The Benefits of Digital Accessibility

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The term "accessible" often brings to mind physical buildings, with handicapped parking, ramps, and the like. However, with today's growing digital market, accessibility is expanding to new realms.

To make something accessible is to make something able to be reached or entered. Similar to the way people use assistive technology to enter physical storefronts with wheelchairs — which require accessible ramps — others use assistive technology and adaptive strategies, such as screen readers, screen magnifying tools, read-out-loud functions, and selection switches to enter digital markets on their desktop, mobile, and tablet screens.

Available assistive technology varies widely based on the type and severity of the disabilities it can address. For example, screen readers such as Freedom Scientific's Job Access for Windows and Speech (JAWS) and NV Access's Non Visual Desktop Access (NVDA) help blind users by reading text (including alternative text). Similarly screen magnifying tools such as native browser settings and additional hardware help users with low visibility by increasing font and image size, without distorting quality. In addition, selection switches help users with impaired mobility interact with technology by helping users adapt to the physical requirements to enter data. For example, users can input information with a toggle switch rather than a QWERTY keyboard.

While assistive technologies continue to adapt to the marketplace and provide improved user experience, it is also important for the producers of web content to use industry standards that allow assistive technologies to function properly.

Providing an accessible digital experience can provide a number of benefits, including:

1. Increasing potential customers
Based on the 2010 census, 19 percent of the population reported having a disability, with more than half reporting that the disability was severe. As the population ages, this number will continue to increase. By providing an accessible digital experience, a company is choosing to market not only directly to this population, but also to friends and family who are conscious of a company's approach to accessibility.

2. Decrease possible legal action
While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities identifies access to information and communication technologies (including the Web) as a basic human right, the United States has various laws and regulations regarding specific federal, state, and local governments along with public accommodations. A number of companies have already suffered from costly public legal actions where inaccessible sites were deemed discriminatory. Specifically, in National Federation of the Blind vs. Target Corporation, 452 R. Supp.2d 946 (2006), the federal court ordered that a retailer may be sued if its website is inaccessible. The legal landscape for digital accessibility in the United States continues to grow rapidly through advocacy and litigation.

3. Increasing efficiencies by using common coding standards
Because most assistive technology leverages coding best practices, accessible sites usually exhibit better quality characteristics, including better usability, better search engine optimization, and reduced maintenance costs.

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4. Upholding corporate social responsibility
Having an accessible website and mobile application is the right thing to do. Not only is it good business to create content everyone can access, it's also something your people can be proud of, improving their overall engagement and sense of purpose.

Ideally, an organization will consider accessibility when it creates coding standards and selects technology. Again, most assistive technology uses coding best practices. For example, if a lengthy article is coded correctly, a screen reader will create an off-screen table of contents, allowing the user to index the article, quickly scroll through and understand what is included on a page. On the other hand, if a page is not coded with accessibility in mind, the screen reader cannot identify the content structure to build the off-screen table of contents, reducing the reader's ability to easily understand the content.

While it is best to consider accessibility during the initial planning and coding of a site, it is not too late to make an existing site accessible. From a tactical point of view, the best way to introduce accessibility is through education and a committed organizational focus. Ideally, accessibility will be incorporated from beginning to end of the software development life cycle.

With legacy sites, however, it is possible to retrofit content. In addition to planning and developing with accessibility in mind, it is also important to include accessibility testing. Accessibility testing includes both automated testing, using a code-parser to flag possible violations, and manual testing, using assistive technology such as screen readers and magnifying tools.

The field of assistive technology will continue to grow along with the need for accessible media and new considerations for both customers and employees of all ages and abilities. Rather than ignore the increasing focus on accessibility, companies should embrace the requirements for accessibility and leverage their digital footprint as a competitive advantage.

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