

# Top tips for supermarket staff assisting blind and partially sighted customers in store

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# Introduction

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The spending power of disabled people and their households amounts to £274 billion per year, and a fifth of your potential customers will have a disability.

Sight Loss Councils, led by blind and partially sighted people, have produced this useful guide based on lived experience. This is to ensure customers can access your supermarket and to create a positive shopping experience for everyone.

This resource does not claim to have all the answers, but it offers practical tips to enable staff to learn as they go and adapt what they offer to the individual needs of the customer.

Throughout this document, the blind and partially sighted (BPS) shopper will be referred to as 'customer(s)'.

# Section one:

## Spotting vision impairments

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- There are a few signs that could help identify a customer who may require assistance. These visual indicators could include the use of a white cane, a customer being guided by an assistance or guide dog, or a customer being guided by another person. Some customers may also wear a sunflower badge or lanyard.
- Some customers carry nothing obvious and may move freely and unaided until they request assistance.
- Some customers will wear coloured or dark lens glasses or sunglasses to help reduce glare. Some customers will wear these in the supermarket and during the darker months.
- Some customers may be more hesitant on arrival, track a wall or walk much slower. Remember, these are only clues and you shouldn't assume they have a vision impairment.
- Some customers might be perfectly able to make eye contact or see colour, but due to their vision impairment, not be able to see more specific details to do their shopping independently.
- A customer may have enough vision to identify you as the relevant person to approach (such as by your uniform or name badge), but still might need help because of a vision impairment, eg reading small print or navigating the supermarket and finding specific items.
- Finally, if you notice a customer standing still for a long time, moving cautiously or seeming to walk with no clear aim, approach them saying, 'Can I help you?'. They may be waiting for someone but might gladly accept your help.

## Section two:

# Introducing yourself

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- Say 'Hello, can I help you?'. Introduce yourself. It is good to do this as soon as you notice the customer, even if they then must wait a little. By doing this, they at least know that help is coming.
- There is no harm in asking if a customer needs help. Worst case scenario is that they might say no – this is no different from any other shopper at this point.
- If a customer has asked for some help with their shopping, it's important that you keep them up dated on progress with getting this support. If you're not the person who can help and you need to call for assistance, then ensure that you communicate this to the customer. It can be disconcerting stood waiting without knowing what's going on. Where possible, offer a seat so that the customer has somewhere safe to wait.
- Ask if and how the customer wants to be guided, as they will know what level of support they need. This could range from just following you closely to letting them take your arm, elbow, or shoulder. All are good methods, depending on the individual's preference.
- Remember, a customer may also have other disabilities in addition to a vision impairment and therefore may require different/additional support than what we mention in this resource. Asking them how they would like to be supported is always best practise.



- Guiding is pretty easy, just remember that you need to give enough space for you and your customer when navigating the store. Also consider and avoid any obstacles such as trolleys and baskets that have been left on the floor.
- As you guide, you don't need to describe everything you pass. The customer will be far more intent on what they need to buy.



## Section three:

# Talking about disability

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- Don't worry about saying, 'I'm having a look at this' or 'I'm seeing if I can find that' – blind and partially sighted people will use these phrases too.
- Do try to avoid broad questions about how your customer copes with everyday life. They may not mind, but they aren't there to educate staff. Such questions are also just hard to answer.
- Avoid phrases like 'suffering from' or 'handicapped' when talking about disability – both are old-fashioned terms and are widely viewed as negative expressions.
- When talking generally, some people prefer to put the person first eg, 'people with disabilities' although others prefer 'disabled people'.
- Following consultation with the blind and partially sighted community, the preferred term to use is 'blind and partially sighted'. We may also use the terms 'vision impaired' or 'visually impaired' to describe any degree of sight loss. We avoid using 'people living with' or 'affected by' sight loss.
- Remember, you don't need to discuss disability at all whilst helping someone. For many, fear about language is a real issue, but focusing on the task means the subject probably won't arise. If it does, as already stated, just ask what term your customer prefers.

## Section four:

# Just before you get started

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- Ask your customer what support they need and if they've any preferences about this, eg whether they like to be guided on the right side.
- Ask your customer what items they want to buy early. This means you can walk to different parts of the supermarket in the right order to save time.
- Identifying what your customer wishes to buy before you start will also ensure that you can identify whether a basket or trolley is required.
- If your customer has a list (they may have written or printed one at home), ask them if they want to read it as you support them or whether they would like you to do this for them.
- During the shop, your customer may remember an item that they've forgotten to mention or they've not added to their list. Try and avoid walking up and down the supermarket multiple times when this happens and just collect them as you head for the checkout.
- If your supermarket offers a 'scan as you shop' type service, your customer may like to be supported to use this. You might like to ask them before you start the shopping how they plan to pay and offer this service at the same time.
- Finally, if you provide a telephone ordering service as an alternative shopping option for people that are unable to get to the supermarket or use the online ordering service, then it is important that this option is always available or made clear to customers on what days/times it is available (having an answering machine with this message for example).



## Section five:

# Navigating the store

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- Your customer may be familiar with the store and its layout, but don't assume this. You may like to ask them if they shop with you often and how much information they would like to know as you navigate the store. If you have recently changed your store layout, your customer may not be aware of this.
- Even if your customer is familiar with the store, they still might like you to inform them where you are or where you're heading - "We're just in the fruit aisle" or "We're now going past the chilled aisle where there is butter, cheese, etc". This might remind your customer of other items they need but it will also give them an idea of where they are in the store.
- Blind and partially sighted customers are less likely to be aware of any new products or special offers. You can ask your customer if they would be interested to know about these as you go around the store.
- If your store has escalators, travellers or lifts, check with your customer if they're OK using them as not all blind and partially sighted people are comfortable with these. This might be different for each customer, so just because one has said they don't like them, don't assume this is the case for every person. If your customer does say no, then tell your customer what alternatives there are (including stairs).
- If your store has revolving doors, these can be tricky for blind and partially sighted people to use (although not impossible). You might like to ensure that your customer knows about any other entrances/exits you have that avoid using these.

## Section six:

# While shopping

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- Ask your customer to tell you about their food or product preferences such as specific brands, flavours or things they must avoid such as nuts. This is their responsibility, but proactive customer service is always best. This information may also help you to narrow the search.
- Never assume what your customer needs. Even if you know them and have supported them many times, they might not always want the same items.
- Please listen to your customer. Usually they know exactly what they want and it can be frustrating if this is ignored.
- Go at your customer's speed. They might need time to make decisions, or they might be in a hurry. Ask them if you can't judge it.
- Your customer may need help with reading the product information, checking the price and best before or use by date. So, feel free to read details on labels – sometimes this is exactly what the customer needs to know.



- Don't be shy about using words and descriptive language – conversations about products are hugely helpful.
- It is fine to describe items by colour and shape. For example, “would you like green or yellow bananas?”. If you're unsure of how best to do this, just ask your customer how you can describe items to them.
- Items may come in a variety of ways. Ensure that you confirm with your customer what they need. For example, “your carrots, would you like fresh, tinned or frozen?” And then “whole, sliced, grated, etc”. Your customer will really appreciate this attention to detail and go home happy knowing they've got exactly the item they came for.
- Your customer may prefer to touch items to confirm it's what they want (familiar to them). If there is a hygiene concern, you can always put things like fruit in bags so your customer can be sure they are choosing the right item.
- As mentioned previously, you can inform your customer about any offers or new products. They may be happy to change their purchase if something similar is on offer. For example, they may have asked for custard cream biscuits but you could say “we do have those but we also have these new rhubarb creams, or the chocolate chip cookies are on offer this week”. Again, ask your customer if they like to know about offers like this as, if they are in a hurry, then they may not wish to know these during this visit.
- When searching for something, do your very best to find it. Look a couple of times and, if needed, ask colleagues for help.
- If you do need to ask a colleague, try not to talk about your customer as if they are not there. Yes, this actually happens, and they will hear you from further away than you might expect.

## Section seven:

# Paying and exiting

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- Where possible, offer to queue with your customer. If this is not possible, try your best to explain the procedure. If you offer a designated till service and there is no need to queue, take your customer to it if they require this support.
- Ask if you can help with packing. Some customers will appreciate you putting their items in bags as they can then concentrate on paying. However, others may prefer to pack for themselves so that they know where things are when they get home.
- If your store has a loyalty scheme, ask your customer if they have a card.
- Tell your customer the total price and when the payment has gone through. They will also need to know anything that others can easily see on displays etc.
- It is OK to offer support with finding the card machine. You can guide a customer gently by the wrist for tasks like this, but it is wise to ask first if they mind you doing this.
- If your store prints out special offers or vouchers in addition to the receipt, then tell your customer about these and what they are. For example, “you’ve a voucher here for £10 off your next in store shop over £30. It expires at the end of October.”.
- Ask where your customer wants to go next. Some will want to exit from where you met them, others might need help to a bus stop or taxi rank. This is reasonable if it’s a short walk, but you may not be covered by insurance to go a long way or cross busy roads.

## Section eight:

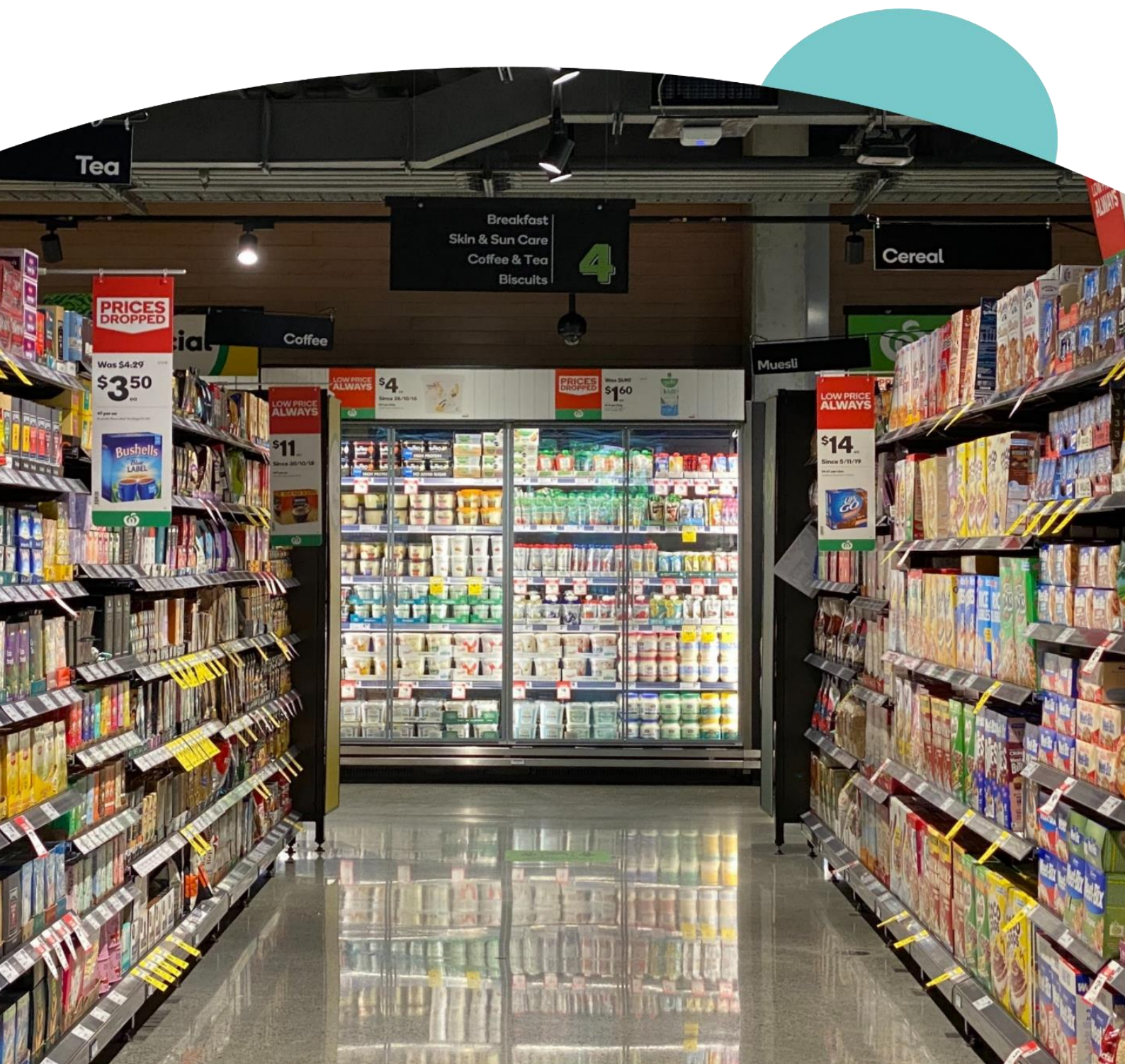
# Reasonable adjustments

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- Aisles and walkways should be clear for health and safety reasons. Any shopper can risk hurting themselves if walkways and aisles are not kept clutter free but this can be exacerbated for blind and partially sighted customers. Obviously supermarkets are busy environments and crates and trollies can't be avoided when restocking. Considering their position and trying to minimise obstructions is appreciated. Empty boxes, where items have been restocked, should be cleared/tidied away so that these do not create a hazard.
- If you have recently changed your store layout, it is important to ensure that the overhead signage matches this. It can also be helpful for blind and partially sighted people to have signage at both ends of the aisle, rather than in the middle as this avoids customers who need to be close to the signs to read them, having to walk down the aisle to do so.
- Some blind and partially sighted people need different light levels to maximize what they can see. It may not be possible to adjust the lighting in store but you may be able to move to a lighter or darker area of the store when needing to show or describe an item. Ask your customer if they have any preference or to identify particular areas of the store that are good and bad for them.
- Some blind and partially sighted people may find music or background noises make it difficult to hear what you're saying. It may not be possible to reduce the noise but you can move to a different or quieter part of the supermarket if you need to communicate about a particular thing.



- If you offer a quiet hour or similar, then inform your customer about this. They may prefer to come when the lighting is dimmed and there is no music playing.
- Finally, you may wish to consider ensuring that as a staff team, you have vision impairment awareness training including sight guiding techniques.



# Section nine:

## Further information

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### What is the Equality Act?

Retailers have a legal obligation to consider and try to remove the barriers a customer might face because of a disability. This is so they can access and use goods and services in the same way, as far as this is possible, as someone who's not disabled. This is set out in the Equality Act 2010.

### Accessibility

If you need this document in an alternative format, please email [info@pocklington.org.uk](mailto:info@pocklington.org.uk) or telephone 020 8995 0880.

### References

To learn more about common eye conditions, visit our website

<https://www.pocklington.org.uk/common-eye-conditions/>

For advice on physically guiding blind and partially sighted people, visit [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

Access further detail on the Equality Act 2010 at

[www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk)

# About Sight Loss Councils

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Sight Loss Councils, funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust, are local groups led by blind and partially sighted members.

Together, we use our lived experience to tackle local and national issues, and work with organisations to improve the accessibility of their services.

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