

ACCESSIBILITY

New world opens for the visually impaired

Vancouver's Descriptive Video Work adds narration of what characters are doing in TV shows, movies

BY MARKE ANDREWS
VANCOUVER SUN

After spending most of her working life in broadcasting, Diane Johnson wanted to do something that made a difference for people. She remembered the time when, at age seven, she had met Darlene, a visually impaired neighbourhood child her age who played beautiful piano but could not watch the television shows that young Diane liked.

So in 2003, following a Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission decree ordering TV networks to make a small percentage of their broadcast hours accessible to the visually impaired, Johnson started Descriptive Video Work, a company that provides narration so that visually impaired people know what characters are doing on screen.

Beginning with four employees and doing one show a month, the company has grown to 25 employees (many of them contract workers) and now does 80 shows a month, amounting to 50 hours of entertainment a week. DVW just completed descriptive video for all 179 episodes of *I Love Lucy* for The Accessible Channel, a Canadian digital network that provides 24/7 programming for the visually and hearing impaired.

How does descriptive video work?

A broadcaster or producer who wants their show or movie described sends the show, either by DVD or digitally, to DVW, which forwards it to one of its dozen writers throughout the country. The writer watches the show and, taking care not to intrude on the dialogue, writes short, descriptive passages that tell the blind viewer what actions the characters are doing. This script then goes back to DVW, where a narrator and an engineer record the narration in the company's two sound studios.

At a recent recording session, Vancouver actress Liz Marleau recited, in French, the description for an episode of *Emily of New Moon*, watching the screen and reading the script. Engineer Kent Stephany recorded the session.



Descriptive Video Work CEO Diane Johnson (left) talks with voice actor Kim Craven in the company's recording studio. The Vancouver firm produces secondary audio tracks so visually challenged people can take in TV show and movies.

The writers can do the descriptive scripts from home. The vocal talent — mostly radio announcers and actors — and engineers must work at DVW's office studios on East Second Avenue.

Using the secondary audio program button on their television, the visually impaired cannot only hear the show's dialogue and sound effects, they can hear what the characters are doing.

Networks usually send the programs and movies in for descriptive video, and hold the rights to the finished show. A producer can also commission DVW as part of the show's production budget, in which case the producer holds the rights. The cost for one hour of descriptive video runs from \$1,400 to \$1,500.

"The writing is really challenging, because you have to fit the descriptions between the dialogue," says Johnson, the company's CEO. Brent Craven, DVW's technical operations manager, says that because of the often stringent deadlines, company

employees work at all hours. There have been times when DVW delivered the video at 2 a.m. on the day it aired. DVW has never missed a deadline.

"Diane and DVW do a fantastic job, and that's why we gave them *I Love Lucy* to describe and they did an absolutely incredible job," says Brian Perdue, director of programming for The Accessible Channel. "Last year we had a couple of Christmas movies for Global, and we delivered them to DVW electronically. They did the description and sent it back, and it aired the very next night after we sent it to them."

Currently the CRTC demands that Canadian networks have four hours of descriptive video programming per week. The United Kingdom requires 15 hours per week. In the U.S., the Federal Communications Commission ordered a similar mandate eight years ago, but network lobbying halted it. This summer, both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed the Twenty-First Century

Communications and Video Accessibility Act demanding U.S. broadcasters provide descriptive video.

DVW has done more than 100 feature films, including *Mississippi Burning*, *The French Connection* and *Fight Club*. TV series include *Corner Gas*, *South Park* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Johnson, who is sighted, constantly uses focus groups of blind people to steer her in the right direction, which she has done since forming the company.

"I thought it would be disrespectful of me to assume I know what a blind person wants," says Johnson. When her company was given a design show for descriptive video, she asked a blind woman if she cares if they show a burgundy pillow on a white couch. "Of course I care," the woman answered. "When my friends talk about things, I need to be part of that conversation."

mandrews@vancouver.sun.com

TECHNOLOGY

Go mobile is new digital mantra for businesses, people

BY GILLIAN SHAW
VANCOUVER SUN

The Internet has gone mobile and businesses that don't join the trend risk being left behind in a world that will see the majority of Internet traffic on mobile devices rather than desktop and notebook computers by 2013.

It represents both challenges and opportunities for businesses, but it's a shift that is being ignored by many organizations that are failing to realize their customers are leaving them for their more mobile-savvy competition, according to Jonathan Carrigan, product development manager at CBC and co-founder of Mobcom, a multidisciplinary speaker series on the implications of mobile computing.

The series kicks off tonight with a panel discussion on the Mobile Lifestyle: A Personal Revolution and New Business Paradigm at CBC Vancouver, Studio 700 from 6-9 p.m.

"Within three years it is expected that the majority of Internet traffic will be happening via mobile devices," Carrigan said. "This touches all sectors."

"Anyone who does anything via the Internet needs a mobile strategy."

Carrigan said it's an issue that seems to be flying under the radar.

"Consumer expectations are going to shift very quickly and if you don't offer a mobile version of your service, they'll say, 'I'm going to go to a competitor who does,'" Carrigan said. "For consumers, the convenience is worth making the switch."

gshaw@vancouver.sun.com

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