

Talking Meter Gets A+ in New NFB Program

by Gail Brashers-Krug

About the Author



Gail Brashers-Krug, JD, is Director of Special Projects for the Diabetes Action Network. A mother of five and a recovering trial lawyer, Gail works with the diabetes industry, diabetes advocacy groups, and government agencies to advocate on behalf of diabetics with complications.

In a nondescript office building in Charlotte, North Carolina, eight blindfolded people sat around a conference table trying to measure their blood glucose. "I can't get the strip in right," observed Tim in frustration. "Do I have a big enough blood drop?" wondered Ametrius. "Getting the blood on the strip is the hardest part," said Alejandra.

The eight are all customer support representatives of Diagnostic Devices, Inc. (DDI), makers of the new Prodigy Voice. It is the first talking blood glucose meter to be fully accessible to blind people right out of the box, with no additional equipment required, and they were being trained by trainers from the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) to help visually impaired people who call the DDI customer service line about the new product.

"Since the Prodigy Voice is designed for visually impaired diabetics," said DDI Vice President Jerry Munden, "we want to make sure our staff understands how to use the meter without vision." DDI employees were also trained to answer questions using non-visual terms. For example, "instead of telling the customer to press the red button, we tell them to push the round button on the bottom right."

A for Accessibility

The training was part of the NFB's innovative new Access Plus Award program, or A+ for short. The A+ Award is the natural extension of the NFB's philosophy, said Eileen Rivera Ley, Director of Diabetes Initiatives for the NFB, and the Prodigy Voice will be its first recipient. "We wanted to develop a program to reward companies

that make consumer products that are truly accessible for blind people," Ley explained. "Often companies will design a product that is intended to benefit the visually impaired, but the designers don't consult any blind people when they're developing it. The result can be a product that just doesn't work well for blind people—in short, a well-intentioned failure."

The idea behind the A+ Award is simple, Ley explains. "The term Access Plus means that the product is not just accessible to blind people, but also useful and convenient. The A+ is for a product that affords the blind the same convenience and features available to everybody else." And the award isn't just for the product itself—the instruction manual, the packaging, the website, even customer support must also be accessible without vision. For example, the Prodigy Voice instruction manual is available on an audio CD, in Braille, or on the company's website. The website is being certified by the NFB as compatible with the screen-reading software that many blind people use to make their computers talk. The meter's packaging features Braille labels, and the colors and fonts are designed to be clearly visible to those just beginning to lose vision.

And, thanks to the NFB's training, DDI's customer support staff is expert at fielding questions from visually impaired diabetics. Munden was impressed with how much his staff learned. "They found out how much harder it can be to manage your diabetes when you can't see," he noted, "and how important it is to have accessible tools. By the end of the training, they were giving each other new ideas about how

to describe things in non-visual terms, and even asking if they could refer customers to the NFB for more information," Munden added.

The Perfect Candidate

Once the NFB conceived the idea for the A+ program, Ley—whose husband is a blind diabetic and whose son also has diabetes—set her sights on the diabetes world. "Diabetes is one of the leading causes of blindness in America, yet for some reason, most diabetes products don't even consider the needs of the visually impaired," she observed. In fact, more than 3 million American diabetics are visually impaired. Ley said she knew that accessible diabetes products could make a huge difference many lives.

The availability of talking blood glucose meters has become especially important to blind diabetics since Roche Diagnostics decided last year to stop producing what had been the leading talking accessible meter, the Accucheck Voicemate. Ley noted that a talking meter is absolutely essential for any diabetic losing vision. The vast majority of blood glucose meters on the market display readings on a tiny, dim screen, which can be difficult to make out for those losing vision, and completely useless for those who are totally blind. The loss of the Voicemate meant an opportunity for someone to develop a new, improved talking meter.

"When we got a look at the Prodigy Voice, I knew it would be the perfect candidate for the A+ Award," Ley exclaimed. "The people at DDI really get what it means to be a blind diabetic." Ley said DDI's engineers came to the NFB with a prototype of the Voice, expecting congratulations. Instead, the NFB's diabetes experts told them it wasn't good enough. They

suggested a number of improvements, such as a headphone jack for privacy, and a repeat button, so that if a diabetic doesn't hear the reading, he doesn't have to stick himself again to get another blood sample.

"We gave them a long list of changes to make. We were utterly astounded when they redesigned the meter, making every single change we suggested." At that point, Ley said, "I knew that if anybody deserved an A+, it was these guys."

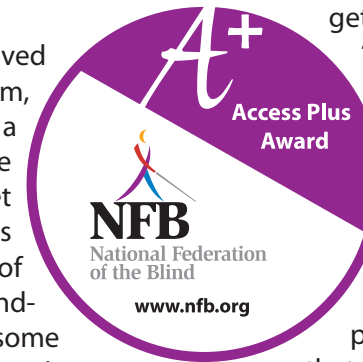
But the award was not a done deal. In addition to reviewing the website, packaging, and instruction manual for accessibility, and training the DDI customer support staff, the NFB subjected the Prodigy Voice to a consumer review panel of blind diabetics who used the Voice exclusively for a month, and submitted detailed, written evaluations. The panel overwhelmingly and unanimously gave the Voice high marks. Finally, DDI had to provide the 510k letter from FDA documenting the meter's approval.

Next Steps for A+

DDI President Ramzi Abulhaj said receiving the NFB's A+ Award is "a terrific honor." Abulhaj said when he and his brother decided to design a talking meter, they began to research the needs of visually impaired diabetics. "Everywhere we went,

everyone we talked to, they all said, 'talk to the NFB. They know blindness and diabetes.' So we figured, why not go to the experts?" Abulhaj said DDI is hard at work designing more products to help blind diabetics, and he will apply for other A+ Awards when they are ready for sale.

Ley said the Prodigy Voice is only the first of what she expects will be many products and services to receive the award. The NFB is currently evaluating a diabetes and incontinence supply company, J&B Medical Supply, for the next Access Plus Award, and several non-diabetes consumer products are in line for consideration. "Our goal is to encourage the manufacturers of all kinds of consumer products, from microwave ovens to cell phones to toys, to consider the needs of visually impaired people at the design stage," she explained. "Anyone who does that really deserves an A+." *



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