

SMALL BUSINESS

New regulations boost narrated-video prospects

Descriptive Video Works well placed for growth with CRTC and U.S. rulings likely to double workload

BY JENNY LEE
VANCOUVER SUN

As voice-over artist Arran Henn coos into the sound-room microphone, Diane Johnson smiles with contentment.

Once again, regulators are creating demand for Johnson's highly specialized product and, once again, Johnson is primed to respond.

Johnson's Descriptive Video Works creates described video.

Described video is like closed captioning, but for the blind. If a show has described video, all a listener need do is turn on the television's SAP function to hear a voice-over description of what's on screen. The narration comes up during natural pauses in the show's dialogue.

Beginning Sept. 1, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) will require specialty channel broadcasters such as History Television, Mystery and Showcase to carry four hours per week of described video programming. This is in addition to the existing requirement that conventional stations do the same.

At the same time, the U.S.'s 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act mandates TV accessibility to the blind beginning in January 2012. The U.S. plan is to increase the number of shows with audio description until it reaches 100 per cent of all TV programming within 10 years.

Not surprisingly, Vancouver-based Johnson has just opened a Los Angeles office and installed a business development manager to service the soon-to-explode American market. Johnson expects business to double over the next couple of years.

At the moment, she's sitting pretty. Her competition in the highly specialized niche is slim. In the U.S., there's WGBH, the public broadcaster, and a handful of small companies. In Canada, she has two competitors in Toronto, but she's the only Canadian firm that specializes in the field.

Johnson expects many small shops to sprout up to meet increasing demand. Fortunately, she's well ahead of the curve.

"We had to figure out how to do it," said Johnson, who started her company in 2003 to help producers meet a then-new CRTC requirement that TV networks make a small percentage of their broadcast hours accessible to the blind.

"We've written our own guidelines. It's not like you can go and get the binder on this or take the course that will teach you about this."

Over the years, Johnson's crew has learned how to be fast and more efficient.

"We've fine-tuned the technical aspects," she said.

Johnson, who is sighted, has also worked hard to please the final consumer, conducting many focus groups to ask the blind and visually impaired for feedback. They tell her if they don't like the voice she's chosen, if there's too much or too little narration, or if the pronunciation is wrong.

Johnson trains her script writers, often screenwriters waiting for funding, for three months, and her readers are often radio announcers with a



GLENN BAGLO/PNG

Diane Johnson (right), is co-owner of Descriptive Video Works, which provides narration so blind people can hear what's visually appearing on screen.

keen sense of audio nuance.

There are 1.5 million blind and vision impaired people in Canada and 25.2 million in the U.S. In Canada, less than five per cent of TV shows are narrated but 90 per cent are closed captioned. By comparison, 17 per cent of U.K. shows must be audio described.

Johnson keeps Descriptive Video Works open 24/7, and does not charge extra for rush jobs. Described video is still relatively new, she explained, and producers often show up at her door, bewildered and frantic, having discovered at the last minute that their contract requires them to deliver both closed captioning and described video.

It is an almost weekly occurrence for her staff to receive CTV's *W5* on a Friday afternoon, immediately after the show has been edited.

"We get it at 4," she said. "We write overnight. Do voice at 6 a.m. so it's ready in Toronto for CTV by 9 a.m."

Johnson charges about \$1,400 to describe a one-hour show, which takes about eight hours to write and an hour to voice, plus four or five hours of technical work. Her writers and voice-

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DESCRIPTIVE VIDEO WORKS

over people understand they have to be flexible with their hours. Such is life in broadcasting.

Johnson employs 12 writers, seven narrators and six or seven technical and support people. They describe about 100 shows a month, ranging from feature films such as *The Full Monty*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Fight Club* or *The Green Mile* to old TV favourites such as *I Love Lucy* (Described Video Works has described 179 episodes) and live description for *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*,

as well as the recent British Royal wedding coverage on CTV.

Johnson started out as a radio station receptionist at CKLG, where she soon rose to promotions director. After senior marketing positions with UTV and Walt Disney Attractions, she was a director at the Heart and Stroke Foundation until she was let go because of cutbacks. A friend suggested she look into described video, which had just been mandated by the CRTC for the first time.

She boldly phoned the CTV director of operations out of the blue to ask for advice and ended up with a commitment for some work.

But neither she, nor the friend she started the company with, were able to secure a \$15,000 bank loan.

"The banks weren't interested unless our husbands signed or if we wanted to put our houses up for collateral which of course were in our husbands' names and our names," Johnson said. "It was so discouraging. I thought as women we had come a long way. How on earth could this be happening. The CRTC has mandated it, we have a major broadcaster saying yes, they

are going to hire us. The banks said we had no history. We said look at our resumes."

Eventually, Vancity gave them a line of credit. Today, Described Video Works has a stronghold on the Canadian market, works with all the major broadcasters, has more than 5,000 projects and 40 North American clients under its belt.

"To see blind people all laughing and to realize they would have missed the whole thing if it wasn't described, that, to me, is the most fulfilling thing," Johnson said. "We all need entertainment in our lives sometimes, and they don't have the same access."

Sanctuary, the Canadian science-fiction fantasy show, has just renewed its contract and Descriptive Video Works will be describing the new season's shows that start broadcasting in September.

jennylee@vancouver.sun.com
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REAL ESTATE

B.C.'s repeat buyers seek to move up into larger, more luxurious houses

Survey also concludes British Columbians move more than other Canadians

BY BRIAN MORTON
VANCOUVER SUN

Forget about all that talk about reining in costs and living within your means in a pricey housing market.

According to a TD Canada Trust survey released Tuesday, most of B.C.'s repeat buyers see large or luxurious as the way to go.

They're also moving more than other Canadians, more than even the survey's authors expected.

"My personal experience as a mortgage specialist is that most of my clients are moving to fit a growing family or downsizing as empty nesters," TD Canada's manager, residential services, Barry Rathburn said in an interview about the company's Repeat Home Buyers Report.

"A growing family is more concerned with the features of a home and they're not willing to compromise."

According to the report, 56 per cent of repeat buyers in B.C. are moving to larger or more luxurious homes, with 25 per cent saying they're moving

because they've outgrown their old home, 10 per cent saying they've always wanted a bigger home and can now afford it, and 21 per cent saying their next home will be smaller but have more luxurious features.

As well, 51 per cent of B.C. repeat buyers are moving earlier than they thought they would, while 22 per cent who had no plans to move are nevertheless back on the house-hunt.

The report concluded that B.C. residents love to move often, with 39 per cent having owned more than four homes compared to 29 per cent nationally. Twenty-two per cent have owned five or more homes throughout their lives, compared to 15 per cent nationally. Rathburn noted that most repeat buyers have equity in their previous homes, making the move to a larger or more luxurious home a lot more affordable.

"To me it's not a surprise," added Rathburn, who is also a mortgage specialist in Nanaimo. "Generally speaking, everybody sets out on a house-hunting trip with dreams of grandeur tempered by affordability, mortgage

approval and down payment requirements. The key is using your equity to upgrade."

The report said B.C. buyers are also the most likely in Canada to say investment opportunities (26 per cent versus 21 per cent nationally) and market conditions (28 per cent versus 21 per cent nationally) played a factor in their decision to buy another home.

Rathburn said that while their research indicates British Columbians aren't staying in one home as long as other Canadians, it's something worth reconsidering because of the costs associated with a move. "It might be more affordable to renovate."

Results for the survey were collected in an online survey, with a total of 1,025 completed surveys, including 131 in B.C., June 16-28 from people who have either purchased a home that was not their first home within the past two years, or plan to purchase a home that's not their first home within the next two years.

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