

ACCESSIBILITY AND YOUR WEB SITE:

How creating an accessible Web site can drive more traffic to your site.

Creating a Web site that is accessible and that validates is a good way to drive the maximum amount of traffic to your site. What does creating an accessible site mean? Originally, it meant developing your site with visually impaired users in mind, that is, those visitors who are color blind or need to use translation devices to read Web pages for them. Today, Web accessibility encompasses a wide range of concepts, from design to coding. Techniques such as utilizing the “alt” attribute for all visible image tags, separating content from style using cascading style sheets (CSS), ensuring that text and graphic elements are organized and legible, and properly contrasting colors are just a few of the coding practices that accessibility encompasses.

As far as standards and guidelines, there are two recommendations to go by. The W3C, the organization which developed most of the HTML, XHTML, and style sheet coding, has created their own standard called Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). You can learn more about the Web Accessibility Initiative at www.w3.org/WAI/. The U.S. government also requires that their Web sites meet a particular standard laid out in a document known as Section 508 (www.section508.gov), which was developed based on the WCAG.

VALIDATION AND BROWSER PERFORMANCE

One way that designers create accessible sites is through the use of *code validation*. Developers use a variety of online and downloadable tools to evaluate a Web site’s performance. Does it meet recommended accessible standards set by the government or by W3C? If it meets the requirements, then the code is said to be “valid”. While validation is not necessary for any Web site to work, conforming to the rules of validation gives you the best chance to ensure that your site works across multiple browsers and platforms, including text-only browsers.

HOW ACCESSIBILITY CAN IMPROVE YOUR SITE’S PERFORMANCE AND SAVE YOU MONEY

In addition to working properly among the widest range of browsers, an accessible Web site also loads faster, tends to perform better in search engines, is easier to update, and will ultimately last longer than inaccessible sites. A designer or developer knowledgeable about accessibility, especially when used in conjunction with a search engine specialist, will help you to create a site that people can find, view, and easily navigate.

Accessible sites have faster load times and this, in turn, means that you won’t lose impatient visitors. New users who are getting to know you and return visitors who know exactly what they want won’t spend a lot of time waiting for large images and Flash productions to load. They want to get to the information they need right now. Design and development with an eye on accessibility will help.

We all know it's very difficult to rank well on search engines, given the amount of Web sites that go live every day. Web design that incorporates CSS for positioning instead of tables, placing main content as high on the page as possible, and externalizing all scripts and styles can help improve the ability of search engines to grab or "spider" your site. Another technique is to keep Flash to a minimum. A site developed entirely in Flash may be harder to spider.

It's easier to manage and update an accessible site. Separating content from all the bells and whistles means that you can go into your site and edit text or change photos yourself, quickly and effortlessly, without the developer having to recode things. A change in look or color, as well, is easy without affecting the current content. Today's content management tools, blog systems, and editing systems like Macromedia's Contribute products, when properly implemented, put you in control of your content without having to touch the code. You can hire your designer only when you need radical changes, saving you time and money.

Accessible sites will last longer. Because of better cross-browser compatibility, and because accessible sites do not use "deprecated" (or retired) coding, your site will remain in place longer. Given the tools mentioned to update, manage, and refresh the look of your site, you don't have to worry about how your site will fare over the long haul - tending to the life of your site will be an easy process.

FINDING AN ACCESSIBLE WEB DESIGNER OR DEVELOPER

Finding an accessible designer, knowledgeable in all aspects of accessibility, can be difficult. Keep in mind that an accessible site can be as creative and visually attractive as any site on the Web. When looking for a designer, there are some questions you can ask to gauge their experience in accessibility. Remember that an accessible site is not just one that is adaptable for visually impaired users. Look for the following:

- Knowledge of different accessibility and validation tools. The most popular tool seems to be Bobby, but they should be able to name a few.
- Knowledge of the terminology. Have they heard of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)? Do they know what Section 508 is?
- How they would code to protect color-blind visitors? Visitors with visual impairment? What about visitors with text-only browsers?
- Will your site rank well on spiderability? (You can check at www.spidertest.com.)
- How would they handle Flash, if you require it for your site?

In short, hiring an accessible Web designer or developer is an investment in the future of your Web site. Some may cost more, but the value to you in time, future costs, and maximum visitor penetration is considerably worthwhile. If you are looking for ways to benefit your clients and prospects, to create a reliable, long-term resource for their interests, and to position yourself as a cutting-edge business, then an accessible Web site is your best investment.