

BT uses video technology so that customers who prefer to use British Sign Language (BSL) can get in touch

Being able to communicate with customers is a fundamental part of business. That's why BT always goes the extra mile to ensure it can maintain contact with all its customers.

In November 2011, BT launched a new service enabling deaf people to communicate with its customer services using British Sign Language (BSL) via a video relay. The company teamed up with SignVideo – an award-winning company led and run by deaf people – that uses technology to help the deaf community.

Using SignVideo's BSL LIVE service, this web-based solution connects deaf people – who are unable to use the phone – with BT's customer service team via an online BSL interpreter. It's a simple idea marrying BSL and video technology but it now enables BSL users to contact BT direct.

“Most people are not aware that BSL is the first or preferred language for many deaf people,” explains Duncan Culley from SignVideo. “BSL has a grammar of its own that is different from that used for English. And this has led to a series of misunderstandings in which people assume that BSL as a visual representation of the English language. It is not. It is a different language and because of this, deaf people have the same difficulties in reading and/or writing in English as that experienced by a foreign language speaker.”

That's why BT decided to offer the new service. Inclusion is part of the company's core values. And that means making it possible for its customers to get in touch in a way they prefer – whether by voice, text or in BSL.

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BT BSL service – how does it work?

BT customers just need to contact the SignVideo Interpretation Service via a computer with video capability and broadband access. This couldn't be easier – customers simply click on the **BSL Live** link at bt.com/bsl. Then a BSL interpreter phones BT on their behalf and relays the conversation, BSL to voice and vice versa. There is no charge for the service because all calls to BT customer service numbers are free.

“We believe all businesses must take responsibility for ensuring their services are accessible, particularly those who rely on call centres as their primary customer contact point,” said Lorna Stephenson, head of service development for relay services at BT. “We view this access method as very much an extension to existing contact methods – whether it be by phone, email, SMS, live chat, text relay, direct telephone access or the web.

“The cost of the service is low for a company like BT, so we would like other businesses to consider this option for their customers. What's more, calls via the BSL Live service are, on average, shorter in duration when compared to similar calls via Text Relay. This shows that when people have the opportunity to communicate in a method of their choice, the calls can be more efficient and effective for everyone,” she said.

Indeed, it's believed that BT is the first FTSE 100 company to offer access in BSL to its customers. Less than 1% of the UK population use BSL as their primary means of communication and BT will only have a proportion of BSL users as its customers, so therefore only a very small number of its customers need BSL access. But what do these customers think? Feedback has been good and as word spreads around the BSL community, more people are expected to use it.

Duncan is also convinced that more companies should embrace BSL.

“This commitment to explore this direct way to access BT's customer services via online video BSL interpreters via their website is much welcomed. It's all about genuine access. For the majority of deaf BSL users, there is no other independent way of contacting customer services unless they work through a third party, often their families and friends. But this compromises their confidentiality and independence. We are delighted to see that a company such as BT is serious about providing access to their services for deaf BSL users,” he said.

To find out more about SignVideo, contact Duncan Culley at duncan@signvideo.co.uk or visit signvideo.co.uk



To contact BT in BSL, go to bt.com/bsl

What people said...



“BT's new service providing access in BSL was the prompt I needed to switch from a company who insisted on doing everything by phone. The switch was easy and I like knowing that I have a choice and can talk to BT online, via email or in BSL.”

“SignVideo is fantastic and good service and quick when I contact them. I did not realise it was only for BT customers but when I had a look at the BT website it is fantastic and really useful for deaf people. Hopefully one day we can communicate with other organisations using webcams... Thumbs up :)”

“I would like to compliment BT for being the first company to support this service, and for making available for customers. It is my hope that other providers such as insurance companies, the NHS, GPs and others will follow this good example. This service also offers more options for BT customers and adds value.”

“Just wanted to say how impressed I am with the trial with BT. I used it for the first time today and my query was dealt with in matter of minutes!!! I am one happy bunny.”