

Top Tips 4 | Designing your website for the widest audience

Website accessibility is more than just a topical buzzword. It is a legal requirement now and if it means that you have considered your audience when designing your site you are likely to be viewed more favourably by the wider community. This article looks at:

- **Why web accessibility is important.**
- **How to achieve web accessibility.**

Definition

On the web you can never be certain how the end user will view your web pages. Accessible website design, therefore, means designing for diversity. An accessible website works on a variety of different web browsers and hardware platforms (old and new). Site content will be available to someone with a 21" screen using the latest Windows PC, to someone viewing with WebTV, or a disabled person accessing the Internet through a speech-enabled device. It will be flexible enough to accommodate the access needs of the end user, e.g. a visually impaired user may need to enlarge text or change colours on the page.

Why is web accessibility important?

Accessible web design is important to businesses for legal, ethical and commercial reasons:

- **Legal:** The Disability Discrimination Act requires organisations in the UK to make online information accessible to disabled people. Court action has never been taken in Britain although there have been high profile cases elsewhere. The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) intends to formally investigate online service providers in spring 2003. Court action on the grounds of discriminatory practice could be costly and damaging to public relations.
- **Ethical:** It makes good business sense for organizations to demonstrate an inclusive and ethical approach – a good image will have an impact on customer perception and buying behaviour.
- **Commercial:** Some organisations may be reluctant to prioritise web accessibility if they believe legal and ethical issues are the only driving forces. However, accessible websites have advantages:
 - Websites designed to be accessible will attract a larger number of potential customers.
 - Accessible websites are usually more 'search engine friendly' and, therefore, more likely to be found by potential customers.
 - An accessible website, created in accordance with the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Accessibility Guidelines, costs less to maintain, and is 'future proofed' – more likely to continue working as browsers and hardware are updated.
 - Accessible web design is important for organisations attempting to attract grant aid or funding, or contracts from public bodies.
 - In the European Year of the Disabled 2003 the European Commission is more likely to consider funding organisations, which uphold the EC's e-accessibility aims.



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How do I achieve web accessibility?

Legally speaking, you achieve accessibility if your site is not deemed to discriminate against a user on the basis of their impairment. This is determined by how your site 'measures up' when judged against the W3C Accessibility Guidelines and the Disability Discrimination Act.

The W3C Guidelines identify three levels of web accessibility:

- Level one compliance covers basic access issues, eg, ensuring that all graphics have text descriptions (Alt tags).
- Level two compliance ensures that colour contrasts do not cloud legibility, that standard mark-up language is used to create well-structured documents and that navigation is clear and well organised.
- Level three compliance provides more advanced techniques, some not yet supported by current browsers.

If you only achieve level one compliance, a lot of people will still find it difficult to access your site. Achieving level two compliance will make a real impact on the number of people who can use your site. Organisations should aspire towards level three compliance. Website accessibility is an on-going process not a one-off activity.

Organisations, particularly larger enterprises, should develop a web accessibility policy and implementation plan. Objectives include:

- Deciding on the standards you will measure your site against.
- Auditing existing web pages as to their accessibility and how much work needs done.
- Testing pages using auditing tools such as Bobby <http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp> and against different browsers and hardware platforms (both Mac and PC).
- Starting by making popular pages accessible.
- Ensuring that all new pages are designed to be accessible.
- Ensuring you have the tools that help you design and maintain accessible sites.
- Budgeting for training to develop expertise within your organisation.

Case Studies

ContractWise <http://www.contractwise.co.uk>

An innovative law practice, whose site was designed with accessibility in mind. This firm deals with Internet Law – having an accessible site is important for their image. It is also a very clear and usable site.

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Pat's Guide to Glasgow's West End <http://www.glasgowwestend.co.uk>

A community-based website generating revenue from features and listings services. Designed as an accessible website since the outset (1999), the site attracts over 29,000 visitors each month and has achieved a high position on major search engines. Use of standard HTML ensures that the site is accessible on all browsers.

Actions and Next Steps

Develop a web accessibility policy and implementation plan following the objectives included in 'How do I achieve web accessibility?'

If building a new website, ensure that the web designer has expertise. Ask for examples of accessible sites they have designed.

If designing the website in-house, budget for web accessibility training for web designers and content managers.

Build the site using standard mark-up language (e.g. HTML); this will enable the site to work on a wide range of hardware and software.

Use the techniques outlined within the W3C Accessibility Guidelines to ensure content will be flexible enough for many users' needs.

Web Resources

W3C Accessibility Guidelines <http://www.w3.org/WAI/wcag-curric/overgid.htm>

An introduction to and commentary on the W3C Accessibility Guidelines.

Bobby <http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp>

A useful audit tool for assessing the web accessibility of your site.

Making Connections Unit <http://www.mcu.org.uk/articles/accessguidelines.html>

A web accessibility consultancy based in Glasgow

Web Accessibility and the Law <http://www.web-access.org.uk>

Martin Sloan, an expert in this field, has published a number of useful articles on his website.

Source <http://www.scottish-enterprise.com>

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