

Ten years ago, a television was a simple device that a user could purchase, take home, plug in, turn on, and use right away. Now, a television must be programmed to find the channels it can receive. This task, along with other features that must be selected and programmed before the appliance will work correctly, can only be accomplished through on-screen menus. There is no way for a visually impaired person to perform this task without sighted help.

Video cassette recorders have the same kinds of access problems. In 1995, Panasonic proudly announced that remote controls for their VCR'S would be equipped with a tactile mark on the SAP (second audio program) button. I purchased one of the Panasonic VCR'S with the remote described, only to discover that access to the SAP channel is possible only after setup using inaccessible on-screen menus. After a month of trying to learn to use this VCR, I returned it to the store for a refund. I wrote to Panasonic suggesting ways to make their products more useable by people with disabilities, but no more accessible products have appeared. Although Zenith has recently introduced a "talking" VCR, only some of its features are accessible through spoken menus. If the user makes an incorrect choice, a question mark appears on the screen, but there is no audible cue to alert a blind user to the mistake. Default items such as the current date are not spoken at all.

The telephone I use at work has a "queue depth" light to indicate how many calls are waiting to be answered. Another light indicates whether the user has dialed into the queue to accept incoming calls. A blind employee can use a light sensor to determine the state of these lights, but this equipment must be purchased from third parties, and it is both expensive and difficult to find.

Cellular phones and services also have significant access barriers. Cellular phones lack speech access to on-screen menus, caller ID, paging, and text messaging.

If market forces were sufficient to ensure adequate access for people with disabilities, there would be no need for me to send you these comments. Individuals who are blind and organizations that serve us have communicated our needs to manufacturers of consumer electronics, but our efforts have met mostly with disinterest. Please adopt the Access Boards accessibility guidelines and require that telecommunications companies make affirmative efforts to make their products, services, and documentation accessible to people with disabilities.