

Pandemic presents new opportunities to boost accessibility

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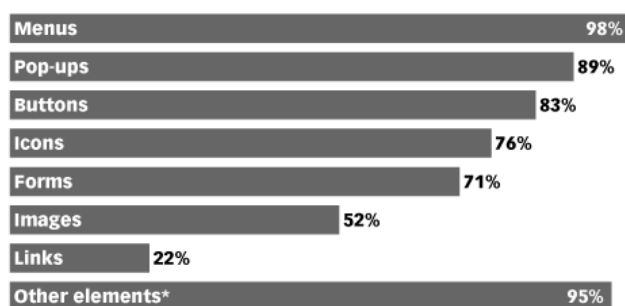
Victoria Petrock

Though US law requires most public and private companies to make their websites and digital experiences accessible to people with disabilities, many are still missing the mark. But as the pandemic forces more people to work, study, shop, and conduct business online, it is empowering the disability community. Brands are turning to new technology and inclusive design to boost accessibility and extend their outreach.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, brands doing business in the US are required to optimize their websites and other digital experiences for assistive technologies and/or make them available in alternate formats. “Accessibility is the law,” said Christina Mallon, global head of inclusive design and digital accessibility at Wunderman Thompson. But because of vague digital guidelines and inconsistent enforcement, a surprisingly large number of companies don’t meet legal requirements. For example, December 2019 research compiled by accessiBe found that 98% of webpages worldwide failed to meet accessibility guidelines in at least one area.

Share of Webpages Worldwide that Do Not Comply with Accessibility Standards for Select Page Components, Dec 2019

% of total



Note: WCAG 2.1 AA guidelines; *proper HTML language attribute, skippable links for page navigation, correct use of aria attribute, tabbing within hidden elements, and proper focus outlines for tab navigation
Source: accessiBe, "Web Accessibility Annual Report 2020," Feb 1, 2020

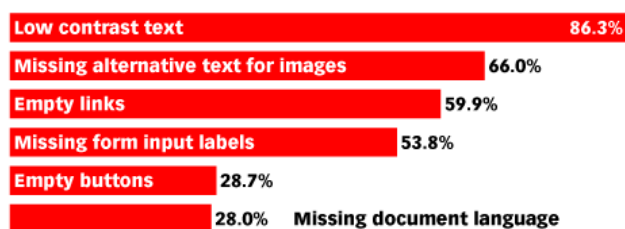
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Three months later, a review of the top 1 million homepages worldwide by WebAIM also found that many lacked the most basic features: 86.3% failed to offer low-contrast text, 66.0% were missing alternative text for images, and 59.9% had empty links.

Most Common Content Accessibility Failures Among the Top 1,000,000 Homepages Worldwide, Feb 2020

% of homepages



Note: top websites based on data from the Majestic Millions List, Open PageRank Initiative, and Alexa Top Sites
Source: WebAIM, "The WebAIM Million," March 30, 2020

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These failures have resulted in tens of thousands of accessibility-related lawsuits in recent years. In one high-profile example, a blind man won a case against Domino's Pizza because he couldn't order a pizza via the company's website or mobile app. In another, a blind woman sued the management company of entertainer Beyonce, alleging her website violated the ADA.

But as the coronavirus pushes more of everyday life online, it is eliminating physical barriers and making more things possible for people with disabilities. As a result, brands are exploring the use of cutting-edge technologies, including AI, machine learning, virtual and augmented environments, mobile apps, voice assistants, and assistive and adaptive hardware to make digital assets more user-friendly, bridge language differences, and augment spoken and written communications.

Brands are also turning away from an “after-the-fact,” or “checklist”-based, approach to accessibility and moving toward inclusive design, a process by which products, services, and environments are designed for the widest number of users and which builds in accessibility from the start.

“The COVID-19 lockdown, and the subsequent move online of work, socializing, the education system, cultural institutions, healthcare, and even the justice system, has opened up the world for people with disabilities and created a new conversation of what disability representation looks like,” said KR Liu, head of brand accessibility at Brand Studio, Google’s internal marketing think tank. “This gives us a huge opportunity to help embed these changes more permanently, both through our tech and the stories we tell.”

Though the use of new tech and inclusive design takes time and may require marketers to completely rethink their approach to accessibility, disability advocates say it’s a win-win for brands and consumers alike. Accessible content not only generates goodwill and makes more people feel included, it’s often simpler and easier to use and applicable to a wider swath of the population. “When people feel met, seen, considered, and thoughtfully designed for, they will positively engage and share to their connected community: ‘Try this out, this is a place for us, I feel like this fits me. I see myself reflected in this experience,’” said Naomi Clare, founder and chief strategy officer of Storycraft Lab.

To learn more about designing for accessibility and using tech to remove barriers, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our recent report:

Report by Victoria Petrock Nov 05, 2020

Getting Accessible Marketing Right

