The Economics of Inclusion:

The Bottom Line Is Built on Inclusive Technology

In the article "A Broader Customer Base Is the Bottom Line" in the Fall 2019 issue of the *The Jabian Journal*, we discussed how an inclusion and diversity strategy not only is the right thing to do, but it can have a business impact by increasing your customer base. In this article, we will continue to explore the economics of inclusion through digital technology, physical technology, and emerging technology.

DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY IS A MUST, EVEN IF YOU'RE BEYONCÉ

Every year, we make significant advances in technology, but this doesn't necessarily mean that all of those advances are equally beneficial. Accessibility is not just a consideration in the physical world. While it's still important to have accessible restrooms, parking spaces, automatic doors, and other architectural details that enable a greater degree of independence for those with restricted mobility, the term "accessible" has developed much broader implications. No longer does the question "Can everyone access my storefront?" suffice. Now we must

Investing in the right tools and technologies will open the door for more customers.

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ACCESSIBLE WEBSITES HAVE A GREAT UX

think, Can everyone enter my digital world? What does that mean? It means that all websites and apps should be updated and made fully accessible for people with low vision, people who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing, and people with cognitive disabilities. It also means that we need to rethink navigation to ensure that we enable interactions, not just transactions, with our customers.

The law has not fully caught up with inclusive customer experiences, but the costs for voluntary adoption are certainly lower than a court battle, both in the court of law and the court of public opinion.[2] Make no mistake, the costs for noncompliance will be high. The U.S. Supreme Court recently rejected an attempt by Domino's Pizza Inc. to avoid a lawsuit by a blind man who accused the company of violating a law barring discrimination against people with disabilities after he was unable to place an order online.[3] Domino's argued that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) did not apply to websites and apps because the ADA predates the internet. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals held that all companies must adhere to the ADA.[3] App and website accessibility lawsuits are being filed at a rate of one per hour, affecting everyone from wineries to Beyoncé as customers demand more accessible, equitable experiences.[3,4] Customers are trying to let companies know that they want to purchase products and services; they just need different interfaces to interact with. Instead of making excuses or reacting to negative press or lawsuits, your company can take a proactive approach.

Matthew Bivins, co-founder of CaptionPoint, a company providing accessibility to the d/Deaf community via captions to scripted theater and other live events, underscored how an ounce of planning is worth a pound of cure. One estimate to make the Domino's website accessible came in at $38,000.[5] Bivins agrees this is a reasonable amount and noted how this is not only a fraction of Domino's sales ($13.5 billion globally in 2018[5]), but also much cheaper than even a single lawyer, not to mention a lawsuit. According to the National Federation of the Blind, more than 7 million Americans are visually impaired.[6] That number is expected to increase as the population ages. An investment of less than $40,000 seems like a small price to pay to make a product accessible to 7 million more potential customers.

The tried-and-true approach to understanding your customers is to put yourself in their shoes. Diversity and inclusion make the case that those "shoes" are far more varied and complex than we may have believed. That mindset helps us create customer personas that reflect the diversity of the customer base. Follow up with focus groups to pressure test your theories and ask your customers if there are any barriers between them and your product or service. What they tell you could improve the experience for everyone.

Bivins lives by this mantra: "Accessible websites have great UX [User Experience]." He and his brother, Evan Bivins, use this as the North Star for their company Bivins Brothers

Creative as they focus on simple, efficient language and well-thought-out navigation and functionality to create an end product that delights all users.

NECESSITY VERSUS CONVENIENCE

As we outlined in "A Broader Customer Base Is the Bottom Line,"[1] businesses should focus on customer acquisition beyond the customers they currently serve. In the 2010 census, 19 percent of the population self-reported a disability, and half of those rated that disability as "severe."[7] The numbers are almost guaranteed to increase as the world ages. A customer experience that centers on digital accessibility will enable new customers to enter the market and enable socially conscious friends, family, and citizens to "vote with their dollars" and celebrate companies that are accessible.

Many digital advances combine accessibility and convenience. Anyone who has dictated a text while driving or has enjoyed a loud snack while reading Netflix captions can certainly attest to this. Much like automatic doors, these pieces of digital accessibility have quickly become features that enhance the experience of customers of all abilities. What we can forget, however, is that a "nice to have" for a hearing or sighted person can be a barrier to entry or enjoyment for a low-vision or d/Deaf or hard of hearing person. Deaf activist and model Nyle DiMarco tweeted his displeasure at the closed-captioning device available for a screening of "Black Panther." The device highlighted cinema (in) accessibility as he called for a universal adoption of captioning. Beyond making movie theaters more accessible, it makes financial sense. Subtitle devices such as CaptiView cost $1,500 to $3,000, while captioning can be done at the studio level where production companies can leverage economies of scale to keep costs down.[8]

IF THEY CAN'T USE IT, THEY WON'T BUY IT

It's vitally important to a company's success to have an accessible storefront, digital and otherwise. What cannot be forgotten, however, is how important it is that consumers are able to actually use the end product. A website that's fully outfitted with a 508 reader and videos with captioning won't lead to a final sale if the product in question can't be used by people with physical challenges.

Microsoft is tackling inclusivity in innovative ways by retooling its signature gaming console, the Xbox, to have a new, adaptive controller. In years past, a gamer was required to have two dexterous hands in order to play video games with any degree of ease.[9] This limitation closed off gaming to players with a wide variety of physical limitations. Xbox now sells the adaptive controller that can be connected to external buttons, switches, joysticks, and mounts. This allows gamers the ability to customize their setups based on their own personal adaptive needs.[10]

XBOX NOW SELLS THE ADAPTIVE CONTROLLER THAT CAN BE CONNECTED TO EXTERNAL BUTTONS, SWITCHES, JOYSTICKS, AND MOUNTS.

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT, BUT IS IT FAIR?

Other areas of technology are less inclusive, which can have repercussions in broader society as a slowly diversifying employee base builds tools for a diverse society. Big tech companies have been publishing their diversity statistics since the middle of the 2010s. Google, for example was 70 percent male and 61 percent white in 2014.[11] In 2019, Google was 68 percent male and 51 percent white.[12] The lack of significant improvement in gender and racial diversity has real implications for products that Silicon Valley is producing; these products will increasingly affect our daily lives in the future.[13]

If tech companies were more focused on creating a workforce that truly reflected society, we would be much less likely to have technology products with "hard-coded" biases. Instead, we have facial recognition that struggles with nonwhite faces, especially nonwhite and nonmale, and artificial intelligence programs that default to male pronouns.[14] These issues can have real impacts as law enforcement relies more heavily on facial recognition and as AI becomes more prevalent in our everyday lives. If tech companies do not act quickly and decisively to combat existing and new biases, these issues will become even more problematic for consumers. Public outcry may also limit adoption, which curtails profits.[14,15]

AS CUSTOMERS VOTE WITH THEIR DOLLARS, LIKEABILITY MATTERS

As the economy becomes increasingly global, companies must consider the needs of consumers beyond the boundaries of North America. Worldwide, people with disabilities control over $8 trillion in annual disposable income, presenting fertile ground for new customer acquisitions.[3] This amount increases when you remember that people with disabilities are part of families, friends, and communities who want to help those with disabilities thrive. Fifty-two percent of U.S. adults and approximately 70 percent of U.S. millennials weigh a company's values when making online purchases. If businesses were to cater to customers with disabilities in a meaningful, thoughtful, and compassionate way, they could expand their customer bases while creating a positive brand halo effect.[3,16]

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