



Why build accessible websites?

by Debra Blundell.

“The power of the Web is its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect.” Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the World Wide Web.

So there you have it, straight from the mouth of its very inventor: the World Wide Web was designed to give everyone access to the rich stores of information it strings together. So why are so many websites still out of bounds to the disabled, a group of people who stand to gain more from the Internet than most?

One of the reasons is that the belief still persists that accessible websites are boring, text-based, visually-uninspiring places where ‘design’ is a dirty word. Another is that they cost too much to develop. Some people just don’t know how to go about making a website accessible. But by far the biggest reason is that people simply don’t realise the enormous benefits accessibility offers alongside helping out disabled computer users.

Let’s start by over-turning some of those myths.

Myth 1 – Accessibility compromises good design.

Not true. Text-only websites are as boring for disabled users as they are for the rest of us, so there’s no excuse for producing them. In fact, industry guidelines that once advocated text-only content have recently been revised. Good designers see constraints as challenges and turn them to their advantage, building simple yet engaging sites that benefit from a lack of clutter and unnecessary technological wizardry.

Myth 2 – Building and testing a website for accessibility is difficult and time-consuming.

The W3C (led by Tim Berners-Lee himself) has developed a set of international standards for web user interfaces, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0. These standards consist of 14 broad guidelines and 65 design checkpoints. They’re available free on the Internet and are easy to follow. Once you’ve built the site, you can test it easily with online tools, for instance webxact.watchfire.com, that assess, for example, whether your site will work well with screen-reader software for the blind. Asking disabled people to work with you from design to evaluation is also effective and rewarding.

Myth 3 – Accessible sites are expensive to build.

Not if you build accessibility in from the start. Retrofitting a site to make it accessible presents problems. It rarely works and often ends up looking clumsy and cobbled together. But if you think about accessibility right from the planning stage, you can achieve your aims with nothing more than carefully written HTML.

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So now that we've sent the myths packing, it's time for a reality check. Why should you go to all this trouble?

Reality 1 –

You may be severely limiting your audience.

There are around 750 million disabled people in the world today. That's a heck of a lot of lost surfers if your site isn't accessible. And that's not counting the people who can't use it because they don't have the latest plug-ins or their computer is a bit behind the times.

Reality 2 –

Accessibility can benefit everyone.

Follow the WCAG 1.0 checkpoints and it can lead to improved useability for all your site visitors. For instance, they recommend including a site map and list of contents – something that lots of people use to find information they might otherwise miss. And anyone – disabled or not – is more likely to click on a link that states clearly where it is going than one that demands vaguely that you 'click here'.

Reality 3 –

You'll be ready for the Silver Surfers.

The market for accessible design is bigger than most of us realise. Research commissioned by Microsoft and conducted by Forrester Research in 2003 highlighted the fact that the average age of computer users is growing and that ageing inevitably increases the need for accessible technology, as existing impairments become more severe and people develop new impairments. They reckon that 60% of working adults in the US are likely to have difficulties or impairments that will affect their computer use at some time.

Reality 4 –

You'll generate more traffic.

On the Web, the 'blind population' includes the robots of search engines. Since the search engines' robots are text-only and generally support only HTML 2.0, being accessible can up your chances of getting picked up and listed by the search engines.

Reality 5 –

You'll be ready for new platforms.

'Aural browsing' may have been invented for the blind (via screen-reader software) but its applications go much further. Hands-free Web access using aural technology through car-based PCs and phones could be commonplace in the future. The technology also has applications in difficult operating environments, such as under or over-illuminated rooms. If you write accessible pages now, you'll have the flexibility to adapt to innovative technologies.

The 'eyes' clearly have it when it comes to accessibility, and it's really not that hard to achieve. Make sure your requirements are explicitly set out in the earliest phase of the project. Use designers with experience of making accessibility exciting. Put your users at the centre of everything you do – if possible, ask disabled users to get involved at every stage of the project. And remember that accessibility isn't just about access for the disabled. The business benefits include increased market reach, a more standards-compliant (and therefore more efficient) website and a clear demonstration of your company's social responsibility. You can't afford to ignore it.

If you would like to discuss any issues regarding the accessibility of your website, please contact Gary Clark, Digital Solutions Manager, at gc@indigocreative.co.uk