Breaking Down Online Barriers

for People with Disabilities

Be sure your Web site doesn't shut out the disabled.

By Shirley Sexton & Andrea Knudsen

In the 14 years since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), businesses and organizations nationwide have made strides in accommodating people with disabilities. But while physical barriers in public buildings and workplaces continue to disappear, the designs of many Web sites stand like a flight of stairs between disabled users and the Internet's potential.

What is an accessible Web site?

An accessible Web site is designed to account for differences in abilities and technologies among Internet users worldwide. Accessibility issues include:

• **Mobility:** Some people have trouble using a keyboard or mouse.

• **Vision:** Some people don't see well, or they may be using a screen reader or a small screen. Others may be connecting to the site through a slow Internet connection.

• **Hearing:** Those who are deaf or hard of hearing need captions or visual descriptions for sound and video files.

• **Cognition:** Some users can't understand certain types of information due to mental disabilities.

Accessible design follows the principles of usable design, emphasizing fast download times and site architecture that's easy to navigate. Site visitors who may not consider themselves "disabled" — for example, people recovering from an injury or who have difficulty reading small type on a screen — also benefit.

A thoughtfully designed site offers a flexible interface to meet each person's needs. Accessible sites usually include images with alternative text tags for graphics and image maps, captioned

One in five Americans has a disability.

audio, and descriptions for video. They also avoid the use of frames, confusing navigation, and low-contrast text.

Why should your organization provide access for people with disabilities?

People with disabilities are the nation's largest minority group. According to the U.S. Census' disability data, one in five Americans (20%) has a disability. In the past 25 years, many more children born with disabilities have not

only survived, but also have received a public school education, graduated from high school, earned undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, and entered the workforce. Meanwhile, their Baby

> **Ignore people with disabilities, and you ignore their combined discretionary income of $175 billion.**

Boomer parents, now in their 50s and 60s, are beginning to experience the effects of aging, more frequently reaching for the ibuprofen and reading glasses. Their grandparents are living longer and working to maintain their independence.

Equality for people with disabilities, including access to the Internet, is a matter of civil rights. It's also good business sense. Ignore people with disabilities, and you ignore their combined discretionary income of $175 billion.

A Model for Equal Access Online

Easter Seals has supported the independence of people with disabilities for more than 80 years. A leader in promoting access *offline*, Easter Seals recently took a hard look at its *online* presence — about 90 Web sites representing national and local offices — and decided to invest in accessibility tools for people affected by a full spectrum of disabilities. These tools ensure that visitors to Easter Seals' Web sites can find services, information on specific disabilities, and solutions to common challenges.

In 2001, Easter Seals planned a strategic overhaul of www.easter-seals.org and affiliated sites to create a more effective network of Web sites. To achieve its goals, the organization chose Convio (www.convio.com), a leading online Constituent Relationship Management (eCRM) company serving the nonprofit sector.

Convio's commitment to Web accessibility was a key factor in that choice. Convio offers an accessibility checker in its content management product. With one mouse click, the accessibility checker scans each page for accessibility violations according to the W3C's guidelines (www.w3c.org/WAI).

Although the Internet hasn't yet realized its full potential to serve users with disabilities, Easter Seals' plan to make its 90 Web sites accessible will move the world another step closer to achieving that important goal. Easter Seals hopes not only to better serve its constituents, but also to be a model for how an organization can makes its Web site more accessible, usable, and valuable to a broader range of people. ■

Barbara Gordon of Easter Seals meets with Wade Wingler, manager of the Ruth Lilly Assistive Technology Center, at Easter Seals Crossroads.

Photo by Mark Avery

Who will help you create an accessible site?

There are several good resources to help make your Web site accessible. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has developed common protocols that promote the evolution of the World Wide Web and ensure its interoperability. The U.S. government also has provided federal accessibility guidelines in Section 508, the 1998 Congressional amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which requires federal agencies to do all the following:

• **Eliminate barriers** in information technology.

• **Make new opportunities available** for people with disabilities.

• **Encourage development of technologies** that will help achieve these goals.

How can you make your existing site more accessible?

• **Always** use the alt attribute, an alternate text description added to a Web page's code, to describe the function of each image.

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• **Provide** captioning and transcripts for audio and video.

• **Use hypertext links** that make sense out of context. For example, instead of "Click here," use "Click here for financial information."

• **Use relative** rather than absolute font sizes for the text on your site. This allows users with visual impairment to increase the size of the font from within their Web browsers so that they can see it more clearly.

• **Visit** www.w3c.org/WAI for a full list of tips. ∎

Resources

Brinckerhoff, Peter, "Nonprofits and the Americans with Disabilities Act," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 2.

Elges, Mary, "Designing for Web Accessibility: More Benefits than You May Imagine," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 4.

Hoffman, Leslie & J.P. Frenza, "Building Your Web Site: HTML Basics," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 16, No. 3.

Kleiner, Brian & Eric Neumann, "How to Accommodate Disabilities under ADA," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 5.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center. The articles from Volumes 14-23 are available free on-line at www.snpo.org/members, and articles prior to Volume 14 are available on CD-ROM at www.snpo.org/publications/articles.php.

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