

Ensuring your website is accessible

Anti-discrimination legislation did not happen overnight. Indeed, the process of inclusion for citizens of all demographics has been on the agenda of governments and human rights activists the world over for many years.

This is an important agenda

Most policy makers and corporate watchdogs actively encourage the employment and inclusion of all people regardless of ethnicity, social or economic standing, religion, mental capacity or physical attributes.

Indeed some national governments enforce these policies to ensure a fair, socially responsible business climate.

Private and public organisations have likewise also long understood the importance of providing facilities for staff members or visitors with unique needs, particularly in their legal place of business or operations. Not providing such amenities would likely result in litigation, a compelling reason to address any inadequacies as a high priority business agenda.

The Internet is also a premise

Even after the Internet had been with us for many years, a large proportion of companies had still not considered the idea of ensuring their Internet premise was also accessible.

After all, why would a person that has vision impairment use the Internet?

Of course a visually impaired person wants to use the Internet, just as any sighted person would want to access such a vast and rich resource.

Vision impairment is also only one of many conditions that can potentially inhibit the use of information resources like the Internet. These constraints never mean that the person will not want to participate in an otherwise ordinary life.

In actual fact, there are many people who have difficulty using digital or interactive media who may not necessarily be technically classified as having a disabling condition either.

Thankfully, there are some wonderful technologies to aid users with special needs in their use of media.

Included in a large variety of assisting technologies are items such as screen readers or Braille machines for people with vision restrictions, subtitles for those with hearing difficulties, and speech recognition for those without the full use of their appendages.

It will not be too long until we have eye-tracking, and can do away with the keyboard and mouse altogether.

In spite of the existence of tremendous enabling technologies, the ability of a machine to accurately render content in a meaningful way often relies on that content being formatted with careful consideration of current accessibility standards.

Due diligence and the bottom line

The issue was not really even on the corporate radar until a lawsuit mounted by the US National Federation for the Blind (NFB). On behalf of their claimants with disabilities the lawsuit stated that these USA citizens were

being discriminated against because a well known company's online content was only accessible by able-bodied people.

The NFB had raised concerns with the Target corporation (a major US-based discount retailer which operates more than 1,300 stores in 47 states) more than ten months before, and stated:

"The website is no more accessible today than it was in May of last year, when we first complained to Target."

Most boardrooms now agree that it is imperative that they find the best way to quickly conform to changes in the Disability Discrimination Act, Section 508, and other legislative guidelines from governments around the world.

There is a simple solution

Website designers and developers have long known about the technical requirements and specifications as determined by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

These standards are subject to change, and are developed by an international community for the betterment of every user of the Internet.

Developers and designers acknowledge and adapt to changing technological standards both in hardware and software design, although it can sometimes be difficult to stay abreast of the latest guidelines.

Other benefits to compliance

Actually not only is commissioning an accessible website easy, it makes a lot of sense on many different strategic levels.

Consider the following insights as documented in the "Guide to good

practice in commissioning accessible websites" (British Standards Institute 2006, ISBN 0 580 46567 5):

- *The Family Resources Survey [2] found that there are almost 10 million disabled people in the UK with a combined spending power in the region of 80 billion pounds per annum. Furthermore there are millions of other individuals that are affected by sensory, physical and/or cognitive impairments, including those resulting from the ageing process.*
- *Research undertaken by the DRC "The Web: Access and inclusion for disabled people" [3] has confirmed that people without disabilities are also able to use websites that are optimised for accessibility more effectively and more successfully.*
- *Content developed upholding World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) guidelines and specifications can be more easily transferred to other media, such as interactive TV, mobile phones and handheld computers.*
- *Accessible content, for example where a text equivalent is provided for graphical elements, is highly visible to search engines, often leading to higher rankings.*

Certainly these benefits will be of interest to executives considering the perceived expense associated with accessible content, yet it is plain to see that there are other benefits in the form of corporate social responsibility and positive public relations.

The key stake holder role

Whenever a digital media project is commissioned by a company the only consideration to be made by the key stake holder is to make the decision about the level of compliance to which the content should adhere.

There is a small amount of flexibility in this context because there are some

elements within the standard which are considered compulsory, some which are recommended yet are not necessarily essential, and others which are desirable to create something which has the maximum possibility of being viewed by any user, regardless of their situation.

Although many of the requirements of the standard can be accurately measured to see if they are fulfilled correctly, there are some elements which are somewhat subjective.

Ultimately, a design or development company can adopt a more stringent approach depending on the design criteria set by executives.

In the final case, the real question is whether people enjoy using the site and are not prevented from accessing any important content which should be available to the public at large.

There are a lot of technical and specification documents full of guidelines that will be overwhelming to conscientious companies attempting to embrace the need for accessibility.

In reality all of this content should instead be assimilated by the agencies that intend to create the content rather than the corporations who simply want to develop an interactive strategy.

The difference between accessibility and usability

Usability is a little different, and is an important concept for consideration for all people that use the website.

Usability could be defined very simplistically as how easy is it is for the 'average' person to use the content, regardless of any special needs.

It is possible to satisfy all necessary W3C Website Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and yet have a layout and content that actually makes very little sense to users of the site.

Usability translates into a positive experience for all people as they interact with a company's branded presence.

A positive user experience logically leads to results such as increased sales, brand interaction, positive word of mouth, and other business benefits.

Accessibility is not complicated

There can appear to be some complexity involved in building highly accessible and usable content.

Actually this is a fundamental service which should come as a standard inclusion with any website proposal.

Commissioning an 'accessible' website is no different to commissioning an 'ordinary' website. They are certainly the same thing in the eyes of an accomplished website development company. Accessibility is really as simple as making sure the site is built correctly in the first place.

This means a good foundation, standards compliance, craftsmanship, good project management, together with attention to detail and great build quality.

A metaphor of house building

The process of website development could be compared to building a new house.

As a homeowner you would want an architect and builder who are abreast of the latest trends, techniques, standards and processes to build your house.

You would not expect them to charge you a consultancy fee on top of the house design and build fees.

Yet how would you feel if you then discovered that your brand new home was illegal because it did not adhere to the current building code?

Enforcement agents would instruct that your house be razed to the ground.

In the same way, the building of a new website in this millennium should take all current design and technical specifications into consideration.

Converting old websites into accessible websites

As opposed to the building a new house, renovating an existing house can be considerably more problematic.

What may seem like a single simple task may end up becoming five other quite complicated tasks. This can make budgeting quite difficult, and milestones seemingly without a definitive end.

In the very same way some of the processes used in the original construction of an older website will be dated and are likely no longer compliant. This often means that major re-engineering may be required to bring the site up to the standards set in current legislation.

Strangely, it can sometimes be easier to knock down the outdated house (or website) and start again.

Some websites can be updated more easily for accessibility standards

Fortunately database driven dynamic websites have a distinct advantage over static websites when it is time to 'renovate'.

If content (text and pictures) is being loaded into a browser from a database, it is then also possible to modify the way that same content is displayed (or rendered by aiding technologies) through dedicated page templates. These templates can be updated or replaced with greater ease to create an entirely new website that is completely accessible.

Indeed it is possible to create templates especially for different types of device: mobile phones, screen readers, braille machines, LCD projectors, and so on.

Perhaps most importantly, typically the renovation process will not be so expensive as there is not a complete website rebuild, nor the creation of hundreds of new web pages of content as in the case of a manual or static website rebuild.

Some websites will require a complete rebuild from scratch

If a site has been built statically, it could be compared to a building that was originally set in concrete with steel reinforcement.

Unfortunately in these cases it is better to simply 'demolish' and start again.

This also affords an opportunity to incorporate the very latest trends and development techniques to create something fresh and contemporary, perhaps even prize-winning.

In these circumstances, the production work (and therefore cost) involved in making the website accessible can be compared to a new website project.

Some recommendations

It could be said that if there is any one recommendation to be made in the design and building of websites, it

would be that stake holder should make sure that all content is dynamically driven from a database, even if it seems to be an overkill.

By implementing this database the company can ensure that the site can be continually modified as Internet technologies and standards change.

Content will at the end of the day always just be content.

So all businesses that are maintaining websites with a content management system (or CMS) should already have this functionality built in and will be a step ahead of the accessibility game.

That's not so complicated

Accessibility is not complicated after all, nor is it necessarily expensive.

Brands should ensure that they are deploying optimised and accessible content for all of their Internet based projects.

They will then also begin to see the financial advantages of creating a resource that people all over the world can enjoy... regardless of accessibility constraints.

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