

Vulnerable Customers – Hearing Loss Help Sheet

One of the most common disabilities that firms will encounter amongst their customers is hearing loss. In fact 1 in 6 people across the population has an element of hearing loss a number that is expected to grow to 15.6m or one in five over the next twenty-five years.

Hearing loss may be a permanent impairment or temporary, sometimes occurring suddenly but often happening gradually with ageing. Hearing loss can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and a feeling of not being valued. 84% of people with hearing loss say that their difficulties with hearing make it more difficult for them to access services. Half of people with hearing loss say they have been teased or mocked, and a third report bullying. There is a great deal that firms can do to improve the experience of customers with hearing loss. Installing loop systems is critical in businesses that have face to face interactions with customers, but it is essential that they are of the right type and installation, and that they are properly tested. There is evidence to suggest that the vast majority of hearing loops are not in fact working properly.

When engaging face to face with someone with hearing loss, a little care and understanding can make a lot of difference in aiding communication:

- Always turn your face to the person, so they are able to see you speaking.
- Speak clearly and naturally, using the full range of expressions – but don't exaggerate movements as it can be very distracting. Don't shout, speak rapidly, or indeed too slowly or 'over-mouth' words as that will alter the normal lip patterns.
- Don't cover your mouth or eat while you are talking - visual clues to speech are important.
- If person doesn't understand what you have said, try saying it in a different way rather than repeating yourself, and pause between phrases and sentences.
- If possible, find a room that is quiet to speak in, has good acoustics and plenty of light.
- Gain attention if necessary with a tap on the arm – but not from behind.
- It is best to use full sentences rather than short phrases.
- It can take a while to process information gained by lip-reading. Make sure your message has been understood, rather than walking away.
- Avoid sudden changes of topic; explain when the subject has changed.
- Follow up the discussion in writing where relevant, particularly with directions and schedules.

Much of the interaction between financial firms and their customers takes place on the phone, and that also presents difficulties for people with hearing loss. A few simple measures can be taken to improve the customer experience:

- It is important to speak directly into the mouthpiece. This will help to remove background noise – although it is important not to hold the telephone too close.
- Before engaging in the content of the call, it is important to ensure that the customer knows who they are speaking to and for what purpose.
- Expect that you may need to repeat yourself, and the conversation may take longer than usual. It is important to be patient and supportive, rather than rushing a conversation.

Action on Hearing Loss www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk are able to help firms in all aspects of their work to support customers with hearing loss. They are able to:

- Conduct a survey of your site and advise on the choice and installation of hearing loop technology as well as maintenance and servicing.
- Provide staff awareness training – including specific training for call centre staff.
- Support staff in learning to sign.