



How Accessible is your Website?

Building User-friendly Websites

"The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect." Tim Berners-Lee, W3C Director and inventor of the World Wide Web

For most of us, the Internet is proving itself to be a valuable tool in our 'I need it now', information-based world; we are fast becoming tied to it for learning, entertainment and communication.

As a result, it's easy to believe the claim that the Internet is universal: inclusive and without limit, fostering a global society. But, any Web accessibility expert will argue otherwise. They'll tell you the Web is not a level playing field for all users. In fact, for those with accessibility issues – seniors, persons with disabilities, people using new technologies or older model computers with slow Internet connections – the Internet is not the Great Equalizer, but often a giant obstacle to getting the information they need.

"In the past, Web accessibility was often treated as an afterthought, and justification for the effort to accommodate people with disabilities was often debated, says Emily Rothwell, of Devlin eBusiness Architects. "Even today, many companies choose graphically intensive, marketing-driven designs that ignore the needs of those with visual or hearing impairments. While such sites employ complex layouts, navigation and audiovisual components in the hopes of attracting viewers, in many cases they shut out a potentially significant segment of their target audience."

If, according to Tim Berners-Lee, access is an essential aspect of the Internet, then why aren't more websites accessible to all?

What is accessibility?

'Accessibility' deals with the way people get information on the Internet. For those with disabilities this may mean using assistive technologies or it may simply mean reading or comprehending at a slower pace. For others, it may mean using different operating systems, mobile devices, text only screens, older Internet browsers and so on.

These kinds of accessibility needs affect how effectively a given website will function. Therefore, sites should be designed with the specific needs of a variety of users in mind.

Who is affected by accessibility?

At this point you may be asking, as a small business person operating online is it my responsibility to ensure that a disabled person can access my website?

Consider this: In Canada in 2001, 3.6 million people – 1 in 8 – were living with a disability. Today, more than 3 million Canadians are print disabled – that is, they have vision impairments or learning disabilities. Today in the US, 1 in 5 people have some kind of disability. And, 30 million Americans are affected by inaccessible computer and software design.

People with accessibility needs constitute a significant portion of our community – that means significant buying power. Now ask yourself, how many of these people are your potential customers?

The case for accessibility

From a business standpoint, accessibility makes sense. It increases the general usability of your website, it improves compatibility across technology, thereby extending your reach, and it can even lower your web maintenance costs.

“Although accessibility requirements are initially set to benefit people with disabilities, organizations meeting the requirements are discovering that improving accessibility also helps them to address a number of emerging online communications challenges,” says Rothwell, whose web design team recently won the Iron Chef Web Design Challenge held in the US. Their winning website design was rooted in accessibility.

Rothwell cites the increased use of handheld devices and wireless technology as an example of accessibility having the added effect of managing new technology issues. Currently, handheld and wireless devices are better suited to the fast loading and easily viewed, low-color, low graphic websites endorsed by accessibility experts.

In fact, a site designed for accessibility may even be a cost-saving measure. Accessible websites generally use less bandwidth, and they have a distinct advantage in that they are more easily identified by search engines, which could reduce your marketing costs.

The benefits of building a website with accessibility in mind:

Increased usability

Accessibility focuses on developing clear and consistent navigation and content on your website. Therefore, it makes finding information and purchasing easier and faster and encourages your visitors to stay longer.

Greater reach

As browsers, standards and technologies change, an accessible website which relies more on html and text over Flash and graphics is more likely to be compatible across browsers, platforms and mobile technology such as handheld devices.

Lower costs

Coding techniques inherent in creating accessible websites lead to simpler, well-organized websites. This simplicity makes a site easier (and cheaper) for a designer to maintain. Further, as accessible pages tend to have smaller file sizes, server strain is reduced and loading and network performance is enhanced.

Of course, improved accessibility doesn't have to compromise your site's design. With a little skill, a designer can create an effective website that looks good too. Want proof? Sitepoint.com, a popular online magazine for web developers gives the following examples of accessible yet attractive websites. Two of these are not English content sites, nevertheless, they'll give you a sense of the balance that can be achieved between function and design.

1. www.onedayfilms.com
2. www.cybercodeur.net
3. www.einfach-fuer-alle.de

Guidelines for accessibility

The W3C, the World Wide Web Consortium is a great resource for accessibility information (www.w3.org). Representing 400 member organizations worldwide, the W3C has become a leading force in the development of Internet protocol and guidelines, and has created the Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines for universal access to web content.

Their basic principles of accessibility are expressed in the following 4 guidelines:

1. **Perceivable.** Ensure that all content can be presented in form(s) that can be perceived by any user - except those aspects of the content that cannot be expressed in words.
2. **Operable.** Ensure that the interface elements in the content are operable by any user.
3. **Understandable.** Make it as easy as possible to understand the content and controls.
4. **Robust.** Use Web technologies that maximize the ability of the content to work with current and future accessibility technologies and user agents.

To read more W3C accessibility guidelines visit www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/.

Summary

Rothwell concludes, "As organizations continue to serve an increasingly wide range of audiences, they need to deliver information and services that are accessible to targeted users to ensure effective communication."

The case for website accessibility is a good one, because everyone benefits from more user-friendly websites. Globally, it levels the playing field for all users. On a micro level, it can give a small business owner an advantage over his/her competitors by providing the chance to score big in a market often overlooked and underestimated.