Hadley Presents

Be My Eyes

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss the Be My Eyes service for obtaining visual assistance through a video call. And joining us is Vice President of Community from Be My Eyes, Will Butler. Welcome to the show, Will.

Will Butler: Thanks so much for having me, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: So glad that you can take a little time to talk about Be My Eyes with us. Why don't we start then by just having you tell us a little about yourself and what does it mean to be a vice-president of community exactly?

Will Butler: Well, Be My Eyes is a technology that allows one person who needs visual support to ping many people at once who might potentially be available to support, so that they can really quickly get the visual support they need. More broadly than that, Be My Eyes is a platform and a community. We have globally about a quarter of a million visually impaired, blind, low vision people using Be My Eyes in about 180 different languages and almost as many countries. It's the biggest global blind community that exists and a community of more than four million volunteers answering the calls, in addition to the companies.

My role is just to make it those 4.3 million people happy, which well-suited to my skills and my anxieties, I'm sure. It's sort of a marketing and branding role for the company as a whole. But we're a very small company, so we all wear a lot of hats.

Ricky Enger: Exactly. And you guys might be a small company, but you serve a really wide range of people, both from the volunteers who choose to get on the platform, and of course, the people who do need assistance. How does this work, just in general terms? We've talked about how you're perhaps a blind or low vision person who needs some visual assistance, and now there are people at the other end picking up a call. What kind of technology do you use and how do you know, for example as a blind person, what to do with the cameras so that the volunteer understands what they're looking at? How does this process work?

Will Butler: I, myself, am legally blind. I have some vision that I use on a regular basis, but occasionally I need help reading small print. Rather than calling up my friends or FaceTiming my mom or knocking on my neighbor's door, all I have to do is go into the app store on my iPhone or go onto the Google Play store if you have an Android phone and download the Be My Eyes app. Sign up with your email address, verify your email address. A pretty quick sign-up process, easy. And if you have a Facebook or a Google or whatever account, you can just use that to log in. Once you're signed up, you're presented with a pretty simple home screen, which just has a Call First Available Volunteer. It's a big blue button.

And once you press that big blue button, the app will do its magic. It will basically send out a call, kind of like when you call an Uber driver or Lyft driver, and we'll ping a couple dozen people at a time. All these people around the country or around the world who speak the same language as you will be getting a notification on their phone saying that you're looking for assistance, and they are literally racing to be the first one to answer. When they do, whoever gets it first gets to be the one who has the privilege of assisting you with whatever task is at hand. And that's about it.

Once they answer, the outward facing camera is in action. You're pointing your camera just like you would be if you were taking a photograph of something. They'll direct you, they'll tell you what to do. They'll say, "Oh, turn your camera a little to the left," or "I can't quite read what you're showing me. Tilt the camera down a little bit." Together, you'll get the object in frame and they'll tell you exactly what it is that you're looking at, and that's about it.

You click end call. If you're had a good experience, you press thumbs up, or I had a good experience. The calls are often under two or three minutes. They've been known to go longer, but they're usually pretty quick spot checks or spot reading or something in the kitchen, just very simple little tasks where you might need a pair of eyes.

Ricky Enger: And I think it's interesting that there are so many volunteers. I think there's probably an advantage in that, right? Where in a smaller pool of people, you might be waiting a bit to get someone to answer. But when there are this many volunteers, there's a lot to pull from, right?

Will Butler: Absolutely. I mean, our volunteers are constantly complaining about how they want to get more calls. But the thing is, those same volunteers aren't always available when a visually impaired person is calling in. We need that mesh, sort of network of people and have availability because we want on-demand support, and we can't predict when someone's going to call for that.

Ricky Enger: And that's a great point too. If it's on demand, that kind of implies that this isn't just an eight to five thing. And keeping in mind that people are on different time zones is, Be My Eyes a 24/7 availability kind of thing?

Will Butler: Yeah, that's the other cool thing about having so many volunteers is we have people who speak English in non-English time zones or in other English speaking time zones. If you live in Florida and you call for help at 3:30 in the morning, we're not going to wake up someone who lives in Florida. We're going to have someone who's having their breakfast in Denmark who speaks English answer the call or someone in the UK who speaks English will answer the call. You might get someone in Australia or New Zealand. If you like talking to folks with charming accents-

Ricky Enger: Hey, there you go.

Will Butler: ... make a Be My Eyes call in the middle of the night.

Ricky Enger: I find myself using Be My Eyes for things like looking at the expiration dates on something or getting directions to cook something really quickly. What are some of the common things that people use Be My Eyes for? And if you have stories, are there some really uncommon and cool things that people have used Be My Eyes to do?

Will Butler: Those are definitely some of the top two. The other things we see commonly are people using it to match clothing saying, "I think I have this outfit all picked out, but I want to make sure the jacket matches the pants." Clothing distinction is pretty common. Product distinction is pretty common.

There's so many inaccessible touch screens and LCD displays around the house that don't talk or give any audio feedback. You see people using Be My Eyes a lot on their thermostats, their air conditioning, their heating, their ovens, their microwaves. Home appliances are definitely a huge use case.

But I mean the list sort of descends outward from there. People get pretty creative. We've heard about people using Be My Eyes to check their wedding dress before they walk down the aisle. My favorite story, which I tell a lot, a gentleman heard a noise in his backyard and he grabbed the phone and called Be My Eyes. And asked the volunteer, "I'm hearing something strange in the backyard." And the volunteer said, "I don't see anything strange out there. It's just your dog." And the guy said, "I don't have a dog?”

Ricky Enger: Wow.

Will Butler: The next question was, "Well, does he look friendly?" And the volunteer said, "Yeah, he looks friendly. He's wagging his tail." Together with the volunteer, the guy went outside, approached the dog and was able to read the tag on the dog's collar-

Ricky Enger: Oh, that's great.

Will Butler: ... and returned the dog to its owner.

Ricky Enger: That's amazing. That's a really creative and very cool use for Be My Eyes. It ended up helping, not just the person who called, but also the pet owner.

Will Butler: Absolutely. And the volunteer had, I'm sure, a great feeling out of it as well.

Ricky Enger: Are there things that maybe you wouldn't ask a volunteer to help you with on Be My Eyes?

Will Butler: We tell people we have community guidelines, and we tell people that the obvious stuff. Don't use it for anything unsafe or inappropriate. Don't use Be My Eyes when you're crossing the street. No one should be using their phone when they're crossing the street for anything, right?

Ricky Enger: No.

Will Butler: And don't give out your credit card information, don't give out your bank account numbers, stuff like that.

But then there are things that are less obvious, like in cases where specialized help is needed. For instance, we were noticing that a lot of people were calling to get help reinstalling Windows when a Windows update was issued. And the volunteers are great. They try to help. They'll look things up on the internet. They'll walk you through an owner's manual, but they don't always have the specialized help, the skillset that is needed to do some of these more technical things.

And so that's the reason we actually created a second feature in the app called Specialized Help, that allows our users to call companies like Google, Microsoft, Procter & Gamble, and other companies who have a subject matter expertise where their representatives can help out our users, just the same way that volunteers do.

Ricky Enger: That is a super cool feature. Because as you say, sometimes you just need help that a volunteer isn't going to be able to provide for you. And there are some times that you might feel uncomfortable asking a stranger whose background you don't know for help doing something like a Procter & Gamble product, like looking at a pregnancy test and telling you whether it's positive or not. And I know that's a big thing that you guys did with Clearblue. Now, the person doesn't have to call a friend or family member that may have advice or feelings, or you might not be ready to share that information, asking someone random about it might feel a little uncomfortable too, but getting that specialized help makes a lot of sense, right?

Will Butler: There's tons of use cases where we heard from users, people were saying, "I really wish I had Be My Eyes for this." Whether it was trying to figure out that inaccessible pregnancy test, or maybe they were at work and they wanted to help with something, but it was private and they couldn't share it with a volunteer and said, "I wish I had Be My Eyes for this too." We've started creating all of these business solutions that companies can buy Be My Eyes for work, so that companies can create private Be My Eyes network to support their employees specialized help so that companies can provide customer support, and it's all accessible to the blind consumer just directly through off-the-shelf Be My Eyes app.

Ricky Enger: And how does it work then? If I have my phone and I'm ready to make a video call and I'm having some sort of difficulty with Microsoft Office. Maybe my Outlook window has been resized randomly, not that I speak from personal experience or anything, but let's say it's just behaving oddly, and I have no idea what's going on. What's going to happen when I select Specialized Help in the app?

Will Butler: The first thing that will happen is you'll be taken to a category page, so there's basically three clicks you have to do. The first click is on the home screen. It's the second button down is Specialized Help. Then the next screen is a category page and you'll scroll through things like assistive technology, blindness organizations, personal health. And then I think the final category right now is technical, and technical is where you'll find Google and Microsoft. And you can click on Microsoft's profile and you'll read a little description of what service they provide, their opening hours. Microsoft happens to be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And so no matter where you are in the world, you can press the call button. And in a matter of seconds really, someone will pick up from Microsoft and they'll be looking through your camera on your phone at whatever issue you have with your computer, whether it's a resized window. Or maybe you don't even need the video element of it, you just want to ask them a question about something you're struggling with, and those folks are trained in accessibility and assistive technology to help you out with your Microsoft issues.

Ricky Enger: And you would think that a service like that would cost the consumer something, but I don't think we've really touched on cost, or lack thereof, with Be My Eyes.

Will Butler: Yeah. I mean, there's nothing to touch on.

Ricky Enger: Which is great, right?

Will Butler: We were founded by a blind guy. We're a small company, but we have pretty firm beliefs about this state of modern assistive technology, and we don't think people should pay an arm and a leg just because they have a disability and need some extra accessibility features. We think accessibility should be free. To get access to good quality technical support that in most cases relies on people's eyes over a phone line, we're fixing that with video and we don't think people should have to pay for that.

We have a business model that involves the companies that are joining the community and pledging their support, paying to be a part of that solution. It's really incredible. It keeps the volunteer community running and free 24 hours a day, and it allows us to never have to pass on the cost for support to a blind consumer, many of them can't afford an expensive personal assistant.

Ricky Enger: It's one thing to be accessible in the sense that you can use the technology without difficulty. And it's another thing entirely to be financially accessible so anybody has the ability to use the program, and that I think is a wonderful thing.

We talked about companies, really cool companies, doing some really great things, Proctor & Gamble, Google, Microsoft, just to name a few. It's not just these really large corporations who are doing things. In fact, kind of exciting to be able to announce that Hadley is a part of this platform as well.

Will Butler: Yeah, welcome to the family.

Ricky Enger: Thank you. We're really excited. This means that we've just launched our new site, and it pretty straightforward kind of walks you through how to set up an account and do some of the things that you need to do to access all of the new content. But if you are struggling with that, or if you just have a question for us at Hadley and you want to be able to connect to someone directly to walk you through some of those things and have that video content, you can do that from Be My Eyes now. How awesome is that?

Will Butler: Absolutely. Sometimes it's just nice to have a person to talk to or someone to look at the thing you're doing with you to give you that reassurance and that confidence that you're doing it correctly. I know that when I'm coming to a new website for the first time or a website's been redesigned, sometimes it's nice just to have a friendly tour guide to show you around.

Ricky Enger: Exactly. And of course, people can call Hadley's 1-800 number to get that kind of help. But having just that extra little bit of info that you know we're looking at what's happening on your screen and can give you information based on what's going on there, I think that's really very nice icing on the cake, and who doesn't like cake, right?

Will Butler: Great. It's a really cool way for, not only people to discover Hadley for the first time, but to stay connected. And I know that especially in this time where everyone is working remotely, there's no such thing as the reception desk anymore. We're sort of trying to help organizations around the country and around the world who are serving visually impaired and low-vision folks recreate that virtual reception desk through Be My Eyes.

Ricky Enger: Will, it has been so wonderful to have you on the program. Just in hearing you talk, I'm realizing just how dedicated you are and how dedicated Be My Eyes is in general to the community aspect. At the beginning of the program we were talking about, well, what is a Vice President of Community, and I think that you've made that clear just throughout this conversation. You're doing a little more than that even though, right? If you're done listening to this program on Hadley Presents, I think that there's something else people can check out from Be My Eyes.

Will Butler: Absolutely. I mean, the podcasting aspect of what we do, community is not just about joining a phone call or exchanging comments, it's about feeling like you have resources. And when I became blind about 12 years ago, I didn't know anybody. I had nothing to consume. There are no books to read. There was no online resources, not like there are today. I mean, there are some today. We still have a long way to go, but there are a lot more. And so I really feel like it's important that now that we have the opportunity and we have gathered together this amazing quarter million blind people, we can start to tell those stories and help people who are in the situation I was in a dozen years ago feel not so alone, not so confused and hear the voices of passionate, excited, funny, interesting people who are blind or have low-vision who are doing great things with their lives.

We try to do that on the Be My Eyes podcast. And then we have a podcast called 13 Letters, where we explore accessibility and inclusive design from a whole bunch of different angles. And that's a podcast I cohost with a woman named Cordelia McGee-Tubb from Salesforce.

Ricky Enger: For people who are looking for those podcasts or just to read a little about Be My Eyes before taking the plunge and downloading the app, what can they do to get more info?

Will Butler: Bemyeyes.com/podcasts. And I think just in general, follow us on social media. We're constantly tweeting and posting, and we've always got new updates pretty much every week. There's always something interesting going on, somebody new joining Specialized Help, some cool, new initiative, or just a funny video or whatever it might be that we're sharing.

Ricky Enger: Will, thank you so much for everything that you're doing and everything that Be My Eyes is doing to bring people together as a community. And certainly, thank you so much for taking a little time out of your day to tell us a bit about what you do.

Will Butler: I'm happy to do so and really happy to be partnering with Hadley. It's such a great resource. I like that we share a mission in that not only are we helping people like you and me, but it's all free.

Ricky Enger: It's all free. Got to love it. Thanks, Will.

Will Butler: Absolutely.

Ricky Enger: Thanks for listening. Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's podcast@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.