

Issue 5: Accessible Telecommunications Services



**ASSOCIATION OF  
BLIND CITIZENS OF  
NEW ZEALAND INC**

Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”

## **Are You Walking The Talk?**

Blind People Speaking for Ourselves

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## **Supplement to “The Great Barrier Brief”**

### **Issue 5: Accessible Telecommunications Services**

## **ARE YOU WALKING THE “TALK”?**

Founded in 1945, the Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc (Association) is New Zealand’s leading blindness consumer organisation and one of the country’s largest organisations of disabled consumers. The Association’s aim is to heighten awareness of the rights of blind and vision impaired people and to remove the barriers that impact upon our ability to live in an accessible, equitable and inclusive society.

In the context of this document, the word “blind” encompasses all those with a vision impairment who can identify with some or all of the issues described below.

## Introduction

As blind people, we are unable to communicate and access information visually and often we are restricted in our ability to get out and about. No wonder then that often the humble telephone is the first choice for many of us when it comes to maintaining social contact, accessing information and even carrying out everyday transactions such as banking and shopping. The modern development of the mobile phone is also having a profound impact on our approach to communication, provided of course we can get one that we can use.

Modern telecommunications services are changing the very fabric of how society works. Texting for example has become a widely accepted means of communication. Schools now text parents to advise if their child has not turned up, and hospitals and dentists send reminders of appointments by text. Increasingly people are encouraged to receive regular bills by email or read them on a website. Blind and deafblind people must be able to use today's telecommunications services or we will be more and more shut out of everyday society.

Good properly designed telecommunications services would make life better for everyone but they can be particularly liberating for people who are blind. Some disabilities such as deafblindness can severely restrict a person's ability to access information and communicate with others, and for these people, good telecommunications services in today's world can actually be life changing. But often the reality of our experience is more frustrating than liberating.

This brief is directed primarily at the telecommunications industry because it is that industry that must ensure that the fundamental communications services we use are accessible to everyone, including blind people. It is beyond this brief to address the growing range of other services being developed that rely on the telecommunications infrastructure, everything from using an EFTPOS terminal in the supermarket, ordering groceries online, using the phone or TV in a hotel room, texting for a taxi, are all examples of such services. The Association is developing briefs that list our most important needs with respect to other services which all depend on accessible telecommunications.

However we would add that telecommunications companies should recognise that it makes good business sense to directly meet our needs and see us as a genuine source of revenue. With a phone in our hand we can really use, blind people are perhaps more likely than most to make calls, send texts and use other accessible telecommunications services.

New Zealand has strong legislation to protect the general rights of consumers and our specific rights regarding telecommunications services, but we lag behind many other countries that have adopted legislation to uphold the rights of disabled people to equitable access to these services.

### ***What We Need***

Overall, we need:

- telecommunications services that are accessible to and easily used by blind people;
- increased recognition in law to our right to accessible telecommunications;
- standard landline phones that are reliable, have a good clear sound and are easy to use;
- mobile phones that are accessible and sold on similar terms and at a similar price to everyday phones that are taken for granted by sighted people;
- a commitment to ensuring all information is accessible, including bills, directory services, call plans and promotions;
- websites that are accessible.

## Standard Landline Phones

A wide variety of everyday phones is available for use in the home and at work. Often these are difficult for blind people to use with all but the most basic functions unusable. Yet simple inexpensive universal design features can dramatically improve the usability of the humble telephone. For example, distinct keys that are easy to press, good colour contrast, logically designed menus of functions and appropriate beep tones can make an appliance like a phone usable to a blind person when otherwise it might be almost unusable. But we must emphasise the point that such universal design principles would benefit many other people, not just people who are blind, deafblind or vision impaired.

We realise most if not all phones in New Zealand are imported. But telecommunications providers can do more to ensure that phones are available that can readily be used by blind people and other groups such as the elderly who might sometimes have problems using today's commonly available models. Also these companies can do more to structure their services to appeal directly to the needs and aspirations of such groups.

### ***What We Need***

- A general commitment to ensuring that everyday phones are readily available that are easy to use while still providing all the basic functionality people nowadays expect.
- Businesses such as hotels that generally provide a phone and other communications services to the public must ensure these services are accessible.
- Models need to be readily available with large buttons, basic memory functionality and good colour contrast (this Association and the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind recommends 70% for people with low vision).
- When importing phones, preference should be given to manufacturers that show a clear commitment to meet the needs of blind and other disabled customers.

- User manuals should be supplied with the phone in an accessible computer readable format, so they can be read directly or easily converted into other accessible formats such as braille and audio.
- Telecommunications companies should be prepared to look at innovative ways to sweeten the deal when offering contracts to blind customers, such as by throwing in a talking caller ID unit at a cost of about \$50, to give us the same access to caller ID display that is available on many of today's standard phones.

## Accessible Mobile Phones

Most mobile phones can be used for much more than making and receiving calls. They are small computers which allow their users access to the internet, e-mail, text messaging facilities, personal contact organisers and much more. Manipulating any of these features is managed through a digital display which we as blind people are unable to independently access. Likewise, it is impossible for blind people to independently send and receive text messages without adaptive software that speaks audibly or magnifies visually what is on the screen.

Accessible mobile phones are readily available, but they tend to be expensive, \$500 or more, compared to the much cheaper everyday models, particularly if all someone wants to do is make calls and send and receive text messages. Often these phones are excluded from today's standard contracts, further penalising blind people who must pay much more than most other people simply to have a mobile phone. We believe phone manufacturers can do more to make such phones available at an affordable price. Telecommunications companies should introduce and make widely available to blind people, accessible mobile phones that incorporate specialised adaptive software. We believe that telecommunications companies should help supplement the additional costs associated with making these phones accessible, thereby allowing blind customers to afford to purchase accessible mobile phones at a price equivalent to that paid by sighted customers. After all, the telecommunications industry is profoundly changing the way many in society interact and communicate. Thus it is a growing industry and the industry itself must accept that it has a fundamental obligation to ensure their services are accessible to everyone.

For a mobile phone to be considered accessible, a blind person should be able to efficiently and independently use such functions as menus of choices, dialling a number, reading the last number dialled, reading the called number, reading incoming text messages, checking and editing text messages being sent, accessing and using the contacts list, reading the indicators such as battery and signal strength, and changing configuration settings. Other more optional applications should also be accessible if included, such as email, web



browsing, clock and calendar, media player, and so on. Functions should be usable through keys that are distinct and easy to press, built-in responsive synthetic speech, the ability to enlarge characters on the display and ability to link to a braille display via Bluetooth.

### ***What We Need***

- Accessible mobile phones that are affordable and available and at a similar price to commonly available models.
- Accessible mobile phones available through contracts similar to standard contracts linked to other commonly available models.

## **Accessible Telephone Directories**

Every so often, everyone with a typical phone arrangement receives replacement phone books free of charge. These are completely inaccessible to blind people, and, for that matter, people who can't read small print. The alternative is of course the 018 directory service. But that involves a charge, even if it is a small charge. In our view, it is discriminatory to offer printed phone books free of charge when clearly there is a significant cost to produce them, while charging for the 018 directory service.

### ***What We Need***

- Free of charge access to a phone-based equivalent service that allows people to verbally ask for and obtain the desired number.
- Ability to make yellow pages enquiries by phone.
- Accessible and easy to use white and yellow pages' websites (see below for further comment on accessible websites).

## **Accessible Information and Dealing**

It is a commonly held view that service plans such as call and data plans are hard to understand. Imagine how much worse it is if you can't even easily read the information.

We need information to be accessible, and nowadays, making information accessible is simple and cheap, provided the right philosophy and approach is adopted from the outset.

Also when dealing with telecommunications companies, we need them to ensure they avoid practices that perhaps inadvertently discriminate against us.

### ***What We Need***

- Information on service plans and other materials including promotional materials commonly produced by telecommunications companies to be available online in formats that comply with recognised accessibility standards.
- Monthly billing information to be available and easily accessed online in accessible formats.
- Companies should also make their information, including billing information, available in other accessible formats such as braille and audio.

## **Accessible Websites**

Websites are increasingly valuable to blind people because, provided they are accessible, we can use them with full independence. It is particularly liberating for blind people to carry out business transactions which, in the past, would have involved asking someone else for help.

All telecommunications companies nowadays do a considerable amount of their business through their websites. Often they try to show-case the latest website technology. There is a lot of potential for these companies to show leadership in the industry and ensure their websites comply with currently accepted accessibility standards.

### ***What We Need***

- Telecommunications companies to have websites that comply with the accessibility standards set by the World Wide Web Consortium.
- Web sites to avoid utilising technologies such as CAPCHA that can create an insurmountable barrier to people who are blind or deafblind.

## **Staff Training**

We as blind people should be able to buy our phones in much the same way as sighted people do, from a local dealer. Telecommunications companies need to ensure their key staff have a basic awareness of our needs and the solutions available. The Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand can provide such advice on behalf of our members.

### ***What We Need***

- Telecommunications companies to ensure their key staff are trained to know about the needs of blind customers and specific services and products of interest.



## References Sources

- Telecommunications Act 2001
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, World Wide Web Consortium, available at <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20>
- The Great Barrier Brief: ABC NZ July 2008
- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Article 9, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 December 2006, ratified by New Zealand, September 2008 and enforced in October 2008.
- Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand – Technology Sub Committee (usability and accessibility evaluation by blind users).

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