

# Vancouver company helping the blind "see" television

Descriptive Video Works has quintupled its output of described video productions since the early 1990s

Bob Mackin

It's not a cure for blindness, but **Diane Johnson** does offer a cure for boredom by opening a new world of media choices for those without sight.

Johnson's company **Descriptive Video Works** adds subtle audio tracks to numerous television shows.

It's called described video and is best described as the blind person's answer to closed caption programming for the deaf.

It's activated by using the second audio program function on newer TVs and has mushroomed since the early 1990s when the **Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission** required broadcasters to offer the service.

DVW began in 1993 and soon averaged 70 described video shows per year. Business has grown five-fold to the point that the 12-employee company averages 350 a year.

"The most difficult thing to do is get somebody that can write," Johnson said. "You're trying to say as few words as possible in between dialogue, fitting the words in."

No one was available in Canada to train the writers, so she contracted an American described video consultant to conduct a weekend workshop in Vancouver.

Johnson has radio experience, as well as marketing experience with **Disney's** Canadian division. Her husband **Terry Reid** is a morning drive voice on **QM/FM** and is involved in doing many of the voice-overs for DVW clients.

"It started out small, but I knew it was going to grow," she said.

"I looked at what happened with closed captioning - 15 years ago there was very little, but now you find 90 per cent of programming is closed captioned."

Johnson expects the same thing to happen to the described video market.

"You can't treat one segment of the population different from the way you treat another one."

It's surprisingly cheap, averaging \$1,600 per hour.

Blind and sight-impaired focus groups indicated the biggest problem was learning to use SAP. After that, Johnson was told users wanted minimal information.

Johnson said the key is to always "say what you see and not interpret what's happening."

"A lot of them are used to having someone sit beside them and whisper information," she said.

"If you gave them too much information they find it frustrating and tune it out. If you give them not enough information they find it frustrating because they can't follow what's going on. They, like the rest of us, want to figure it out for themselves."

Generally, Johnson casts a male voice for documentaries and female voices for home renovation programs.

Whoever does the comedy voicing is asked to smile while reading,



DOMINIC SCHAEFER

DVW's Diane Johnson: company now averages 350 shows annually

because the finished product will tend to be lighter.

DVW is doing shows for **History TV** and **HGTV** for **Alliance Atlantis** and has worked with **CTV** on *Corner Gas* and *W5*. It also does the *Collector*, produced by Vancouver's **Bright Light Pictures**, for **CHUM**.

Johnson said there are no descriptive commercial advertisements that she knows of yet.

"I'm sure soon the broadcasters are going to be able to make some of the money back that they're spending, just to sell time," she said.

**Susan Ewing**, director of library services for the **Canadian National Institute for the Blind**, applauds the work of companies creating described video.

She said described video gives more access to "a media that is central to popular culture."

"In terms of a family being able to enjoy a movie together, a kid can watch *Finding Nemo* with the description with their siblings and know what's going on and enjoy the jokes and gags and sit together," she said.

"The whole family can sit together and enjoy with descriptive video, rather than someone being isolated." ♦

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