



## Analysis

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### Accessibility - gaining access to an online world

(12 February 2008)

#### New guidelines on web accessibility will be issued this year. Julie Howell and Rune Leth Andersen explain what is at stake for website owners

What's top of your list of priorities for 2008? Social media was the major trend of last year, but sector pundits predict this will be the year of mobile. Everyone in the sector is concerned about boosting conversion and creating the optimum conversion funnel through increasingly immersive design.

With attention focused on staying ahead of the curve do you risk neglecting those aspects of your web strategy that are always 'on trend'? Like security and privacy, accessibility is never off trend, never out of fashion. And, like security and privacy, accessibility is a complex subject, with new guidance coming online in 2008 that your design team or agency will need to be aware of to ensure your sites are inclusive and designed in accordance with the law.

Since October 1999, a legal duty has been placed on all UK service providers to protect the right of disabled people to access the web. Whether your site offers e-commerce or simple brochureware, the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act requires that you ensure disabled people receive the same level of service from your company that other customers expect.

While this might sound like yet another expensive demand on your resources, in truth making your site accessible will make it more usable by everyone. If return-on-investment data from other sectors can be repeated in travel then the business case for making your site accessible to disabled people is compelling. Financial services provider Legal and General reported a 300% increase in take-up of one insurance product after the company made its site more accessible.

The Department for Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey 2003/04, found there are almost 10 million disabled people in the UK with a combined spending power in the region of £80 billion per annum.

Not every disability affects the way that person will use your website. When thinking about disabled people and the web, it's helpful to think in terms of four impairment groups:

- People who are blind and partially sighted
- People who are deaf and hard of hearing
- People who have difficulty using their arms and hands
- People who have cognitive impairments and learning difficulties

Blind and partially sighted people, who number approximately two million in the UK, might access the web with the synthetic speech software that transforms text into audible synthetic speech. Those who see a little might use screen magnification software to increase or decrease the size of the text.

However, the majority of partially sighted (who greatly outnumber blind) people have no special software or hardware. They adjust their browser or control panel settings to alter text size and colours according to their needs.

Its crucial fonts and colours are not locked down as this will prevent more than a million partially sighted people from reading your site.

Audiovisual material can present problems for deaf and hard of hearing people. Advances in technology – not least ubiquitous access to broadband – promises to make avatar-based British Sign Language translation a reality. This will help those deaf people who use BSL, but transcripts will still be of vital importance to the majority who don't sign.

Many people find the mouse a huge obstacle. Conditions like arthritis can make a conventional mouse difficult to use. It's vital that websites can be used with the keyboard alone. An easy test to try on your own site: unplug your mouse and see if you can navigate your site using keystrokes alone. If you can't then many people in that lucrative 65+ age bracket won't be able to either.

Many thousands of people have conditions such as MS or strokes that affect their ability to concentrate and remember. Logical, memorable, intuitive design makes it more likely that these people will stick with your site. Consider also those whose first language isn't English, and the sevenmillion with only basic literacy skills. They all benefit from clear language and consistent navigation.

Published in 1999, by the World Wide Web Consortium Web Accessibility Initiative, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are the de facto standards for accessible web design worldwide. However, research undertaken by the DRC in 2004 found many sites that conform to WCAG are not usable by disabled people.

WCAG offers technical guidance that ensures the 'assistive' technology that some disabled people rely upon can access a site. But it's the application of usability principles that ensures disabled people get the same experience as everyone else and that the DDA requires.

In 2006, in response to this obvious and urgent need for additional guidance, the British Standards Institution published Publicly Available Specification 78: Guide to Good Practice in Commissioning Accessible Websites. PAS 78 heavily references WCAG but directs web developers to guidance on how to ensure the sites they produce are truly usable.

#### The Disability Discrimination Act

The DDA is anticipatory. Claiming ignorance about the issues is not acceptable. While there have yet to be any test cases in the UK, high-profile cases in Australia and the US have shown that failure to address accessibility proactively can really damage a brand.

Consider what changes, large or small, you can make in your next site refresh. PAS 78 recommends a programme of user testing with disabled people. This process will take time and you are not expected to make your site accessible overnight. However, it's unacceptable to do nothing. You should benchmark where you are now and formulate an 'accessibility policy' that will contain a plan of how and when the site will become more accessible. If you do find yourself in court over the inaccessibility of your site, your actions (or at the very least an action plan) will speak louder than your words.

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## How accessible is online travel?

There are a number of ways of testing the accessibility of your site. Run it through an automated accessibility checking tool ([w3.org/WAI/ER/tools/complete/](http://w3.org/WAI/ER/tools/complete/)). But beware, automated tools detect only some accessibility problems and can produce false positives! Another approach is to commission a web accessibility expert to audit your site and provide recommendations. And you can undertake user testing involving disabled people, though don't pick on that disabled friend or colleague and consider the job done! Solicit views from a range of disabled people to gather useful feedback.

We undertook expert evaluation of eight travel sites. These are popular sites that disabled people would reasonably expect to be able to use. Our findings highlight typical problems across the industry. The sites we reviewed are by no means the worst examples, nor are any of the sites completely inaccessible.

Some travel sites commit the most basic of accessibility sins. A number of the images on Malmaison's site ([malmaison.co.uk](http://malmaison.co.uk)) have no 'alternative text' description. 'Alternative text' provides blind people with a brief description of the purpose of each image on the site. As travel sites tend to rely on rich imagery to convey the holiday experience, brands cannot afford to miss the opportunity to describe the images they have worked so hard to produce. There were many small accessibility issues such as this on the sites we reviewed that could be easily, quickly and cheaply fixed to provide a much more accessible experience.

The majority of the sites we looked at relied solely on JavaScript for navigation or other key functionality ([hilton.co.uk](http://hilton.co.uk), [statravel.co.uk](http://statravel.co.uk), [travelsupermarket.co.uk](http://travelsupermarket.co.uk), [expedia.co.uk](http://expedia.co.uk)). By offering only one method of accessing key aspects of the site many potential customers find themselves out in the cold.

Some sites ([statravel.co.uk](http://statravel.co.uk), [travelsupermarket.com](http://travelsupermarket.com)) made extensive use of animated Flash movies on their sites. Flash can be made accessible and Adobe provides lots of information on how to do this on its website at [adobe.com/accessibility](http://adobe.com/accessibility). When we tried to use the STA Travel site with JavaScript turned off we got errors or the screen froze. Incredibly, several of the sites we checked offered poor colour contrast that would make the text illegible to some people ([travelsupermarket.com](http://travelsupermarket.com), [expedia.co.uk](http://expedia.co.uk), [cruisecritic.com](http://cruisecritic.com)).

The navigation on some sites ([tripadvisor.co.uk](http://tripadvisor.co.uk) and [cruisecritic.com](http://cruisecritic.com)) was inconsistent and confusing and likely to bamboozle anyone with a cognitive disability. We found it really easy to get lost in these sites and would imagine many people would give up and try elsewhere.

If this is to be the year of mobile, then any site that can't be accessed by devices that don't have a mouse are in trouble. The navigation on at least one of the sites we reviewed ([cruisecritic.com](http://cruisecritic.com)) is not accessible by keyboard only, which means it is only accessible to customers who are sitting in front of a computer.

Julie Howell is director of accessibility at Fortune Cookie and one of the UK's authorities on the subject. Rune Leth Andersen is Fortune Cookie's accessibility specialist

### The future of accessible travel

Technology moves fast. How can accessibility – and disabled people – keep pace? The answer may lie in standardisation.

Accessibility should be a staple of good web design. A web developer should not be deemed professional unless the work they produce is accessible as standard. Those who advocate accessibility are concentrating their efforts on influencing the various standards-setting bodies, so that accessibility is a requirement from the very beginning, not left unless release 2.0, when it is more expensive and difficult to retrofit.

Travel brands seeking to ensure that their sites are accessible to disabled people – and the law dictate that this is all travel brands without exception – should write a requirement for the site to be designed in accordance with PAS 78. PAS 78 points to WAI WCAG, so there is no need to be concerned with this as well. PAS 78 covers it all.

PAS 78 is due for review by BSI 2006. As this issue of Travolution went to press it was announced that PAS 78 will be developed into a full British Standard, which will be published towards the end of the year.

It was also announced that Julie Howell – who served 12 years with RNIB prior to joining Fortune Cookie – will chair BSI's new web accessibility committee, that will oversee the production of any standards guidance that BSI produces on the subject.

In the meantime, you can download PAS 78 free of charge from the [Equality and Human Rights Commission \(formerly DRC\) website](http://www.equalityandhumanrights.com).

by Julie Howell and Rune Leth Anderson

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