these steps, and it's only because my companion manages to stop me abruptly that I don't fall down them. Once down these steps, I make a discreet check to see what kind of floor surface we're on, and can tell that it is carpet. As we cross the room, I suddenly trip - this room also serves as a dance floor and all of a sudden, where once there had been carpet, there is now parquet flooring. I collide into the back of someone's chair, forcing them to spill soup down their front, only to be told that I am a clumsy idiot and I'll be receiving a dry cleaning bill. When I explain that I'm blind, I'm told that I "shouldn't have that bloody dog in here anyway".

I find myself apologising to someone even though the accident was not of my causing. They mutter something about "supposing it's OK" and I shuffle off, feeling even more embarrassed and wishing I'd stayed at home.

Eventually, we arrive at our table. The waiter pulls out a chair for my companion and leaves me to struggle to get Jarvis under the table. The table has a cross bar underneath it, and Jarvis cannot get all

the way under. We must have upset the manager, because the table we've been allocated is between the door to the toilets and the door to the kitchen. Because of the bar under the table, Jarvis is lying half under and half out from under the table, with his rear end sticking out into the aisle. We haven't even managed to get comfortable when another waiter, carrying two plates of food, comes barrelling out of the kitchen and trips headlong over Jarvis, spilling food all over the floor and leaving me to deal with Jarvis as he tries to 'hoover up' someone's steak.

Eventually, our waiter returns to bring some menus. He's only brought us one - he's already made a decision about what I may or may not be able to read, without even asking me. When I ask him if I could have a large print menu, he replies "Eh? What's that?". I explain to him that every restaurant is required by law to keep at least one large print and one braille copy of their menu. He makes no offer at all to read the menu to me, and once again it's left to my companion to deal with the situation. The only other people in the restaurant whose companions have to read the menu to them are small children, but somehow I don't fancy turkey twizzlers.

After a few minutes, the waiter comes back to take our order. My companion orders his meal first, and then the waiter proceeds to ask him what I'll be having. When I interrupt, and order my own food, the waiter adds insult to injury by asking my companion "and would the blind gentleman like a drink?"

After the waiter has gone, I get up to use the toilets. After extricating Jarvis from under the table, we look for the sign. There is a sign above the door marked "toilets" which I can make out, and we head that way. On going through that door, I find myself in a hallway with three other doors. These doors are painted blue. There are signs on these doors, which are also painted blue. There are symbols on these signs in a lighter shade of blue, with a very thin line. I'm assuming that what we have here is a Ladies, a Gents, and a Disabled toilet - but as I'm unable to make out which is which, I have to go back into the restaurant to ask my companion to come and explain which I should use. When he shows me which is the Disabled toilet, I find that the door is locked. There is a small hand-written notice which apparently says that the key is available on request at the bar. I have not had to ask for permission to go to the toilet since I was six years old. At the grand old age of fifty-one, I find it more

than a little insulting and demeaning. We've been in the restaurant less than fifteen minutes. I've had one accident, been involved in another, been insulted at least three times, and now I have to ask permission to use the toilet. I can really feel my temper beginning to rise.

The barman grumbles that he's already busy with a customer, and I'll have to wait. He's not going to be happy when he has to clean the carpet! Eventually, when he can be bothered, he passes me a key and off Jarvis and I set back to the toilets. I unlock the 5050 door, and as the door swings back I can feel it knock into something. The door is not sufficiently ajar for Jarvis to go through together. For the second time this evening, I find myself leading my own guide dog. The reason the door would not fully open is that someone has stored the floor-polishing machine in here. When I come to wash my hands, I go to the soap dispenser only to find that it's empty. After feeling my way around, I find a bottle of soap placed on the sink itself. The hand-drying machine is behind the door, blocked by the floor-polisher, so I can't get to it. Fortunately, I have a handkerchief in my pocket. Feeling even more disgruntled, we make our way back to our table.

Eventually, our food arrives. Mine is placed in front of me without any announcement. Once again, it's left to my companion to tell me that it's there. The waiter brings our cutlery, wrapped in a napkin, and leaves it at the far side of the table - and again my companion has to deal with it.

Half way through the main course, I can feel a sudden tightening on Jarvis's lead. I ask my companion if he can see what's going on. He has a quick look under the table, to find that Jarvis has a used butter wrapper stuck to his nose and is chewing on a sachet of sugar. We manage to retrieve these, and go back to our meal. Now, I can hear Jarvis panting - the sugar has made him thirsty. I ask the waiter if he could bring a bowl of water for the dog. "What should I put it in?", he asks me. "A dog bowl", I reply. "I don't think we have one, sir", he answers. Eventually he returns with a margarine tub containing the tiniest trickle of water in the bottom.

We decide, after finishing our main course, to have a pudding. I call the waiter over and ask what's on the dessert menu. He points to where the desserts are listed on a chalk board on the wall, and walks away without another word. Fortunately, my companion is able to read them to me, which is just

as well since the waiter didn't seem bothered. We call the waiter back and order our desserts. He goes off and brings back a sweet trolley. The bottom tier of the trolley is at the same height as Jarvis's nose. Fortunately, Jarvis is so well-trained that he does not succumb to temptation. However, I cannot help but wonder why restaurants still persist in using sweet trollies when they are now obliged by law to allow guide dogs access to their premises. It would seem sensible to remove such obvious sources of temptation.

Having had such a poor experience, we decide to elsewhere for coffee, and we ask the waiter for our bill. Despite the fact that it's been obvious all evening that I'm the one who's hosting my companion for a meal out, the waiter still offers the bill to him. When I say that I'll have the bill, he simply moves it across the table and walks off. All evening, I've been telling my companion to order whatever he wanted, and not to worry about the cost. Now, he's seen the bill and is feeling very uncomfortable. This should not have been allowed to happen. Meanwhile, I'm left to deal with a bill that I cannot read - the till receipt has very small print, and the handwritten tickets and illegible. I don't want my companion to have to dissect what he's costing me - this is meant to be a treat after all

- but there is no offer of help to explain the bill from any of the staff. I find myself having to pay a bill on trust, with no way of checking whether it is correct. If a sighted person is able to check their bill before paying, then so should I be - all it takes is for a member of staff to take me to the till and explain the make up of the total without my companion overhearing. Failure to provide this service is not equality.

Having paid my bill, I notice a tips jar as I walk away from the till. I think to myself “they have paid so little attention to my blindness, perhaps I just didn’t see the jar!”, and I walk away.

As I prepare to leave the restaurant, I pick up Jarvis’s harness and move back towards those double doors at the entrance. Still, no-one offers to open the door for me and I’m forced to lead the dog out. Back in the car park, it’s even darker than before and the lights are still not switched on. Had I not got my companion with me, this would have been an impossible situation.

Sadly, despite the quality of the food being really good, and the bill being reasonable in the end, this restaurant has lost a repeat customer. I had been looking for a restaurant to take a booking for the

thirty members of my Guide Dogs branch for their Christmas meal. It won't be this one!

## The Second Evening

On arrival at the car park we immediately notice a well-lit sign giving clear directions to the disabled parking spaces. There are plenty of disabled bays, some of which are already occupied by cars displaying blue badges, but there are still spaces available. We park the car, and I'm relieved to notice that there's plenty of space for me to get Jarvis out of the back and put on his harness, without us having to stand in the roadway.

Once again, there is a clear well-lit sign guiding us to the entrance of the restaurant. There is an A-board, but as it's placed on the verge at the side of the pavement in a well-lit area, it's not causing any obstacle to anyone.

We are greeted at the entrance by a member of staff who has noticed our approach and opened the door for us. The lobby is well-lit and free from obstacles and we receive a warm welcome. Already,

this is becoming a much more pleasurable experience.

A waiter asks me if it's a table for two we require. I confirm this and he asks us to have a seat in the waiting area while he finds a table with plenty of room for the dog. He leads me to a seat in the waiting area, asks if I can manage, and makes sure there's room for Jarvis to lie down comfortably.

After just a few moments the waiter returns to say our table is ready and asks us to follow him. He waits till I am ready to move, and leads us through the restaurant, taking care to point out the three steps that we must descend, and the edge of the dance floor area as we cross the room. The steps were quite easy for me as they were well-lit and had nosings on them. He takes us to a table near the window with a good light above it and tells me he's checked that there's nothing underneath that could do Jarvis any harm. He gets us settled with Jarvis comfortably under the table. It's nice to know that he's aware of my needs.

The waiter tells me that the restaurant has menus available in large print and braille and asks if I'd like one of these. I ask for the large print menu and he soon returns with this, plus a copy of the regular

menu for my companion and a extra card with today's specials listed on it. The waiter asks if I'd prefer to have him read the menu and specials card to me. I thank him and say I can manage the menu, but would be grateful to have the specials card read out. He happily does this. He takes our drinks order and asks if I'd like him to bring some water for Jarvis. I thank him for being thoughtful and say 'yes, please'.

While the waiter goes for the drinks and Jarvis's water, my friend shows me his menu, as he can see it's well laid out and clear. In fact, I could manage with this menu myself, it's so well thought out.

The waiter returns with our drinks and then asks me whether we have decided what to order - I'm pleased he has realised that I'm hosting my friend this evening. We place our orders and the waiter tells us to have a good evening - and if we want anything, to simply raise a hand as he'll be keeping an eye on whether we have everything we need.

After the waiter has gone, I get up to use the toilets. Because there is so much room, it's easy to get Jarvis out from under the table. It's also easy to find the toilets as there is a large clear sign above the door.

On going through that door, I find myself in a hallway with three other doors. These doors are clearly marked with contrasting signs and the well-recognised standard symbols for ladies, gents and disabled. I'm happy to find that the disabled toilet is not locked, and for a change, it's not being used as the cleaner's storage cupboard either. I haven't had to ask anyone's permission to use the toilet, and have been able to access it on my own without difficulty. You cannot imagine how much this means to me.

I return to our table just as our food is arriving. The waiter places my meal in front of me and tells me that it's straight ahead of me, at "twelve o'clock". He unwraps the cutlery from the napkin and places the knife and fork at either side of the plate. All the way through the meal, Jarvis remains nice and settled under the table - there is nothing there to distract him, he has a nice dog-bowl of water, and is well clear of busy thoroughfares through the restaurant since we have been given such an appropriate table.

We decide, after finishing our main course, to have a pudding. I call the waiter over and ask what's on the dessert menu. He turns towards the chalk-board on the wall and reads the sweet choices to us. We

make our choices, and in a few moments he returns with them direct from the kitchen. No sweet trolley, no temptation for Jarvis!

The waiter leaves our desserts, and asks if we'd like coffees afterwards. Since we are having such a pleasurable experience, we happily agree.

After desserts and coffee, the waiter asks me if I would like to accompany him to the till, where he discreetly explains the bill to me. I'm happy that it's correct, and proffer my money to settle it. The waiter explains that I've handed him £20 too much - I reply "no - that's for you". After all, he has looked after us really well. He thanks me and shows me back to the table. As we are getting ready to leave, he joins us again and guides us back through the restaurant, up the steps and holds the double doors open for us as we leave. He walks us to the car and wishes us a very good night, remarking that he hopes we enjoyed our evening and that we'll come again soon. I ask him for a card so that I have the phone number, and assure him we'll be back with more friends soon. Tomorrow, I'll ring and book our Guide Dogs branch Christmas meal here - they really know how to make you welcome.

What a difference from the other night!

# 4 - Conclusion

## Conclusion

Visually impaired people encounter problems such as we have described, on a daily basis. What we have tried to set out here is a set of guidelines representing best practice. However we don't want you to feel so intimidated that you are so afraid of getting it wrong you end up doing nothing. The important thing is that you treat a visually impaired person with the same respect you would wish to receive.

We're often told by sighted people that they have tried to engage with a visually impaired person and have had what can only be described as a negative response. We would urge you to remember that many visually impaired people suffer abuse from the public on a daily basis and it is the grind, grind, grind of this that can sometimes send a visually impaired person on to the offensive. I have sometimes caught myself doing just this.

It should also be remembered that many visually impaired people have not had great educational opportunities and may therefore not possess the best communication skills or a great deal of

confidence. Please remember to exercise your patience and tolerance.

Remember, facing up to a visual impairment is a very difficult thing and whilst it may seem obvious to you, it may not be something that they themselves have come to terms with. This could be an area that they are very sensitive about. I know because I've been there myself. If you were to catch me on a bad day, which, thank God are fewer nowadays, then you may not get a great response from me either.

What we have tried to give you in this guide is not simply a list of instructions to help you comply with the letter of the law, but a comprehensive argument that being accessible to visually impaired people is beneficial to your business. It could bring you access to almost 40% more custom - what business can afford to ignore such potential? We know that ours couldn't!

**A Clear Print Document from  
David Lucas**

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