

Making Your Web Site Accessible to All

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 8/13/2007

It's important to try to make Web sites accessible to as many people as possible. Increasingly, laws are being passed requiring a minimum level of accessibility on a Web site. Following the best practices in Web site accessibility can actually enhance the overall usability of a Web site for *all* visitors. Consider the following:

- An acceptable minimum set of standards can greatly improve accessibility when implemented
- Simple, clean design greatly improves accessibility—and it can make your site more attractive to the majority of your visitors
- Being consistent in your design standards is critical from an accessibility point of view

What to Do

Keep It Simple

Good accessibility design is also good Web site design. Trying to be too clever or trying to use too many groundbreaking features is simply not effective when you're trying to communicate on the Web. Make your site simple, clear, and consistent; the result will be a Web destination that is more accessible for everyone.

Weigh Accessibility Standards and Their Implications

Minimum accessibility standards are increasingly becoming legal requirements, much like the equal access laws that apply to buildings. Finding out the basics of what is required of your Web site is important, particularly if your Web work represents a large organization, one that is likely to be a primary target of any legal action.

It's All in the Code

HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) is how Web pages are built. Anyone working on a Web site should be familiar with both the basics and the nuances of HTML coding. Ensure that the HTML coding for your Web site follows high standards and avoids sloppiness and shortcuts that can make it hard for any visitor to use your site.

Hold to Proper Standards for Layout and Design

Clear and consistent layout of content is important for accessibility. While it may not seem exotic or eye-catching, black text on a white background actually improves readability for everyone. While it is not that hard to find faint red text on a stark yellow background on some “artistic” Web sites, you should avoid the use of colored or graphical backgrounds, particularly where substantial quantities of text are presented, especially if you are trying to increase accessibility to your Web site. It is also important that font sizes should be reasonable and that visitors should be able to change the font size if they wish.

Provide Clear Navigation

Implementing consistent and clear navigation allows everyone to move through the Web site easily and in a logical manner. If you go to a sub-page on your Web site, users should be able to get back to where they started *and* to be able to easily go to any other related Web page that is also part of your site. Navigation design should embrace clarity and simplicity.

Treat Images as a Kind of Language

All images should have text associated with them: this is called ALT (or alternate) text. This ensures that a blind person can understand everything that is on a page by means of a screen reader that converts text into audio. Also, use only client-side image maps.

Minimize Screen Movement

It is very difficult to read text that is married to moving images. Where animated ads are absolutely required, they should animate a couple of times and then stop. Where tickertape elements are used, provide a facility that allows the visitor to turn them on or off. Too much motion makes a Web site dizzying, not compelling.

Hold to Common Standards

Keep all designs and technologies to a common standard where possible; again, the more basic the technology required to convey information, the better. If content has to be delivered that requires a

plug-in or other special feature, please make it easy for the visitor to obtain that plug-in. Better yet, also provide the content in a standard HTML environment if possible.

Employ Tables for Web Page Design

Tables are both a popular method of laying out content on a Web page and one that enhances a logical structure. Make sure that tables are properly marked up, in terms of HTML coding. Clearly identify row and column headers. Be aware that tables can cause difficulties for blind people who use screen readers, so try to make sure that your tables also make sense when laid out in a linear fashion.

Avoid Frames

The use of frames can create a lot of problems, not simply for people with disabilities but for everyone who uses the Web. Frames basically offer the possibility that you can have a Web page within a Web page, with both offering information and links. However, very few of the largest and most popular Web sites use frames. To promote accessibility, frames are not recommended; but, if you have to use them, make sure they are properly titled—and keep the framing as simple as you possibly can.

Limit the Number of Scripts and Applets

Where possible, and especially if you are promoting total accessibility, Web pages should be capable of being viewed with a browser that *doesn't* support applets, scripts, or other programming elements. It may be necessary to create two versions of the Web page in order to achieve this. In this way, you can offer the visitor the choice of how to view the information you are placing on the Internet.

Multimedia: Yes or No?

Studies show that the average consumer is not particularly interested in multimedia features. Not every computer can handle music and movies. However, where visual multimedia is required, try to provide an audio or text description of the content presented, just in case the visitor or the equipment being used is impaired.

Know How To Handle Forms

The purpose of any form is simply this: to collect information. People with disabilities should be able to use assistive technology to fill out forms or should be offered an alternative means of providing the information required. This gives all visitors the choice of responding to a Web page in the way that is most comfortable *for them*.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Clark, Joe. Building Accessible Web sites. New Riders Press, 2002.

Web Sites:

W3C Guidelines on Web Content Accessibility: www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT

Watchfire Accessibility Test: <http://webxact.watchfire.com>