

Leader Dog Users Find Added Direction with Trekker

By Linde DeCarlo

In today's techy world, getting from point A to unknown point B is no big deal, get in your car turn on your global positioning system and follow the touch screen prompts to program your destination. But for the blind or visually impaired, who will be grabbing their cane or harnessing up their guide dog, programming the popular GPS units is not an option. Touch screen prompts have left behind those who can not see to read.

However, there have recently been some innovative solutions in this area and a company named HumanWare has developed a unit known as the Trekker.

The blind and visually impaired are finding this technology necessary to be effective in today's world. Trekker uses verbal GPS and digital maps to help blind individuals find their way.

Trekker users can pinpoint exactly where they are, learn about area points of interest, and find out how to get to specific destinations by following verbal cues coming from the unit.

Trekker helps guide the visually impaired and it complements existing aids (white canes and guide dogs). It does not replace them.

Leader Dogs for the Blind, in Rochester Michigan, is the first dog guide school in the United States to fully integrate a talking GPS navigational tool with dog guide training. Along with HumanWare, they have launched a state-of-the-art approach to training with dog guide students. The audible device gives step-by-step directions for a programmed route and notifies the user of upcoming streets and landmarks, among other functions.

Leader Dog is sure this new initiative will dramatically enhance the ease and pleasure of travel for people who are blind and visually impaired.

Here is what some Trekker users have to say: "Winter may be a wonderland for some but for the visually impaired, it is more often a nightmare. My vision helps me only in situations where there is a sharp color contrast, but snow does not provide much contrast. That's when I find my Trekker the most helpful. It is so easy to become disoriented in the snow. Walking speed changes. Detours have to be made around piles of snow. Sidewalks are not shoveled and curbs are not kept clear. Through it all, the Trekker helps me stay on course and remain confident.

"I travel with the assistance of a wonderful Leader Dog. He guides me safely around obstacles and across streets. But he can not talk to me. When I am 'lost' he can not tell me where we are. A couple of times last winter I could not have told you where I was walking. One time I told Nicholas to "find the sidewalk". He tried, but it was buried in snow and blocked by the snowbank that the plow had left. I got totally turned around and we walked seven blocks in a different



direction before I found someone to ask our location. The second time, we walked to the elementary school for a mentoring session. On the way the roads were clear and I could see each intersection we crossed. On the way home it was snowing hard and the roads were covered. Nicholas took me on the sidewalk until we came to a pile of snow left when someone had shoveled their driveway. So we walked the rest of the way on the road. By the time I realized we had walked too far we were four blocks beyond our driveway. The Trekker would have announced "home" as we went by. I'm still not sure if Nicholas was enjoying the walk or if he didn't recognize the house because it was hidden behind snow banks.

"This year I have my Trekker. It announces upcoming intersections and the name of the street on which we are walking. Today I chose to take a different route and avoid the shoulder of Main Street. With the Trekker's help I was able to find the road I wanted and directed Nicholas to turn a block earlier than our usual route. I may choose to stay home because it is too cold or too icy but not because I am afraid of getting lost in the snow anymore!"

Pam Blizzard,
Carson City, Michigan

"I am new at using the Trekker and it has been quite an experience for me. My Leader Dog, "Leo", always guides me safely, but he doesn't know how to read street signs! The Trekker alerts me of intersections that announce street names. I can make a decision of which way I want to go, and my dog can tell me if it is safe to cross. Using the Trekker has enabled me to travel new areas confidently. Leo and I are free to explore different routes without getting lost. "I am also learning to use the various functions in the unit such as retrieving e-mail, setting appointments, entering contacts and creating predesignated routes and points of interest. "Adding the Trekker to my mobility has made a big difference in the way we travel."

Lori Dent, Kent, Ohio

"I got my Trekker in August of 2005. Alan Paganelli and I were the first ones to be trained using guide dogs, and, of course we both had Leader Dogs. They taught us the basics. The dogs were never distracted by the Trekkers and we had a lot to learn, fast! My Trekker always goes with me when I'm walking and sometimes when I'm riding with someone. It keeps me from getting turned around and it helped when I was getting a new Leader Dog. New dogs often test us by trying to go different ways from where we tell them to go, but if my new dog, Alisse, tried to do something that I wouldn't always detect without my Trekker, I'd know within 30 feet of the error and be able to fix it. I've been able to traverse new areas and take new routes in my neighborhood without being concerned about getting lost. My dog is my partner, but the Trekker is my navigational aide."

Gail Selfridge,
Denver, Colorado

For more information about the Leader Dogs or the Trekker, you can visit their web sites at www.leaderdog.org or www.humanware.com.