



Image Consulting For Blind and Partially Sighted People

**Foundation Institute
for Regional Development**

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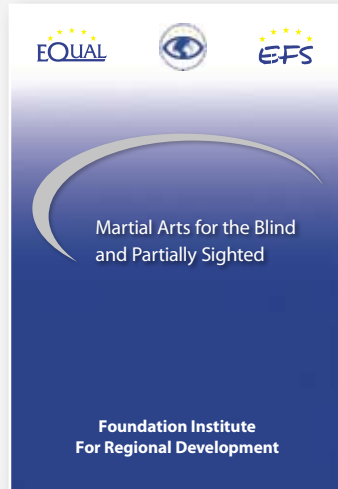
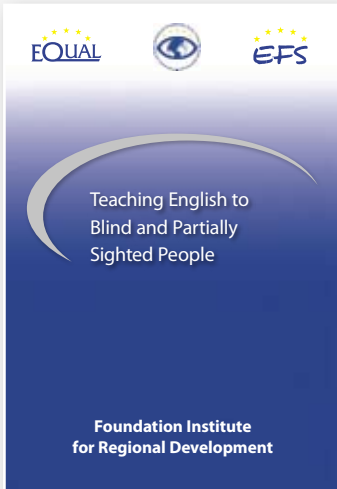




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For Blind and
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**Foundation Institute
for Regional Development**

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The Beauty of Uniqueness

Each human being is different – both inwardly (character, temperament, mentality) and outwardly – figure, facial features or hair. The multitude of combinations, the possibilities of combining these characteristics make us entirely unique and constitute the beauty of the human being. Everyone can emphasize their assets and divert attention away from their imperfections, so that others will be charmed by them and look at them in a completely new and different way – only, unfortunately, few people know how to do this professionally.

Image – in French the word means picture, likeness. It is assumed that the creation of the image of a given person is to style him or her in the desired direction – that is also how it very often is in the world of the media. Sometimes something seems artificial, false, not to say “plastic”. It is not a problem to recognize what is true to the nature of a given person and what is not. What we want to look like must have a connection with what we really are – all of us come into this world with our own unique image: our looks, gestures, the way we move and speak are given only to us.

Nature consists of a great variety of forms, shapes and colours – they coexist and create an admirable whole. The seasons of the year change and also the individual days are different from each other – over twelve months the colour palette changes incessantly. If we observe our environment well, we become aware of an extraordinary harmony, to which we, as part of nature, are subject too. Everyone has their place, their season, their day, and even their time of day, which best emphasizes their beauty and personality – with this harmony we come into the world. During our whole life this harmony stays the same, and if it changes – then only minimally. But can we not exploit and show it better?

How they see us is what they put us down as

Let us imagine the following situation: we suddenly need a nanny for our child. Our acquaintances could not recommend anyone, we are forced to use the services of an agency in order to find someone to help. The candidate who comes forward is a young woman, very attractively dressed – in a skirt that is maybe slightly too short and reveals her navel. She is wearing heavy make-up, has carefully styled hair and chews gum. What do we do? Can we with a quiet conscience leave her with our little darling?

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Image consultants claim that we assess a given person within the first four seconds of contact. After that time we have already formed certain ideas of whether this girl we are talking to will make a suitable nanny. We judge her in the first moment according to her appearance – we do not consider that she might be a wonderful, sensitive, warm-hearted and dedicated nanny. So is it worthwhile to make an effort and to try, with the help of a stylist, to emphasize our inner assets?

Our image has an influence not only on how we are perceived by others, but also on how we see ourselves: when we look good, we feel more attractive, more confident, have higher self-esteem and therefore receive the approval of others. Our image influences the way we feel – by looking good and behaving accordingly we inspire higher esteem from those around us.

Image consulting

In most cases people turn to a stylist for advice when – although they are already highly qualified specialists, talented and full of enthusiasm for work – they get stuck somewhere on the professional ladder and fall victim to negligence with regard to their own image and consequently to low self-esteem. Other people who decide to visit a stylist are those who want to radically change their life: they feel the need to harmonize all the elements of their new “me”. They want to be themselves and that is the image they are looking for. Unfortunately, around us we see many copies of the so-called “plastic” models. We meet people we perceive as not authentic, because it seems to us that what we see has little in common with what we hear, that the person is posing as someone who they are not really.

If it poses a considerable problem for sighted people to create themselves and their own image, then how difficult must it be for blind and partially sighted people?

People who cannot see do not generally feel the need to consult a stylist, do not appreciate the meaning of the sense of sight in the estimation of others, they overestimate the senses they possess: hearing, touch and smell, and also have no standards for comparison – do not know what could be improved or changed, since they have never seen themselves nor others. The information coming from the environment is often fragmentary, incomplete, does not provide a picture of the whole image of a given person and does not provide a basis for an explicit comparison with others.

One very important task lies with the environment of blind people – it is essential to suggest and to convince them to use the existing possibilities, opportunities and potential benefits. This is certainly a difficult and time-consuming task – above all for the person concerned. But the effects are amazing.

For blind and partially sighted people an image specialist can be someone who broadens their horizons, shows them their sensitivity and decidedly above-average possibilities. Image specialists can help to improve their quality of life so much that their self-esteem is increased, which in turn allows them to realize their dreams. The achievement of higher self-confidence enables them to overcome their complexes and apply for the job they desire. As they form new friendships they enrich their environment with their uncommon talents and their decidedly better-trained senses other than sight.

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One essential problem is the establishment of personal contact between the blind person and the stylist, since trust is the basis for accepting the latter's, sometimes far-reaching, suggestions. In order to submit oneself with conviction to the suggestions of the stylist and to make significant changes to oneself, the relationship with the stylist has to be close and full of mutual trust.

Blind and partially sighted people mostly go shopping with someone to accompany them and to fulfill the role of advisor. In general this is a family member or a friend and it cannot be expected that they will be professional stylists. In their advice to the other person they are usually guided by their own tastes, inclinations and preferences – and consequently the final result is far from the desired effect.

It is worth mentioning that visually impaired persons have a much greater awareness of an ill-chosen colour, cut or style. People with full vision are surrounded by a multitude of external visual stimuli – this visual chaos often results in distraction, in the inability to focus on details which could improve the quality of life, causing a divergence between the external “image” and the inner life, the nature, of a human being. Due to lack of vision, the bad influence of external stimuli disappears and the person can focus on himself and his true personality. The immediate environment is observed very closely, clothing and accessories play an important role, often more so than for people who see. If the image conforms to the “inside” the person feels more at ease, the awareness of his own attractiveness grows, complexes disappear – and the result is higher self-esteem.

Image and the environment

Everyone knows that it is impossible to find two identical individuals, even among a great number of people. Each person is unique – with regard to looks, the way they move, gesticulate and speak. Each of us is surrounded by an individual aura – his or her own style. This style is composed, among other things, of physical features, the way of moving, body language, voice timbre and style of dress – and it is in this order that the components of our image should be examined.

First there are the physical features: height, body build and facial features – in the first stage of shaping the image of a blind person the latter will be of key importance. If the blind person wears glasses, these should be chosen according to his or her facial features. The choice of suitable frames is dependent on whether the face is characterized by geometrical or gentle and rather rounded features.

A blind person who distinguishes himself by an authentic, carefully prepared and well-groomed image makes an extraordinary impression on those around him. The message he or she communicates is that, although he cannot see, he looks very good, which means that the person is successful and able to deal even with difficult and unusual situations and is therefore worth trusting. The way of moving, the gestures and mime provide additional information – e.g. are we dealing with a confident person (determined, simple movements), a classic person (gestures that are economical in form), a natural person (spontaneous movements) or a romantic person (sweeping and seductive gestures).

The signals we receive are manifold – nobody is really fully aware of the fact that we unintentionally judge others on the basis of their appearance, even if we try to avoid it. The task of the stylist is therefore to make blind people aware of their stylistic type, of how they are perceived by those around them and on which aspects they should work in view of self-perfection. In such situations people often realize that somewhere inside them they intuitively felt that they are exactly as their body language indicates, but that they did not attach the due significance to it – that maybe they were simply not aware of the importance of their appearance. Acceptance of oneself and of one's style enables a person to become more authentic, which in turn facilitates and accelerates development, often in directions so far considered impossible. By avoiding misguided searches for an imaginary image we save energy and time. Photos 1 and 2 present project participants in their natural style in one picture, and in the other the same person in a classic style, in preparation for a job interview.



Photo 1. Natural style (left) and classic style (right).



Photo 2. Natural style (left) and classic style (right).

The styling of blind and partially sighted people

A blind person has no possibility to directly observe and compare him- or herself with others with regard to body language, gesticulation or the way of moving. People who do not see are not aware of the fact that the way they move may be different from the way people usually move, and have no means of detecting defects or peculiarities, which in cooperation with a stylist can be defined and then eliminated.

One of the most frequent problems met with in blind people is the habit of turning towards the speaker with the “hearing” and not the “sight” – which can create the impression that the person we are talking to is not listening, or worse, is thinking about something completely different. Very often too, a blind person keeps his or her eyes shut or directed at the ground during a conversation. The risk is that this may be interpreted as a lack of interest or even as a certain disrespect for the interlocutor. Yet in most cases it is an expression of utmost concentration on the topic of the speaker. A layperson, seeing that the interlocutor has his head turned away at a 90° angle and his eyes closed, may think the person has simply fallen asleep. In reality, however, this is a sign that the blind person is listening very attentively and, in order not to miss a single word of the conversation, turns towards the voice the organ of that sense which is at that given moment most engaged – i.e. the ear. There is not always an opportunity to explain this behaviour to a seeing person – and it is therefore better to work on “looking” at the interlocutor, something that in fact requires a lot of exercise but leads to excellent results.

Another frequent problem is unconscious movements of the body – mostly repeated movements of the torso (“swaying”). This element is in general not dif-

difficult to eliminate, especially because the schools for blind children have begun to work on this problem.

Work on the facial expressions of people who are blind from birth is one of the most important tasks for both sides. A blind person has no model and cannot make any comparisons with others – the only possibility is therefore to precisely explain the importance of the problem and to suggest an appropriate way of communication. The most important element of the work at this stage of image creation is exercises carried out by the blind person, just as for problems of body language in general. These exercises require a lot of work, systematic work under the permanent guidance of a specialist. The development of this topic could make an interesting subject for a future, separate publication.

Another important element in the search for one's style is the voice. Speaking in a measured way without modulation of the voice is usually a sign of the classic type, voice modulation is typical for a romantic, while a determined, strong and distinct voice is a sign of the dramatic style. People who spontaneously laugh and speak in a very lively manner certainly belong to the so-called natural style, who value above all freedom and comfort.



Photo 3. Natural style (left) and romantic style (right).

The last stage of the work on the professional image should be dress. This does certainly not mean imposing the style of clothing a given person should choose, but rather to suggest what would suit the person's character, appearance, way of moving and speaking. The most frequent groups of outfits are classic, dramatic, natural and romantic. Each has its characteristics – and so a suit will be ideal for a classic person, who will feel good in clothes with a perfect cut, of a slightly stiff



Photo 4. Natural style (left) and romantic style (right).

material, which does not lose its form, and in pastel or neutral colours (not too eye-catching). A person of the dramatic type on the other hand will wear clothes cut in straight lines (in order to feel comfortable when making broad gestures) in distinctive colours or in black and white. Most important for the natural type is to feel at ease: soft, preferably natural materials in natural colours. Romantics will prefer fitted suits or slightly revealing outfits made of very soft material, “inviting” to the touch. The choice of the remaining items of clothing, the hairstyle and the make-up is made according to the same principles, based on a close cooperation of the model and the stylist, whose task is to turn theory into practice, so that the person whose image is being created will look as well as he feels. Photos 3 and 4 present people of the romantic style, preparing for work as a baby sitter (photo 3) and as a social worker (photo 4).

Practical observations from the lessons

The “Partnership for Improving Access to the Labour Market for the Blind”, administered by the Foundation Institute for Regional Development in Krakow took up the challenge of working on the image of a group of 40 blind and partially sighted people (women and men aged between 17 and 35).

During the sessions, the course participants were introduced to the principles of creating their own image, which each had the task to apply later in practice. Contrary to our fears, the lessons met with great interest – many unusual discussions arose and many – often surprising – questions asked. The participants presented many problems they met with in everyday life, when they did not have the possibility to consult the professional knowledge of a stylist.

The lessons took place in mixed groups. The identification of all shapes was done with the aid of touch, the participants practising on one another. They familiarized themselves in this manner with a great variety of shapes and forms at the same time – for many of them it was a completely new and surprising experience: they discovered the great diversity which surrounds them and the existence of which they had not been fully aware of till then!

Worth emphasizing is that the exercises were carried out very precisely – it turned out that blind people are excellent at recognizing shapes and forms, what paid off during the lessons dedicated to recognizing types of figures or subtle differences in the build of the body, and then to covering up their imperfections. For example, an analysis of the facial features (eyebrows, ears, lips, cheek bones) serves to determine, generally speaking, all the accessories the given person should use every day. Such items include jewellery, shoes, watches, bags, handbags, material textures, trimmings – hairstyle and spectacle-frames are chosen according to the same principle. What was amazing was that in exercises of this type completely blind participants managed best. One can even risk the statement that they did it better than people with normal eyesight training in this field. Apart from defining their “parameters”, they claimed that each shape and each form is good – that there are none which are better or worse than the others. During a lively discussion they discerned the power and the beauty that lies in diversity.

But the image is not only shape, texture or smell – it is also colour. It may seem that talking to a blind person about colours is a waste of time – the lessons, however, proved irrefutably that one couldn't be more mistaken.

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Physically speaking, colour is a mental impression triggered in the human brain by electromagnetic radiation received by the eye – it is therefore a kind of wave, received, similarly to sound, by the human being and influencing his or her emotions. Colours – just like music – evoke different feelings in people and it depends on their appropriate application whether or not the intended effect is achieved.

Another surprise – yet again blind people, in particular those blind from birth, could very precisely describe the emotional state connected with given colours, although they have never seen them!

Each human being, regardless of whether or not he can see, possesses in his psyche information on the topic of the three primary colours: yellow, blue and red. These can be very precisely described by visually impaired people, and the remaining colours are a mixture of the three primary ones.

During the lessons dedicated to colour, one of the men, Rafal – blind from birth – was asked to describe the colour green and his emotions connected with this colour. He was supposed to say what he feels when he “sees” green – which he achieved together with the stylist by “mixing” the colours yellow and blue. The description of yellow was easy: “the colour of the radiant energy of the sun, inspiring joy”, and so was blue: “it is not cold, because the sky is blue when the sun shines, blue gives us a feeling of self-confidence, reliability”. He was then asked to take one part of the sun and exactly the same part of the sky, mix them and say what he feels. “Balance” – he answered after a moment; although much has been written about the colour green, this one notion describes it very accurately.

Malgorzata – a completely blind person, went shopping together with a group of several people as part of individual consultations. She wanted to buy a coat – and found the ideal cut that she wanted. After trying it on, although the shape and form turned out to be an ideal fit for her figure and style, Malgorzata started to feel bad in it, could not even “bear to have it on”. The coat was olive-green in colour – Malgorzata had forgotten to say that the coat shouldn’t be olive-green, because lately she had come to simply dislike that colour.

Lessons of this kind not only serve to communicate knowledge on the topic of the image to the participants – they also develop the talents of blind and partially sighted people, who are able to beautifully and precisely speak about colours and to feel them. It is to be considered whether it would not be worth it to familiarize them even better with this knowledge? As time went on and further lessons took place, the participants’ joy in discovering the unknown grew – they attributed more and more importance to the colours and forms they were wearing, became

more and more familiar with the professional terms and applied their knowledge in practice. They claimed that when they go shopping from now on they will already know what they want and take more conscious decisions.

Choice of colour is inextricably bound up with choice of make-up. For the female project participants lessons were organized in smaller groups concerning make-up for every occasion. Completely blind women took part in these lessons too – with the aid of touch they learned how to do their make-up, together with the stylist they chose an appropriate colour scheme, in accordance with their preferences and purchased with professional knowledge. Then they set about doing their make-up – one half of the face was painted by the stylist, the second by the blind person herself, after one movement on the first half of the face, an identical movement was carried out on the other half. The individual elements were repeated until a satisfying effect was achieved. The exercises showed, for example, that it is possible to precisely use an eye-liner pencil without being able to see. Further exercises – in the case of make-up these are of the utmost importance – will undoubtedly lead to perfection and bring about astonishing results in the highlighting of beauty. The knowledge alone that the make-up was done with their own hands improves the self-esteem of the blind women and gives them uncommon charm.

Preparation for work

After learning the required basics of the choice of clothing, hairstyle or make-up, further exercises were carried out concerning image creation. At this stage of the training the participants already knew their strengths and weaknesses, knew what to emphasize, how to present their assets and what rather not to reveal. The task for each of the groups – a genuine examination – was to prepare the individual members one after the other for:

- a job interview,
- a festive evening event,
- an afternoon with friends.

With their common strength the task was fulfilled in an exemplary fashion – it was obvious that the topic of the training course had been very interesting for the participants, and that they had listened attentively, as they had no problems remembering even the smallest details – one of the strengths of blind people. Each of the participants was appropriately prepared for the planned outing – considering the modest resources available during the course, they all looked simply sensational. A potential employer, family member or friend, seeing in front of him or her a well-groomed and authentic-looking person, will come to

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the be convinced that the person deserves trust and esteem in every respect and is capable of dealing with any problem – an excellent basis for further talks. The effects are presented in the photos below.



Photo 5. People preparing for a job interview before (left) and after the styling (right).

Know-how for the stylist

The project within which the training in image consulting included the possibility of modifying the programme and it turned out that the perception of the groups was considerably higher than expected and exceeded the abilities of the average human being.

The programme was systematically modified and as a result it can be said in all honesty that the blind and partially sighted people in the mixed groups participated in a complete course in image consulting. The knowledge they gained is not limited to solutions to the problems of individual people, but is decidedly more general – the training participants possess the complete basics of a style studio.

The lessons on the general topic took place in groups of several people, in addition to which the participants had individual consultations, in which individual problems were solved. For the consultations people mostly came alone. Sometimes two or three people took part in them at the same time – usually groups of friends.

Interest in the topic was surprisingly high among the men. They took an active part in the lessons, often exceeding the activity of the female group members, and were also usually the first to make a decision for a change. An interesting detail was that some men even came to the meetings in smaller groups (in the case of make-up), in order “to learn how the woman they love should take care of herself”.

The course participants, as they got to know the general principles of image consulting and translated them into practical application on themselves and other group members, completely assimilated the knowledge they were given, so that there is reason to claim that it will pay off in the coming years. They got to know themselves better, their strengths and weaknesses, also in relation to other people. Thanks to this they now give the impression of being more self-confident people – their self-confidence and self-esteem have definitely improved. The group prepared themselves for a job interview. Each member adapted his or her outfit to the nature of their present or future job. This includes, among other things, a teacher, massage therapists, administrative employees, a baby sitter, a social worker and a warehouse employee.

Image consulting in this group of people in the form of a supply of ready solutions, advice from the stylist or rigid observance of stylistic rules does not lead to

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the expected result. People with perfect eyesight often find it difficult to accept and integrate them in their lives on a permanent basis – they hesitate, question certain pieces of advice, while they receive very valuable information with their eyes. People who do not see (or do not see well) need a medium that reaches their decidedly much better developed other senses.

If we want to help, we have to teach blind people certain principles and means, but not force them to do anything that does not lie in their nature – we have to be their stylists in the full meaning of the word. Then certainly no-one will have such dilemmas as the family looking for a nanny described in the introduction, and qualifications and competences will be presented against an appropriate background, revealing the human being and not his or her visual impairment.

And how do the Danes do it?

The Foundation Institute for Regional Development belongs to two international partnerships – Vision=E³ and VIPs into Jobs. One of our European partners, the Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted (Institutet for Blinde og Svagsynede) in Denmark, is also active in the area of image consulting for blind people within the EQUAL project. The project manager, Connie Hasemann, speaks with enthusiasm about the aims and possibilities of this type of enterprise: “The organization of training courses for the creation of their own image for blind and partially sighted people is a wonderful and very important idea. It helps people to access the job market.” Connie Hasemann describes her project as follows:

“Personal Styling at Vision Trade Center in Denmark

We are living in a “sighted” world – a world where almost everybody is being “judged” from the way they look, how they dress and how they fit into the “sighted” environment. We all know about dress-codes and certain styles at different jobs. This can be difficult if you are blind or partially sighted.

At the project we find that it is important to feel confident about yourself and your personal style. Furthermore to get information about your looks and how style / no style can inflect on other people.

We are working with empowerment, including personal styling as part of our education. Our students are offered an individual styling course during their education. Through a personal styling course our student will enlarge their self-estimation and get the possibility to look their best especially in a job-searching situation.

What we are offering within personal styling is:

- Facial treatment and guidance*
- Make-up guidance*
- Information about hair and hairstyles and how to choose a good hairdresser*
- Information of style of glasses and sunglasses*
- Clothes and how to dress personal and professional*
- Life style, exercise and food*

Great charm and personal magnetism comes from the inside of a person. But we are focusing on how our student together with a professional stylist can learn to work with the above mentioned points. The students learn to harmonize their personal style, how to choose the right colours, hair and clothes. Our stylist looks at each student individually and they work out a personal plan together. Our stylist can also offer help in shopping and personal guidance. Sometimes it is really helpful to use an expert guiding you through colours and clothes and not a friend or family. A personal stylist will be professional and honest.

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It is very individual what the students at the project achieve from the styling course. Some of them really do change style, others start to wear different colours, but it is our experience that we all like to get an individual coaching within this area. Don't we all want to look our best and to get complimented for that??"

Information about the author



Elżbieta Michalska

has been working in image consulting since 1996 and treats the lessons not only as a profession but above all as an interesting adventure.

She gained her extensive professional experience while working for companies such as "Beauty for all seasons" or "Max Factor". The gradual revelation of the hidden beauty in people and emphasizing it correspondingly has become a true passion for her, which she realizes, among other ways, via courses in styling and techniques of self-presentation for groups of financial consultants. Since 2006 she has collaborated with the Foundation Institute for Regional Development (Fundacja Instytut Rozwoju Regionalnego) in the "Partnership for Improving Access to the Labour Market for the Blind" project realized within the EQUAL Community Initiative.



The Foundation Institute For Regional Development is a non-profit non-governmental organization active since the 26th August 2003 in the fields of science, transfer of innovations, entrepreneurship and complex and multifarious support for the most discriminated people in the society. The fundamental mission of the Foundation is balanced development of entrepreneurship, the transfer of innovative solutions, as well as support of companies and other subjects in obtaining and using modern technologies. It has cooperated with the Ministry of Science and Information Society Technologies, the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development as well as the local authorities of the Malopolskie Voivodship, and has recently been cooperating very intensively with numerous organizations for the support of handicapped people, in particular the visually impaired. Since February 2007 the Foundation has had the status of a Public Benefit Organization (OPP).

The project realized by the “Partnership for Improving Access to the Labour Market for the Blind”, consisting in – apart from the Foundation – also the Polish Association Of The Blind, the University of Science and Technology in Krakow, the Foundation for Blind and Partially Sighted People, the Institute for Marketing and Social Research VRG Strategia and the Agency HandiSoft, is co-financed by means of the European Social Fund within the EQUAL Community Initiative. Its main objective is to help visually impaired people find and keep jobs or undertake and graduate from university studies. Participation in the project has given opportunity to improve qualifications and skills to 60 people at the age of 16-35 from the region of the Malopolskie Voivodship.