Overview

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that over 25% of all adults have some disability that requires accommodations. Websites are one of the places where accommodations are made, often focused on making it easier for people who use assistive devices, but really web accessibility is larger than that.

Website accessibility is more fundamentally about making your website usable by anyone who visits (sometimes called “universal design”). This includes not just visually impaired or mobility impaired people, but also someone with a broken arm, someone holding a wiggly baby, people starting to have vision changes as they age, someone with arthritis and many more situations.

Some assistive devices help people with mobility impairments navigate websites. For instance, combat veterans who have lost hands, or people with severe cerebral palsy can use voice navigation. People who are visually impaired use “screen readers” which read out loud to them the words and other information on a web page. Watch a video demo of a person using a screen reader here. It is actually pretty amazing to see how technology can help people with disabilities navigate the accessible web, and to imagine how this independence impacts their daily lives. But for these assistive devices to work properly, websites must be coded properly, and this is part of “website accessibility”.

Website accessibility also includes things like making sure you don’t utilize colors in a way that prevent colorblind people from using your site effectively. Making sure videos don’t auto-play, and that they have captions for the hearing impaired. Not showing things that strobe or flash, which may induce seizures for some people. Having labels or instructions provided when the user must make inputs. Navigation on the site should be consistent and predictable.

This can seem like a lot to try to get into your site. Don’t let that keep you from getting started! Work on a few things at a time, seeking to increase accessibility in your site over time.

There are not yet universally set legal standards, although almost all accessibility court cases and international law so far focus on the standards set out in the Web Accessibility Content Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 at AA standards.

For businesses, organizations and other website owners, court cases and other potential legal developments are moving toward legally requiring website accessibility. But beyond avoiding
legal issues, there are other great benefits to making your site accessible:

- Many parts of website accessibility will also help you improve your site’s Search Engine Optimization (SEO), like alt tags and heading hierarchies.
- When you make your site available to 25% more people, you have the potential to increase your site audience by 25%
- Improving accessibility is an investment in your current customers, since disabilities increase with age (for instance, visual acuity decreases)
- Making your site accessible is a great brand-building social commitment (and social commitment marketing is growing)
- Accessibility makes your site easier to use for EVERYONE, including people WITHOUT disabilities

This introduction is by no means a comprehensive guide to website accessibility, but it is intended to be an introduction to understanding website accessibility and some tips for getting started making your site accessible. This can all feel a little overwhelming at the beginning, but like any new skill, keep working at it, and it will become second nature.

**Tips for Getting Started**

Here are some tips for getting started with website accessibility:

Website accessibility issues generally fall into two categories:

1. **Content related issues** that are related to how text, images and links are added to the site. For instance, when an image is added, does the content creator add an “alt tag” (or sometimes called an “alt description”) to the image?
2. More **technical issues** related to code. For instance, does your website’s code (in WordPress, does your theme) have the proper “landmarks”?

Of these two categories, the easier place to start (especially for non-developers) is content related issues.

Note: Our agency and clients work with WordPress, so that is our frame of reference here. If your website is in another platform, you may or may not be able to make these changes to improve your site accessibility.

**Content Related Issues**

1. Make sure images have alt tags unless they are purely decorative (like a fleur de lis). A photo on a page or post is not considered decorative. If you are using WordPress, there are multiple plugins to help you find and fix alt tags, like this one.
2. Make sure your Headings tags are properly nested. Like the outline of high school essays with Roman numerals, you should not skip from an H2 to an H4. There should be one (and only one) H1 tag, which is the page title. (This is true for PDFs too! In this
3. Don’t use bold or italic fonts at the beginning of paragraphs instead of properly using headings. Use Headings tags (“H tags”) instead. SEO and voice search (Alexa, etc.) are highly depended on H tags.

4. In general, you should not put text inside images (like a meme) on your site. Screen readers can’t see that text, but neither can Google. People with visual impairments won’t be able to resize the font inside an image. Actual text overlays on images may or may not be accessible, depending on how that is done.

5. Watch color contrast between fonts and button backgrounds if you are picking colors. (See below for more info on color contrast, which often is a technical issue with your theme.)

These five things sound simple, but if your site is large, it may be quite a lot of work to get everything fixed! At the very least, learn about how to put content in your site in accessibility compliant ways, and follow those guidelines going forward, so you don’t keep creating new issues!

Technical Issues

These issues are going to be more difficult (although not impossible) for someone without a developer background to fix, but the first step to move forward is to identify the issues.

There are some great automated tools to help you get started. This tool will run an automated scan of your site, to help you get a list of potential issues.

It is important to note however that automated tools can give both false positives and false negatives. This means that the tools might miss things that need to be fixed, but also flag something that DOESN’T need to be fixed. For instance, you want to have an alt tag on all your images, EXCEPT when the image is purely decorative, like a background image. The automated tools might not be able to distinguish between types of images and how they are used. Also, there are things like keyboard navigation issues (for instance, a “keyboard trap” in your search box) that an automated tool will not catch.

Any automated tool will only pick up approximately 30% of any given accessibility issues that may exist on a website because they can only scan for syntax and technicality. They cannot assess things like does hover effect have enough distinction to be visible or has the focus effect disabled? To get the most accurate report of accessibility on your site, you will need human testing.

But these automated tools can give you some idea to the extent of issues on your site. Here are some common issues:
1. **Color contrast**: This has to do with how “readable” the color of the font is against the color of the background AND how large the font is. This is also one of the most common false positives. If text is on a gradient, image, or complex background, it could be perfectly accessible, but the tool won’t know how to comprehend it. It will flag it and say “check manually”.

If you have color contrast issues, here are a couple of tools to help find better options:
   a. To find out the “hex color” (which are “#” followed by a combination of numbers and letters, like #4977B5) being used on your site, use a browser color picker tool like this Chrome extension
   b. To find the hex color of a font, use the browsers “inspect” function. Right click on the text you want the color from and choose “inspect (element)”. Then a new window/sidebar pops up. Go into the "Styles" tab/section and look for "color:" there you will find the color code you're looking for.
   c. To try out various adjustments, this color contrast checker tool is very helpful.

2. **Aria Labels**: These are special non-visible code bits that are added to parts of the website to help describe or give help to the user on things like forms. If you get error messages in accessibility testers about form fields or “ARIA labels” on your site, you might want to try switching to a new form plugin.

3. **Skip Links**: If you get messages about “skip links” or your menu, you will probably need to either hire a developer to fix this, OR find a new site theme that is “accessibility ready” or “accessible”.

**Problems with Accessibility Plugins and Services**

You may have seen sites with small accessibility icons for users. They purport to make the site meet accessibility standards. Some of them actually create more accessibility issues! And many of them essentially force the disabled person to use YOUR plugin’s tools rather than the ones they are already familiar with. It’s like saying to the person who uses a wheelchair: “Leave your custom-fitted amazingly efficient for you chair outside and use my clunky chair instead.” That’s not very welcoming for persons with disabilities.

The services that are advertised generally use a combination of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated checking tools. They use the same tools for checking described above, then they will “fix” the issues that they find via AI. For instance, they will try to add meaningful alt tags to your images based on recognizing images, but those alt tags may or may not be accurate. Our team once saw a photo that could have properly had the alt text of “smiling father and child play outdoors”, but the mechanical service added the alt text "people in scary masks"!

Remember that the automated scans generally only find about 30% of the accessibility issues on a site, so services that rely exclusively on automated checking tools may be missing compliance issues on your website.

The fixes provided by these services are not permanent changes to your site however – they
are only an overlay to temporarily fix the issues. The overlay may slow down your site, and the moment you stop paying for the service, all the old issues are still there. The best use case for quick fix plugins or overlay services is to get temporary compliance while you are working on actually fixing the issues on your site.

**Learning More**

Of course, as a site owner, your goal will not only be fixing accessibility issues created in the past, you'll need to be proactive about preventing new issues. It is important for all the content creators on your site to really learn how to build in accessibility ANY time they are creating content.

If you are interested in learning more about website accessibility, there are some great self-paced online classes at Deque Systems, starting at under $75.

**Audits**

An “accessibility audit” is when you hire trained and experienced developers to look carefully at your site, and to prepare a report about the accessibility issues that were found. If you are not very technical or don’t have time to dive into content assessments, this might be a great way to get an idea of the issues on your site.

When looking for an audit, do perform due diligence about the audit agency. There have been reports of some agencies advertising audits and then only running the site through an automated service like the one described above. Ask the agency what role human testing (and even testing by actual disabled people!) plays in the audits they offer, and how they “flag false positives”. Also ask what training and experience the person who will be doing the audit has had.

Detailed audits can be expensive since they look at EVERY page in detail. Some agencies like ours offer “sampling audits” at lower cost which look at a representative sample of your site pages, to give you a list of issues from which you can extrapolate.

**Decision Point: Remediate or Start Over?**

Depending on how many accessibility issues are involved and how extensive they are, it may be more cost effective to start over with a fresh and accessible design than to painstakingly remediate (fix) all the issues in your current site. For lower budget or hobby site owners “starting over” will mean buying a new “accessibility ready” theme (or finding one for free in the wordpress.org repository!) and configuring it. For most businesses (especially those with accessibility compliance requirements), this means working with a developer or agency to create a whole new site.
Either way, time and costs are involved. Here are some things to consider when making your decision:

- “Starting over” won’t help with content related issues IF you are simply importing content. If your images are missing alt descriptions now, importing them into a new site won’t fix that. Starting over makes more sense when there are large numbers of technical issues (or fewer but more complex issues) on your site. Content issues will have to be dealt with page by page, whether that is in your current site or a new site.

- Sometimes, trying to “retrofit” a site for accessibility involves lots of “workarounds” in the code, which may leave the site more prone to update conflicts or stability issues going forward. A site built from the ground up as accessible will usually be a stronger more stable site than a retrofitted one. If you already have issues on your website that make it less stable, it may make sense not to add to them by remediating.

- Generally speaking, the design of a website “lasts” for 3-5 years before it starts looking dated and/or the content structures are no longer effective since the business has grown and changed over that time period AND web-related marketing has changed too. You definitely don’t want to pay for a bunch of remediations now, and then turn around in 12-18 months to pay for a new site design.

  A good rule of thumb is: the further you are past the half-way point in the life-cycle of your current design, the more likely it is that it will be more cost-effective to simply “start over” with a new design, doing the redesign a little earlier than anticipated but getting a new site that will last you 3-5 years going forward.

- Remember, getting a new accessible site will help you start fresh, but you will still need to learn and implement accessible content any time you make content changes to your site.

Who We Are

Bet Hannon Business Websites is a full-service agency that focuses on WordPress and website accessibility. Our clients from across the US and Canada include popular blogs, governmental agencies and nonprofits who want to make a difference.

If you have website accessibility questions, or would like to explore how to get help with making your site more accessible, email us at info@bhmbizsites.com.