



Moving Beyond Web Accessibility

Legal standards are just the beginning. Inclusive design elevates your brand and shows you value **all** of your customers.



PART 1

What does your website experience say about your brand?

ADA compliance may seem like a matter of logistics for your business, but how you meet those requirements can – and should – go beyond a simple legal standard. If you build a wheelchair ramp that leads to a side door, for example, you may satisfy ADA guidelines, but you may also have created an experience that is less welcoming to a number of your customers.

Any design system that creates unequal experiences for people with disabilities reflects poorly on the business that employs it. Going by the letter of the law is not the same as upholding the spirit of the law.

Now more than ever, this idea applies to your website as well. If you aim only for accessibility, you seek only to satisfy rules and regulations – or to avoid having an ADA lawsuit filed against you. (More than 3,200 lawsuits regarding web accessibility were filed in federal court in 2022, accounting for more than one-third of all ADA Title III lawsuits filed.)

However, if you aim for inclusivity in your design, you not only show that your business values and practices empathy, but you also broaden the reach and relationships that result from your efforts. Valuing empathy as highly as we value functionality, aestheticism and clarity is the key to inclusive design.

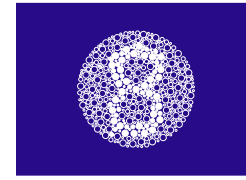
Accessibility merely gets customers access to a place, but inclusivity makes them feel like they belong.

While designing for accessibility is an important notion, if you are refactoring your current design system only to meet requirements (e.g. adding an accessibility mode that is on a divergent path), then you may be missing out on important notions. Inclusive design considers all potential communities with disabilities at every step in the design and development process.

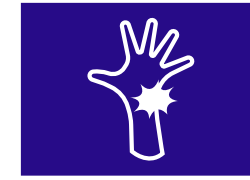
And in pursuing inclusive design as a standard, you are likely to create a better experience for all people, even those not facing accessibility challenges. This should be the goal for web designers and developers: using the internet to bring more of the world together.

Your website says a lot about who you are as a company, and accessible design is just the tipping point for a holistic, inclusive user experience.

Web accessibility helps a lot more people than you think



Online shopper with color blindness



Staff with repetitive stress injury



Online student hard of hearing



Blind staff member



Student with ADHD and dyslexia



Retiree with low vision, hand tremor and mild short-term memory loss



Staff with Down syndrome



Deaf and blind teen

Source: World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)



PART 2

Your website may exclude more people than you think

Accessibility doesn't equate to inclusivity, but accessibility standards still can serve as the gateway to inclusivity. To understand the elements of digital accessibility, it's important to understand the origin of the standards we follow today.

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, discrimination against any individual with disabilities became illegal. Eight years later, an amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 – Section 508 – specified that all federal agencies must eliminate information technology barriers for disabled people.

A year later, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) published the first version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), the gold standard for web accessibility. The guidelines include three levels of accessibility: A, AA and AAA. Most companies and organizations require an AA accessibility level. (Most lawsuits reference these guidelines.)

Typically, the main categories of disabilities people fall under – whether permanent, temporary or situational – include:

- **Visual:** Ranges from blindness from birth, to recovering from eye surgery, to having screen glare from the sun.
- **Auditory:** Ranges from complete deafness in one or both ears, to temporary hearing loss, to wearing headphones momentarily.
- **Physical:** Ranges from an amputated arm, to a broken arm, to holding a baby in one arm.
- **Cognitive:** Ranges from learning or mental disabilities, to a clouded mind from medication, to getting distracted momentarily.

Accessibility doesn't refer only to permanent disabilities; by practicing empathy for your customers, you widen your reach significantly.



Among these disabilities, several other differences in experience and circumstances may overlap to prohibit an individual from fully accessing a website, including economics, geography, education, race/ethnicity and age.

If you're not designing and developing for everybody, you're not designing for 61 million adults in America living with a disability. That's a fourth of the U.S. population who have \$504 billion in disposable income and could be your potential customer. A 2019 Nucleus Research study estimated that e-commerce retailers in the U.S. lost up to \$6.9 billion of revenue to competing websites that were more accessible.

Measuring the purchasing power of working-age adults with disabilities

In the U.S., approximately 26 percent of people – one in four Americans – have a disability, and that number rises to more than 40 percent for people older than 75, according to the Centers for Disease Control.



Sources: American Institutes for Research, Nucleus Research, CDC

PART 3

What does it look like to practice inclusive design?

Your website should not only be visually accessible through color and text, but it also should function properly for someone using screen readers and alternative text.



Consider your customers who live with disabilities – even temporary ones – at each stage of the web design and development process.

Visual

The layout and coding should be screen reader-friendly, meaning elements should be organized thoughtfully and alternative text should give enough information for the user to have a seamless experience. Using alt-text is the typical way to meet accessibility standards, but ideally, you should think bigger: Create a more natural, pleasant experience for those using screen readers by using descriptive text that sets the information's context, avoiding redundant phrases like "an image of" in photo descriptions and ending sentences with a period.

To aid color-blind users, avoid using color alone to convey meaning; instead, use patterns and labels in graphics. When offering color options for a product, provide color labels. If you hyperlink text, underline it. For action buttons, consider using icons, size and placement to make them stand out. For forms, use icons for the focus outline, input validation and feedback messaging. Additionally, make sure your color ratio has enough contrast and avoid color combinations exclusive of users with limited vision capabilities.

Auditory

Include a transcript for any media. For videos, include signs and symbols to convey a point. For contact options, providing an online chat can help customers get live responses without having to talk on the phone. Consider providing contact options beyond only a phone number, such as a form, email address, physical address or social profile.

Physical

Help those with limited dexterity who are unable to use a mouse by building your site to be easily navigated using a keyboard. This will include making sure your site has a logical focus order and your focus outline works in every context. Sometimes, users can get stuck in a keyboard trap (i.e. if their keyboard doesn't allow them to exit a pop-up modal), so it is important to program the site accordingly. Additionally, it's helpful to make clickable areas larger and provide easy ways for users to navigate through certain site elements.

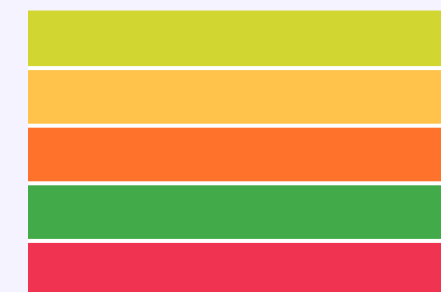
Cognitive

Nobody wants to explore a site that's difficult to understand, and for someone with a cognitive disability, that gap in comprehension could be far greater than we may perceive. Keep your design elements simple and consistent, and when possible, use illustrations, icons or graphics instead of text. Make sure you clearly explain any interactive elements, such as feedback messaging in forms and action buttons.

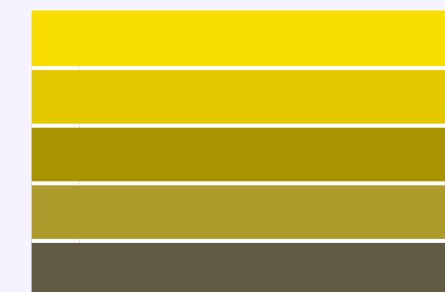
Making the web-accessible for all

To aid color-blind users, avoid using color alone to convey meaning; instead, use patterns and labels in graphics.

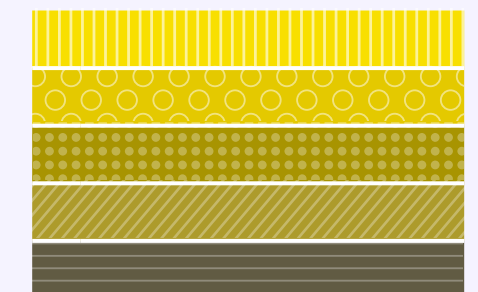
How it looks to people with normal vision



How it looks to people with color blindness



How it looks to people with color blindness with patterns so that it is easy for them to relate



Source: Microsoft Inclusive Design

PART 4

It's time to view website design with a wider lens

The point of inclusive design isn't to create a separate experience for those who are disabled but to keep them in mind at every point in the process, just as you should consider a customer with full capabilities. In doing so, you create a welcoming environment for all, and you begin to consider accessible websites to be just as essential as mobile websites are to our modern society.

Accessibility is not a rarity or exception; it is the norm that all web designers and developers must aspire to if they wish to be considered valid and competent.

One of the most common misconceptions about building accessible websites is that you must forfeit creativity to do so. That cannot be further from the truth; it just takes a bit more intentional thought and effort. As a designer, you already operate under a framework of constraints, so designing for accessibility is just another constraint that is an essential part of your website.

Practicing inclusive design is easier said than done. It's a dynamic, eternal pursuit, but it's worth creating something for everyone.



Designing for accessibility is never complete, even after you've finished crafting your site. It is not a checkbox to mark off your to-do list. When you start thinking about accessibility as an end rather than a means to an end, you fail as a web designer and developer.

Every new feature and element you add to your site must undergo the same monitoring for accessibility with which you first built your site. By default, you should continually test your site – not just through automatic accessibility scanners like Site Improve, but manually as well: Use your computer's built-in screen reader, the tab key on your keyboard, audio cues to navigate through your site, or a color blindness filter – and put yourself in someone else's shoes.

It's never too late to pursue inclusive design and it's never too early to start pursuing it. When we start including everybody, we become more credible as designers and developers and, in general, we become better, more empathetic human beings.



Want to know more about how Lifeblue practices inclusive design?

Visit us at lifeblue.com or email

phillip@lifeblue.com for a conversation or a demo.