

slightly different

Online Accessibility - Does It Really Matter?

If I said to you that making your website accessible to people with disabilities is the socially responsible thing to do, you might be interested in hearing more about it. Then again, if you are not disabled or you don't know anyone who is then it's probably not going to be high on your agenda.

You might further be interested if I said that making your website accessible is also the legal thing to do - if your site is not accessible then you are in breach of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. Given that the public sector fails to comply with its own legislation, this one is unlikely to ring your bell either.

But if I told you that there was a very real possibility that by making your website accessible you could increase your turnover, you might start to look into this a little closer.

The sad fact is that as business owners we have so many things vying for our attention that online accessibility often gets put off, or in most cases completely ignored. This is a shame, as aside from the feelgood factor of helping out your fellow man, which at the end of the day isn't going to pay the rent, there is a sound business case for creating a website that is accessible.

The Disability Rights Commission state that there are almost ten million people in the UK who are registered as disabled. That's ten million potential customers who currently may not be able to use your website and as a result do business with one of your competitors.

Google is the largest blind user of the web, which is a bizarre statement, but if you think about it Google cannot see what is on your website. In fact, all search engines are in the same position, having to rely solely on the information that the page contains rather than what the page looks like. This is identical to the requirements of a screen reader or a braille monitor used by people with sight impairment.

If a screen reader can interpret your website to the point where someone who cannot see can navigate around your site by having it read to them, a search engine is also going to be able to navigate around your site quickly and easily, finding relevant information that it may not have found in an inaccessible website, and consequently listing your site higher in its search results.

So, what can you do about it? You could start by visiting <http://webxact.watchfire.com> and entering your website address in the box. Then hit the Go! button. What you'll instantly get back is an analysis of your home page, and if you select the Accessibility tab you can see where the problems are. Ideally, you don't want any red crosses.

A common problem is the lack of alternative text descriptions for each image. If you hold your mouse over an image on an accessible website you should see a small box appear with a description of what that image is. This is a relatively straightforward modification to any website, and is one of the key points towards achieving the initial level of accessibility.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are the definitive international standards published by an organisation called the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). These free guidelines contain 14 checkpoints to make your website accessible, including examples of how to add alternative text descriptions to all images, and how to create a site so that it works in all browsers, e.g. Internet Explorer, Firefox. This document can be found at <http://www.w3.org/WAI/> and is well worth a read as it details the potential problems, examples, and solutions that you can use to modify your website.

Alternatively, an excellent book on the subject is the Glasshaus publication *Constructing Accessible Websites*. This book examines the history of accessibility, the legal cases (did you know that the Sydney Olympics website was taken to court under the Human Rights Act?), and then looks at specific examples of how to get it right. Although written for the Internet industry, it is easy to follow and is arguably the best book on the market in this subject.

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Tim Berners-Lee, one of the inventors of the World Wide Web, stated that "The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect." Making a website accessible today is becoming more and more important. With the Internet being used increasingly by people over the age of 50 whose vision perhaps is not quite what it used to be, and this trend likely to increase over the coming years, accessibility is the way ahead.

Jeremy Hurst is Managing Director of Slightly Different, an Internet development agency in Cornwall who are specialists in developing accessible websites. The company was founded in 2000 and since then their work has won 13 of the highest industry awards, including the top technical award in Europe. Their website can be found at www.slightlydifferent.co.uk.