



Blindness and Fashion: Teaching Personal Stylists and Image Consultants to Work with Visually Impaired People

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Abstract. This study is devoted to the issues of accessibility of fashion for people with visual impairments. We discuss the experience of teaching personal stylists to work and interact with visually impaired people within the “Blind Fashion” project. The project was aimed at helping the blind participants select the appropriate clothes and look attractive. The article investigates the existing problems and possible solutions, explains the major differences in consulting blind and sighted people and what to consider when working with this category of clients. The study is practical and is based on interview excerpts and real insights shared by blind participants and stylists of our project. The research may be useful for personal stylists, fashion experts, image consultants, psychologists and all the people who are interested in the issues of fashion, image consulting and inclusion.

Keywords: Fashion · Blindness · Blind · Visually impaired · Stylist · Inclusion · Image consultant

1 Introduction

Each person is unique in his individuality and differs from other people in physical features, style of clothing, the way of moving, body language, voice timbre and personal qualities. Our own appearance has an influence not only on how we want to be perceived by the society, but also on how we feel ourselves: when we look good, we feel more confident, more attractive, have higher self-esteem and, as a consequence, often hear compliments from others. Image consultants claim that people assess us during the first four seconds of contact [1]. Clothing is an important means of communication. It communicates how a certain person feels and wants to appear in the society [2]. As we all know, fashion is mostly a visual language, but is this language accessible to people who cannot see?

2 Existing Problems and Possible Solutions

Usually a person receives about 90% of information about the world through vision. In the absence of vision, hearing and touch become the most important sources of information

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about the outside world. Active touch is the basis of sensory perception of the blind in all spheres of activity: in study, at work, in everyday life. Information about the color of an object cannot be obtained using tactile perception. However, we note that for blind people there are special programs or devices for determining color, nevertheless, loss of vision greatly complicates, and in some cases makes it impossible to create and maintain an attractive appearance. Blind people cannot check their appearance in a mirror, they cannot see what other people are wearing and definitely have lack of information that causes certain barriers of accessibility [3, 4]. Most elements of the fashion are visual and people can know the trends of fashion by looking the pictures and videos, by observing the others. People who cannot see have no standards for comparison, therefore they don't know what could they change or improve in their appearance since they have never seen themselves nor others. The information coming from the environment and from the others is often incomplete and does not provide the whole picture needed for the comparison [3]. Thus, visually impaired people have a disadvantage because they cannot see the style and clothing that other people chose. But, on the other hand, people they encounter can see and judge their own style. Our visually impaired project participants explain that it's often hard to choose clothes alone, because blind people can't see the sizes and they must always ask for the price, which is not comfortable for them. They don't have people who can accompany them every time they need. They cannot assess whether a certain look really suits them.

Blind and partially sighted people often go shopping with someone to accompany them and to help them to choose the appropriate elements of clothing. In general, this is a family member or a friend and they are not professional consultants. They usually have their own tastes and preferences and the result is not always what the blind person expects. Our project participants say that there is not always someone to go with to choose clothes, relatives and friends are very helpful if there is such an opportunity, but it also happens that tastes do not always match or do not match at all. Sometimes, when a blind person goes shopping alone he may ask shopping consultants for help, but in this case sales person can sell what they want to sell and not what is appropriate for the client. It turns out that a blind person always depends on the taste of his family members or friends. Very often when blind people choose clothes, they often depend on the preferences of the people who help them, even if they simply tell about the availability of clothes in the store. It is impossible to describe everything, so they usually describe what they like. It is often difficult for a visually impaired person to explain to others their preferences in colors and even more difficult to choose exactly what they want. They have no idea about the assortment in the store and therefore they can not choose the right clothes. By this reason, blind people have often different stereotypes that are difficult to change in the future. Our project team member Julia Vasileva in her interview says: "I was always told as a child that black color makes you look slim, so you need to buy black clothes. Only when I became an adult I learned that not the color that can slim, but the right type of clothing". What can blind people do if they want to change something in their usual style? Our project was created to answer this question and to deal with these problems.

2.1 Brief Review of the Question

Recently fashion has become more open to people with various types of disabilities, including people with visual impairments. In Russia and in the world, local projects are emerging aimed at providing interaction between the blind and fashion industry specialists. Some designers try to produce special clothes and the system of wardrobe analysis [5, 6]. In Tyumen a stylist held workshops on choosing clothes and make-up for the blind, in Krasnodar there was a beauty contest for visually impaired girls. In Krakow in 2007 a course was held for the blind, who wished to find a job or change jobs, where participants gained knowledge about the image, the basics of style, makeup techniques, facial expressions, gestures, and movement. In France there is a service in which volunteers help the blind to choose clothes, shoes and accessories. In Russia there is no such existing service, so for the blind such a project is of great importance.

2.2 The Project “Blind Fashion”

The project “Blind fashion” was launched in Moscow by the team of six legally blind participants. The main goal of the project was to help blind and partially sighted people create and maintain an attractive and appropriate appearance [7]. To accomplish this goal we formed the society of professional stylists who are able and willing to consult visually impaired people.

The work was divided into several stages. First of all, we formed a society of stylists and image consultants who wanted to work with the new group of clients. We worked not only with individual stylists but also with design schools in Russia, such as British high school of design, Nethology and skill box schools. At the moment, our project unites more than 30 stylists and image consultants. Then we held two training sessions for those who wanted to participate in the project. Together with our experts we compiled a list of recommendations for stylists who participated in the project. The list contains advice concerning how to accompany blind people while shopping and points to consider when buying clothes and analyzing the wardrobe. We compiled a handbook for blind people with the description of colors.

The next stage was to work with the focus group formed of 25 blind and partially sighted people ages from 18 to 55. All the participants were interviewed before and after their work with the stylist. The stylists helped them to analyze their wardrobe, accompanied them while shopping and gave recommendations upon their personal style. Some clients tried online shopping which sometimes is also difficult for the blind because of poor descriptions of the items and inaccessibility of the web sites. If blind clients buy something in an online store, it is difficult to understand exactly how things look. Basically, the assortment of the store is presented in photos, while the text description is rather scarce. Often the description does not quite match what the thing actually looks like. This is especially true for colors and shades. We launched a number of webinars from our stylists for blind clients. Through these lessons more than 50 visually impaired persons learned a lot about the world of fashion, colors, wardrobe analysis, and had an opportunity to ask questions. One of our fashion experts Olga Tudakova set up a first YouTube channel about fashion and style for the blind in Russia. “I really want blind people to be able to dress and work with their own style equally with the rest of the

people. On my channel I give lessons of style, explain the principles of the wardrobe analysis, talk about colors. Working with a stylist can have a therapeutic effect: change life for the better and fill it with new colors”, - says the stylist [8]. The final stage was to create a web site where every blind person can choose the expert that he wants to address and to contact him for advice.

2.3 Teaching Stylists to Work with Blind People

The training sessions were carried out in total darkness. During the first workshop, the participants were asked to select clothes without seeing or touching their models, they knew only their measurements and could ask questions. During the second “dark” training session participants were asked to do some exercises in the total darkness, such as to identify shapes, sounds, answer questions in written form without any possibility to see. Our trainees said: “I admit, I was very scared for the first half hour. Then I managed to relax and everything was fine. And, of course, the experience of communicating with blind people is very valuable for me. I realized that I have a well-developed visual channel of perception, and this was a very powerful training for the rest of the channels of perception. I was able to feel the state of my potential clients. It is important that this was not a visual, but a kinesthetic experience. I understood what I feel when I feel fabrics. I also realized that it is very important to orient blind client in terms of colors, color combinations, ornaments, since the client does not see all this”. “Stylists work mainly as psychologists, because it is very important to know the needs of a person and his request and to feel what he needs. I felt myself in the place of that person who does not see. A stylist who works with such a client must take into account everything: you need to explain to the person how the thing looks, understand what exactly the person needs, and build communication so that it is understandable for the client”. “We must spend more time explaining the details that at first glance seem insignificant to those people who can see the item of clothing and know how to put it on. It is better, of course, to inform the blind client about the nuances of the things that I recommend to them”.

2.4 The Role of the Stylist for Blind People

Some people believe that the task of a stylist is only to analyze the wardrobe and help in buying clothes, shoes and accessories. But this is only one part of the services provided by professional stylists. A stylist broadens the horizons of the blind, selects a personal style and suggests what can be improved in their appearance. He also explains by what external means a blind person can express his inner world, as well as what external characteristics will be required to present himself favorably in the society. Such information is initially inaccessible to a blind person due to its visual nature. Even having studied the existing available materials on the topic of a personal style, a blind person cannot always apply this information in practice. A stylist makes the blind improve their quality of life by increasing their self-esteem, which, in turn, allows the blind to realize their professional needs and personal desires. A person becomes more self-confident, knowing that his appearance corresponds to the existing communicative situation, expresses his inner world and is well perceived by others. This can help not only to get a new job but also to establish new relationships including those with the opposite sex. An image consultant

is a specialist who can create a unique harmonious and complete image of a person, regardless of whether the client has no ability to see. A professional stylist can combine different pieces of clothing and accessories in order to create and manage a certain impression.

Here are some expectations that shared our visually impaired project participants before working with stylists: “I would like to get an idea about the clothes that suit me, as well as an Objective assessment of my appearance”. “I would like to hear an honest opinion about what things suit me, some recommendations on style and the most preferred colors”. “I want to be able to choose clothes quickly and comfortably, to create an attractive image for different occasions and situations”. “I’d like to get information about styles, colors, materials and current fashion trends”. “Sometimes I can’t understand several aspects of style, for example, some people say that bright colors suit me, while others say that I get lost in them. These two opposing views scare me”. “I would like to review my wardrobe and get some general advice. It would be useful to rely on professional opinion. It is also very important for me to be able to shop independently without creating additional difficulties for family and friends”. “Despite my age I want to remain interesting and attractive to others as long as possible. I am sure that if you like yourself, then this feeling is transmitted to others”.

2.5 Things to Consider While Working with Blind People

Stylists and image consultants who decided to work with the new category of clients should be aware of several special demands blind people have. They should not only know how to accompany visually impaired people inside the shop or help with online shopping, but it is important to know more general things about blindness and its peculiarities.

The picture of the world of the blind largely depends on the age at which he lost his sight. If this happened already at a conscious age, then a person thinks in the same way as sighted people do. He simply receives information about the world with the help of other senses. So, by hearing rustling leaves they can imagine trees, and warm sunny weather may be associated with the blue skies.

If a person lost his sight in childhood, after the age of five, he can remember colors and understand their meaning. In other words, he will know what the standard seven colors of the rainbow and their shades look like. But visual memory will still be poorly developed. For such people, perception is based mostly on hearing and touch. People who have never seen, imagine the world in a completely different way. Being blind from birth or from infancy, they do not know either the images of the world or its colors. For them, vision and visual perception mean almost nothing because the area of the brain responsible for converting visual information into an image simply does not work for them. They do not have a developed association of the subject with the image. They know the names of colors and objects, but they don’t know what they should look like.

Before starting to work with a blind person the stylist should find out what results the client wants to achieve, how he will evaluate the results of the work: on his own or with someone’s help. It is necessary to understand and take into account that often a blind person cannot understand whether he likes or not the chosen clothes, and vice versa, there may be a stable opinion imposed by family member or friend on what is beautiful and what suits him. It must be remembered that the blind have different levels

of perception. The stylist should gently ask if the clients have visual experience, at what age the person lost his sight, if he has an idea of colors.

Here are some tips that shared our project participants: “In the work of a stylist it is necessary to take into account the opinion and desire of the blind person. It is important to hear what exactly he wants, how he feels in this or that look, and what a blind person would like to achieve by creating this or that image”. “In my opinion, it is very important to achieve a balance between a blind person and a stylist. There shouldn’t be any pressure just because the client is blind”. “It is necessary to consider whether or not a person has a visual experience. The stylist must understand how a person imagines himself and the impression that he produces and wants to produce. Often the blind rely only on the tactile sensations of the thing. The stylists need to convey the visual component in detail. At the same time, it is important to remember that the blind people understand the concepts of color, since they have already established their own ideas and connections. It is important to make sure that the ideas about this or that concept of the blind and the stylist correspond and to find a balance between the emotional and the rational in the process of work: to say how much a thing suits a person, and why it suits him”. “It is important to trust the opinion of the person I rely on when I choose clothes. The items of clothing should be easily combined with what I already have in my wardrobe, it should be comfortable, pleasant to the touch and should look nice. It is important that the item is made from materials that I like. I must understand how I can use this thing: with what and when to wear it. The main criterion for choosing clothes and shoes for me is the fact that I should like myself in it. Even if I know that it is fashionable, but I do not like myself in it, I will never wear it”.

2.6 Similarities and Differences in the Methodology of Image Consulting

Our experts were asked about the main differences in consulting blind and sighted people, they shared their opinion and advice. “In fact, there are no limits in fashion and in terms of clothing. These limits are imposed on the people by the society. Anyone wants to look stylish and can do it. The task of a stylist is to help with it. When we work with blind clients it is important to describe things correctly. There are people who do not see colors completely from birth, and there are those who have an idea about colors. It is important to tell what suits a certain person. He will listen, follow the advice, receive compliments and, consequently, get a higher self-esteem”.

Our experts say that blind clients don’t differ too much from sighted clients. They are the same people, but their clothing restrictions are determined not only by positioning themselves in the society, but by real tactile sensations. The stylist needs to accept this and try to make the person feel as comfortable as possible. Sometimes stylists should give priority to the comfort of the client. It is important not to divide clients into sighted and blind. All people have the same requests when they want to change or analyze their wardrobe. There is a little more work with fabrics, but the quality and tactility of the fabric is always considered. The major difference is that a consultant needs to describe absolutely everything that they see in front of them.

Texture is very important for the blind. Tactile perception plays an important role when deciding on the choice of this or that clothing, so it is worth looking first of all at fabrics that are pleasant to the touch, it can be a mixture with cashmere, satin, silk,

viscose, soft velour textures, etc. Something that is very tactile, soft and pleasant to the body. In principle, all people should strive to wear only pleasant tactile textures, this is a guarantee of self-awareness, self-esteem and is important when presenting oneself.

You need a very detailed description of the form of the proposed clothing, prints, shades of colors. In addition to the standard descriptions that we usually give, explaining why we proposed this particular thing, how it works with the appearance, what mood and message the world conveys with this image. In general, you need to give a lot of descriptive information about what you offer and how the clothes fit. It is also important to give information on how to combine things without looking.

Separately, we should say about the colors. There are cases when a person has a memory of colors and shades, but it happens that he does not. And here we propose to use the maximum number of channels of perception. Each person, regardless of vision, will have their own most active channel of perception, so we need to give it the maximum, and each neural connection will be formed in its own way. Moreover, it is not even so important whether a person sees or not when discussing colors and shades. If a person does not see the color, then he should not have discomfort in the discussion process because of this. After all, even people with 100% vision see colors differently. Moreover, under different lighting, the shade will also change.

Another key point in working with blind clients is the ability to create psychologically comfortable working conditions, to give the person the opportunity to open up and trust and, therefore, get a better result. People with physical disabilities, including visually impaired, sometimes may be shy and have difficulty working with a person they do not know. Not every blind person can adequately evaluate themselves. Therefore, there may be situations in which the exchange of information between the client and the stylist is important, but the client is silent and finds it difficult to express his opinion.

For stylists, working with blind people, it is not enough to understand how to dress them up. The client needs to feel, to understand what a person is like in general. Ideally, you need to have the skills of psychological work with the client, because this work is absolutely not only about clothes.

It is necessary to build the level of trust between the stylist and the blind or visually impaired client as much as possible, because, unlike the sighted client, the blind cannot see himself in the mirror and evaluate the work of the stylist. It is very important that the stylist is highly professional, able to understand the needs of the client and take into account all the nuances. It depends not only on the experience, but on the level of the stylist's inner sense of taste. If a person has recently completed the study, but already has a sufficient level of tact, diplomacy, aesthetics and a sense of taste, then he will be able to create looks for blind people.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that such studies are very important from both theoretical and practical points of view. On the one hand, it is necessary to study more deeply the problems of the blind and their attitude to appearance and image. This is important in order to create educational programs, to enforce a good taste to the blind from an early age and to make them interested in creation of their own personal style. Unfortunately,

neither schools nor families pay enough attention to these issues, as a result, the blind tend to underestimate external factors such as vision and appearance. While these factors are crucial in communication with others because we know that the first impression is formed in the first minutes of contact. On the other hand, theoretical studies are very important, as they allow you to gain experience for a deeper understanding of the issues and the development of teaching methods.

We understand that a blind person that has a well-groomed, harmoniously selected and attractive appearance makes a good impression on others. The message that he brings to this world is that although he cannot see, he looks very good. Therefore, he is successful and knows how to manage even difficult and non-standard situations, which means we can trust him. Either further scientific research or practical studies should be conducted in order to start the projects aimed at creating a positive image of blind people in the society.

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