Being heard by all

A reputation for catering to the needs of profoundly Deaf people and those with varying degrees of hearing loss makes good business sense, writes *Andrew Don*



Deafness is on the rise with more than 800,000 people in the UK estimated to be severely or profoundly Deaf and about 10-11 million have some form of hearing loss – 2 million of whom have hearing aids.

The level of deafness – mild, moderate, severe or profound – is defined according to the quietest sound a person can here. Those who experience profound hearing loss mostly rely on lip-reading, British Sign Language (BSL) or both.

Action on Hearing Loss says people with hearing impairment are often excluded or face barriers when accessing services, so provision of only a telephone number, for example, will exclude many of them.

The charity complains about a lack of awareness in companies of text and video relay, and limited knowledge about how best to communicate with Deaf people or those with hearing loss.

A loop system, for example, which enables hearing aid wearers to hear more clearly without background noise, can be bought cheaply from about £80-£90.

Action on Hearing Loss research has determined that 75% of those with hearing loss would be more likely to use a service if staff were deaf-aware.

Lindsay Foster, executive director at BSL-awarding body Signature, warns: "If you're unable to communicate with potential customers, they will leave your premises and look for support elsewhere."

Lynne Kirby, managing director of Enable Holidays, says: "It would be worth travel agents having one member of staff trained in BSL."

Carrie-Ann Lightly, information services manager at Tourism For All, the UK voice for accessible tourism, agrees: "The more inclusive a travel agent can be the more they will be recognised in the deaf market. It's an asset for any business. It would be a big news story."

Training options

You can learn the basics of BSL in a mere 30 hours, but using and understanding complex BSL in a wide range of work situations will take much longer.

Signature has worked with organisations that have offered training to a group of employees and then operated a rota.

"That way, there is always one person available to communicate in BSL with customers, which has proven to be a successful way to improve services and sales," says Foster.

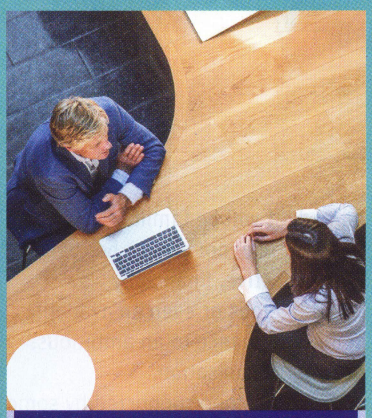
Many teachers offer classes on evening and weekends, and condensed training can be provided on-site at the agency. Signature also offers free online training resources for beginners.

However, not all profoundly and severely Deaf people communicate in BSL – many lip-read or use signs supported by English.

"Because hearing people often don't understand how to communicate with deaf people, having never been taught at school, embarrassment and a lack of confidence often stops them from trying and, as a result, people can be patronising or ignorant," Foster says.

They might make assumptions about the service they want, withhold information or even ignore them. What they need is for agency staff to be patient, understanding and to educate themselves.

"Like hearing people, deaf people have different interests and hobbies, which influence their choices. There is no one-size-fits-all. They need choices that suit them as individuals and they should have access to these choices without any barriers," she adds.



HOW TO ENGAGE

Signature's Lindsay Foster gives the dos and don'ts of how to treat clients with hearing issues:

Don't:

- Shout
- Over-exaggerate lip movements
- Pretend to have understood
- Turn your head away

Do:

- Face the person that you are talking to
- Minimise distractions
- Speak clearly and naturally
- Ensure the customer can see your face clearly without a computer screen in the way
- Look straight at them when speaking