



accessibility

How accessible is your website?

If you have visitors to your business – whether it's a retail operation or simply an office that clients visit - chances are you've made it as simple as possible for the people you do business with to get to you. If you have a shop, you'll make sure your entrances and exits are wide enough for wheelchairs and pushchairs, and that ramps are available for people who can't climb steps. You'll allow guide dogs, and not turn away partially sighted people who require assistance to browse your goods. If you have an office, you'll direct your visitors to the easiest place to park, and make sure that when they come for meetings there's someone on hand to point them in the right direction and give them a hand if they struggle with stairs.

But have you afforded the same consideration to visitors to your website? Whether you're selling online or attempting to reach new clients through your web content, can you be sure that you're not excluding people who would do business with you IF they could use your website?

The letter of the law

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was introduced to tackle the discrimination faced by disabled people, and amendments to the act in 1999 and 2005 refer specifically to website accessibility. The Act makes it unlawful for a service provider to discriminate against a disabled person y by refusing to provide any service which it provides to members of the public. In short, if you communicate with people through a website, you have a responsibility to ensure that you are not excluding anybody from browsing your content because of their disability.

Unfortunately, the definition of 'accessibility' can appear ambiguous and leaves room for exploitation by unscrupulous website owners who don't want to spend time or money on making sure their websites follow good practice.

But observing some simple rules will not only make browsing easier for everyone, it'll also make your site more search-engine friendly and help to boost your business in those all-important SEO rankings.

Build it and they will come

The website of any business should reflect its brand and appeal to its customers, and initial discussions with web designers will probably focus on look and functionality. But having some basic knowledge of the inner workings of a website will ensure that yours is user friendly and DDA compliant.

The look and formatting of a document is controlled by CSS – cascading style sheets. CSS enables multiple pages to share formatting, so if you decide on a font and background colour for one page, this will then automatically apply to all the others. When the CSS is removed from a website, the menu, sub-menus and text should be listed in the order they would be read when the formatting is applied. So if your homepage has a fancy design with, say, each item of the menu appearing in the petal of a flower, when the design is removed the text should appear in list form in the order it would normally be read. This is to ensure that text readers, which are used by partially sighted or blind people to audibly read the text for them, read the text in the correct order.

Turn the tables

Sites that use tables to lay out their text present a particular problem for text readers. If you'd like your text to appear neat and in equal columns, it may be tempting to create it in a table and then hide the borders of the table, much as you would do in a Word document or Excel spreadsheet. But put that table onto a webpage, and the text readers will struggle to make sense of it, reading down a column instead of across a row, or vice versa.





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See, hear

If your website relies heavily on imagery to sell your goods or service, this doesn't mean that you automatically exclude those who can't see the images. If the image is part of a design and is simply a pretty piece of decoration with no function, then there's no need to create a text alternative. But every image which is an integral part of your website should have a text alternative, so the text reader can describe the image to the person browsing the site.

Every image on a website has a title. If your image is of a product that you are trying to sell, then it should be labelled with an accurate description. Someone browsing your site with a text reader will need to hear much more than 'product one' when their reader comes to the image. Similarly, if you are selling tickets to an event and your image is simply labelled 'invitation', they'll be none the wiser. If, however, your product is labelled, "Men's brown brogue sizes 6-12", or your invitation jpeg is labelled, "Invitation to charity ball October 16", the person browsing with a text reader will have the same information at their fingertips as those looking at the screen.

And just as partially sighted or blind browsers need audio to understand your content, those with hearing problems need to see words. If there is audio on your site, then there must be a text alternative.

Attention to detail

Changing the colour or size of a font can mean the difference between someone with a visual impairment reading or not reading the information on your website. Some partially sighted people may find it easier to read yellow text on a black background, or black text on a white background. Give people the option to change the way they view your page by offering a choice of CSS styles to switch between.

Am I accessible?

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is an international community that develops standards to ensure the long-term growth of the Web. Its website has a tool that can check any site for accessibility and highlight where errors are being made – go to <http://validator.w3.org> to check the accessibility of your site.

How can I change?

Now that you know what you're looking for, you can start to put it right. Armed with the knowledge of what makes websites accessible, you can go to your web developer and ask the right questions. If they don't know what you're talking about – and you'd be amazed at how many people don't – it's time to get a new web developer.

And if you think you can't afford a new website, think again – because you can't afford to have a site that's not accessible.

