



The Customer Respect Group -- Why Improve Website Accessibility?



Why Improve Website Accessibility? A Business Perspective

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Why Improve Website Accessibility?

Why do companies focus time and money on improving online accessibility? The key finding was that compliance with W3C guidelines or Section 508 of the ADA, the key sources of accessibility advice, was not the primary driver for most of the leaders. The focus instead was on removing barriers offline and online for customers to do business.

Accessibility makes business sense

There is a perception that accessibility is driven by the need for compliance with technical standards, but there is evidence that leading companies are taking hard-nosed business decisions to design websites that help attract customers and/or cut costs. It simply makes business sense.

For some of the best-performing companies in the benchmark study, accessibility is part of a much bigger vision. The broad corporate strategy was not based upon a set of evolving technical standards but on a much more wide-ranging ambition to remove as many obstacles between the corporation and its existing or potential clients. In such a corporate environment, accessibility-related work on the website as the public face of the organization is often nurtured, encouraged, and even expected. Two of the most accessible websites were those of companies for whom accessibility is both part of the corporate ethos and an important business driver.

For TIAA-CREF, a leading investment financial services company based in New York, an accessible website ties into the broader corporate ambition to “build a bigger storefront”. The redesign of the website happened in parallel to the opening of more offices on college campuses closer to the company’s key markets, and adding TDD technology to call centers. As a retirement products provider, it makes business sense for TIAA-CREF to remove as many barriers as possible that would prevent its customers, especially the more senior, from completing transactions online. By making it easier for seniors to see, hear, and navigate the website, they are likely to keep coming back as part of the bigger storefront initiative.

Similarly, the telecommunications company CenturyTel strives to find ways to ‘touch the customer’. Constantly improving accessibility online is just one of the ways the company has found to enable it to touch more and more of its existing and potential clients. Bill Bradley, Chief Technology Officer said “CenturyTel has a tagline of ‘Personal Touch - Advanced Communications’, and we believe that our market differentiation is as much the personal touch as it is the advanced communications. The company strives to find ways to communicate on a one on one basis with every customer at every opportunity including visiting communities and speaking face to face with customers. The web site is a critical public face for the company and must reflect the corporate vision.”

For Verizon Wireless, online accessibility is a competitive differentiation that helps it sign up and retain disabled customers but also to extend the market effect by an additional magnitude. By removing barriers not just online but on the telephone equipment, Verizon Wireless experienced the ripple effect from promoting its broad accessibility support. Family members, doctors, and home-care providers are more inclined to follow the lead of the disadvantaged customer for whom accessibility is a valuable differentiator. By tapping into the vibrant word-of-mouth that powers communications in the disability community, the number-two mobile-phone operator had also recognized the potential profits. “We could see how viral the community was,” says Barbara Kaplan, National Marketing Operations Manager. “If you do something good, everyone knows about it.”

The word-of-mouth aspects of marketing to disabled customers have also been recognized by Southwest Airlines. “Keeping a high profile has been a big part of the airline’s success in developing its customer base in the disability community”, says Lisa Anderson, who heads the customer insight group. “A lot of it is presence in the community,” she says, adding that Southwest’s efforts have paid off. “There’s a good deal of disposable income in the disability community. We’ve learned if you gain the community’s loyalty, they’re going to travel with you and recommend you to friends.”

Removing barriers

The concept of removing barriers constantly came up; enlightened companies were looking at their websites not just as an extension of how they wanted to do business but also as providing a unique opportunity. Whereas products, equipment and physical building might take years to update and modernize, the website upgrade was comparatively rapid.

Jeff Sluder is Digital Brand Manager for Procter & Gamble and it’s his job to keep www.PG.com relevant and engaging. When examining the website several summers ago he came to a striking realization. “No one realized what a barrier we were creating for consumers to do business with us,” he says. For a company whose weighty portfolio of 400 brands spans everything from Aussie hair products to Zest soap, that was bad news. Says Sluder: “It hit me that we had to do something.”

The theme was echoed at General Electric. GE spotted the web shortcomings early– and the digital opportunity. “For many people, the web site is the first touch point for the company,” said Jen Walsh, global director for digital media. “Given our



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breadth and depth, it's important to be accessible. We have a broad impact on a lot of people's lives." Moreover, even a titan doesn't want to chance a lost sale. First impressions are important to web surfers, notes Walsh: "Maybe they'll purchase something as a result of the initial online scan." The attitude fits directly into the broad corporate vision. The Kentucky appliance headquarters was an early and enthusiastic adopter of universal design. The intent is to simplify life: Make products and services usable by as many people as possible, at little or no extra cost.

In the travel industry, one of the leading performers in the study, a 2005 report by the Open Doors Organization found the average number of trips taken by people with disabilities was up 50 percent since its 2002 survey, ODO's newest results uncovered substantial business opportunities in the hospitality sector. Twenty percent of adults with disabilities rented a car for travel in the past two years. As we all know, travel booking have moved substantially online and without accessible websites, this market opportunity will be lost. The experience for disabled users is not good overall with 60 percent of travelers with disabilities who stayed overnight in paid accommodations said they encountered problems.

Recruiting

Recruitment, employment and training are now all critical aspects of accessibility both off and online.

Following passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, P&G formed an ADA task force. In addition to compliance, the group was charged with ensuring employees had the resources they needed to be productive. Washroom renovations, power door openers, and curb cuts were among the resulting changes. There were also modifications to corporate policy regarding travel, parking and office size.

The resource group didn't stop with offline changes. It has focused on issues in recruitment, retention, and training. For its efforts, it notched the number-five spot on the 2007 list of the top companies for people with disabilities assembled by Diversity Inc., a monthly magazine.

Fueling much of Southwest Airlines' growth has been its single-minded pursuit of diversity – a goal it chased not because of regulatory oversight but strategy. If variety is the spice of life, Southwest theorized, it's also the smartest way to ensure a continuous flow of quality workers to the airline, which hires 4,000 employees annually. "If I only go down one homogenous avenue to find resumes, then I'll eventually have a homogenous workforce," says director of employment Julie Weber. "We're looking for the best talent. So we actively seek out new ways to source people." Support for disabled staff ranges from the physical locations to the online systems that are vital aspects of the business. Applications must be usable by the broad diverse employees the airline desperately seeks to employ.

Other motivations

The majority of the companies that rose to the top of our accessibility benchmark table are seeing that removing barriers and including all types of site visitor is a win-win strategy. There were other motivations, however.

Compliance with guidelines can certainly help the process get started but is not the reason leading companies embrace accessible websites. Compliance was rarely mentioned in our discussions with leaders.

Tactical responses to potential litigation can act as a powerful catalyst and drive improvements to accessibility. The lawsuit taken by National Federation of the Blind against Target is undoubtedly a concern for some companies not only in the US.

Personal motivation by technical personnel with good intentions was not a significant driver, but nonetheless was a factor in some companies. There were examples of programmers or managers with relevant skills and awareness of accessibility that were behind some site improvements. The danger with these motivations is that once accessibility checkpoints have been passed, the effort could be cut back, as the project is complete. On the other hand, when accessibility is seen to help the bottom line, the effort will be sustained.

Projects motivated by personal efforts, compliance or litigation avoidance rarely reach boardroom level and without executive buy-in are unlikely to become part of the corporate ethos.

Technically-orientated motivations are successful when they start the ball rolling, as was the case at Cisco. As a multinational company, Cisco has to comply with section 255 of the Telecommunications Act, section 508 of the ADA and the DDA in the UK to name a few. Cisco's vision is to improve the way all people work, live, play, and learn. Cisco's commitment is to make its products, services, websites, and documentation accessible and usable by people with disabilities, either by design or through compatible use with assistive technology. Cisco now has many products and services that benefit both the company in revenue and the individuals with disabilities



Motivations — conclusions

The discussion of accessibility in the past has focused on negative stories but we found that the majority of the leading companies are focused in a different and more positive direction. However, despite the success stories we found, projects are rarely mentioned in marketing outreach. Corporate communications executives are often nervous about identifying disabled users as a marketing constituency, no doubt reflecting a fear of being viewed as exploitative. Interestingly, however, disability advocates want the community to be viewed for its lucrative buying potential -- an intriguing dichotomy. Carmen Jones, president, Solutions Marketing Group, Arlington, Virginia, a disability consulting firm states on the subject “Don't go after this market because it's the right thing to do; go after it because you want to make money, and the rest will follow”.

The study was created to understand the state of online accessibility. While the picture is not uniformly good, there are clear initiatives in place that are starting to create significant market benefit for the leading companies. Attention to the market is increasing but will not reach full maturity until compliance ceases to be a motivation and business development rules supreme.



Case studies – Profiles in success



THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *make it easy for seniors to see, hear and navigate the website, and they'll keep coming back as part of the bigger storefront initiative. TIAA-CREF expanded its accessibility functionality on this business driver and not technical standards.*

TIAA-CREF, a leading retirement specialist in the education sector, embarked on a program to maximize its exposure to existing and potential customers. The overall corporate strategy was simply stated as 'build a bigger storefront'. TIAA is opening new locations adjacent to college campuses, translating documentation into languages other than English, and installing TDD technology in its call centers for the hard of hearing – thereby removing barriers that stop customers speaking with them.

“When my staff comes to me with ideas, I ask, what business problem are you trying to solve? If the answer isn't there, we don't do it. We are not here to play.”

TIAA-CREF

So when the 89-year-old fund manager redoubled efforts to serve its constituents, its bold turnaround plan called for a website that was welcoming to all, including those with vision, hearing and motor-skill limitations. Usability and accessibility were critical in the site redesign. In the first half of 2007, TIAA-CREF's clients completed nine million online transactions on the redesigned website, from simple administrative tasks to fund transfers. If these clients were driven offline due to an inaccessible or less usable site, they would have gone down the costlier call-centre route.

By keeping the website simple, direct and usable, TIAA-CREF's accessibility initiative “has helped not just the target audience, but everyone,” says Rowena Track, senior vice president of Web and e-business strategy and solutions.

Her initial task was an ambitious, top-to-bottom revamping of the website. Focus groups and online surveys indicated customers wanted 24/7 self-service.

Track kept the site on-message with a single-minded focus. “When my staff comes to me with ideas, I ask, ‘what business problem are you trying to solve?’” says Track. “If the answer isn't there, we don't do it. We are not here to play.”

For Track, the transactional features were just the beginning. She advocated for a no-frills site that could be easily used by those with sight, hearing and motor-skill limitations. The notion made perfect business sense: Sixty-five percent of TIAA-CREF participants are older than 45. So are 97 percent of those in its affluent and high-net-worth segments.

TIAA-CREF took the wraps off its new website in 2006. Positive reviews from clients continue to pile up. The company regularly issues a web-based survey to measure online customer satisfaction. Each month's satisfaction number climb higher than the previous month's.

Small wonder, then, that TIAA-CREF is confident that continuing its accessibility efforts is a competitive advantage



THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *find a market with a strong competitive differentiation and drive hard to create a ripple or viral marketing plan to add new customers.*

Verizon Wireless realized that an accessible website makes business sense. The company, like all wireless carriers, is in a battle for new customers, many of whom will already have a wireless provider. It is a market affected by high customer churn rates and any advantage is critical. By removing barriers for disabled customers, Verizon Wireless sees the ripple effect from promoting its website's accessibility features. "The return isn't just the customers themselves, but also the family members, doctors, and home-care providers," says Barbara Kaplan, national marketing operations manager. "We know that by touching one person we're also touching that many more."

Indeed, companies that broaden their approach to accessibility find that the number of potential sales skyrockets far beyond the 54 million disabled individuals that the US government counts. "If you service someone with a disability, it's usually more than one person," says Tari Hartman-Squire, CEO of EIN SOF Communications, a Los Angeles company specializing in disability marketing. "If a restaurant can't accommodate a wheelchair, guess what? Their whole party goes elsewhere, too."

A recent study found that while people with disabilities spend less time online than others, they log more of it engaged in social networking, research and shopping. The Internet "is the great equalizer for people with disabilities," says Hartman-Squire.

Small wonder, then, that Verizon Wireless assigns its accessibility services home-page billing, cultivates relationships with audiologists, and makes the most of its cell phones' static-free CDMA technology, which avoids the buzzes that can bedevil hearing-aid wearers. Verizon Wireless is not afraid to look at economic value of the potential market and go after it aggressively.

"There are definitely revenues to be made," says Kaplan. "We know the [market for] the disabled and the periphery of people around them is over \$200 billion."

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Verizon Wireless



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imagination at work

THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *Universal Design for every product, service and function of the company. The website cannot be an exception.*

To understand the vision of GE, look no further than the \$163-billion conglomerate's revamped website. Whether you want to check the stock price, apply for a job, or learn about gas turbines, www.ge.com is inviting and useful.

GE is well known for its breadth of products and services. Key to its success as a builder of home appliances is the adoption of Universal Design, an idea that products should be easy to use by the widest possible range of consumers – removing any barriers that exist between the product and the customer. So its appliances division has consistently produced washers and dryers with easy-to-push buttons instead of knobs and dishwashers that can be installed at custom heights and can be used by someone who is seated.

GE's bold embrace of inclusiveness and collaborative design -- no easy feat when you sprawl across 100 nations and employ 300,000 -- reflects its clear outlook of the world, not to mention its customer base, as a diverse place comprised of people of different purposes and abilities

Inclusiveness is stamped in the managerial DNA of CEO Jeffrey Immelt, a 25-year veteran of the company. While leader of GE's medical-products division, Immelt rose to stardom based on a strategy of looking out, not in. He encouraged customer input into new product designs, in one case producing an ultrafast computed tomography (CT) scanner.

Since taking the top post in 2001, Immelt has brought that same expansive approach to the world's second largest company, including its website. In June, GE took the wraps off the redesigned website for which broader accessibility was a key goal.

The website designers had to follow the same rules as the products division; one website, all customers. This philosophy was not driven by W3C Standards; it was part of a wider vision, looking at every potential user and what would stop them using the website efficiently.

GE chose a clean, uncluttered look. The home page is easy to use by the vast array of customers, job seekers, analysts, investors, and journalists who visit it. "It's been an evolution for us" says Walsh of the redesigned site.

"For many people, the website is the first touch point for the company," Walsh says. "Given our breadth and depth, it's important to be accessible. We have a broad impact on a lot of people's lives." Moreover, even a titan doesn't want to chance a lost sale. First impressions are important to web surfers, notes Walsh: "Maybe they'll purchase something as a result of the initial online scan."



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Wamu

THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *to exclude no one from accessing its financial products and services*

WAMU (now part of Chase) prides itself as being ‘the brand of the little guy’. It is the largest thrift bank in the US, and sees accessibility as an extension of its ethos of making sure that no one is excluded from accessing financial products and services. It is currently in the process of a major revamp of its site.

The company believes that not facilitating the millions of adults have some form of physical disability would run counter to its

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P&G

image of looking after all of the needs of all types of customer. It also believes that such an investment in accessibility will increase revenue. “Ten million adults have some form of physical impairment – and that's a significant amount no matter how you shake it,” says Rick Newcomb of Washington Mutual. “We're about being the brand of the little guy. It's wholly consistent with our brand to get as far down the accessibility brand as possible.”



THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *to remove unnecessary barriers between the company and its customers.*

P&G is all about ideas. Innovation is religion at the 170-year-old consumer-products powerhouse, and the Cincinnati-based behemoth embraced the Internet while other large companies still wondered what a web was. One of its mottos is ‘*Touching Lives, Improving Life*’. P&G believes that it provides branded products and services of superior quality and value that improve the lives of the world's consumers. As a result, consumers will reward them with leadership sales, profit and value creation, allowing their people, shareholders and the communities in which they live and work to prosper.

It was with dismay therefore, that Jeff Sluder, digital brand manager for P&G, found from a personal experience that the website did not meet those corporate goals. At a family get-together, he spotted his father-in-law, who was blind, surfing a few websites.

“I watched him navigate a website and had him pull ours up,” recalls Sluder. “The site's multiple images, all visually attractive, had none of the corresponding ALT tags that speech-synthesizing applications need for the translations they provide to vision-impaired users. No one realized what a barrier we were creating for consumers to do business with us. It hit me that we had to do something.”

If Sluder's observations that summer afternoon dovetailed with P&G's renewed vigor toward fresh ideas, they also squared with its embrace of workplace disability. It introduced one of the first sickness-disability programs for its workers in 1915. Following passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, P&G formed an ADA task force.

Sluder says that while it's easier to build in website accessibility from the start, retrofitting is feasible, even for an expansive site like P&G.com, which stretches for hundreds of pages. “As we redesign sections of the website, we build accessibility into the redesign”, says Sluder. To date, 80 percent of the main corporate site has gone through redesign and is accessible.

Once designers, agencies and programmers get the hang of designing for accessibility, it becomes natural to them. Says Sluder: “We'll see a cool, slick Web presentation, and someone will say, ‘I don't think the screen reader is going to like it.’”



THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *to remove all barriers between company and customers and find a way to have a personal touch with every customer.*

“Touching every customer is a marketing goal, not a technical one. Making the website accessible for technical reasons achieves no defined business objective and is likely to be a one-off project driven by a champion.”

CenturyTel

CenturyTel has a tagline “*Personal Touch - Advanced Communications*”. The company strives to find ways to communicate on a one-on-one basis with every customer at every opportunity, including visiting communities and speaking face-to-face with customers. The website is a critical public face for the company and must reflect the corporate vision. It provides the company with a unique opportunity to touch more customers more often and can be a focal point in establishing business strategy and differentiation.

The company has always placed importance on website interaction as a method to touch the customer, for example by answering every incoming e-mail promptly and accurately. The site recently added online chat as another way to reach out and engage. Accessibility is a natural part of this philosophy and while the site follows technical guidelines, they are used to assist in making changes, rather than as a goal in themselves. The driving force has never been on compliance; the vision is “personal touch for all customers” and that means every customer at every possible occasion.



THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *to extend its customer base into the disabled community by lowering obstacles online and offline*

Southwest recognizes that it makes business sense to embrace disability -- both offline and online -- among its customers and staff. It has been diligent in adding fliers of all backgrounds to the 96 million passengers it transports annually, especially those with physical disabilities. When it comes to travel, the challenges are widespread. A 2005 study found that among adults with disabilities who travel by air, 84 percent had encountered airline-related obstacles.

Not that such hurdles dim their wanderlust. The average number of leisure trips and hotel stays rose 50 percent from the 2002 survey, according to Open Doors Organization, the Chicago-based advocacy group that conducted the study.

So Southwest accommodates. It equips each terminal gate with specialized chairs to assist wheelchair users in boarding, eliminating any wait for a chair to be brought to the gate. The airline has collaborated with Oregon State University on a grant for assistive transportation. Members of the carrier's customer-insight team regularly attend conferences to listen for new solutions.

Keeping a high profile has been a big part of the airline's success in developing its customer base in the disability community, says Lisa Anderson, who heads the customer insight group. “A lot of it is presence in the community,” she says, adding that Southwest's efforts have paid off. “There's a good deal of disposable income in the disability community. We've learned if you gain the community's loyalty, they're going to travel you and recommend you to friends.”

Extending this philosophy to the Southwest website fits naturally into the company's thinking. The disabled community represents a substantial market, and removing barriers online and offline clearly makes good business sense.

“There's a good deal of disposable income in the disability community. We've learned if you gain the community's loyalty, they're going to travel you and recommend you to friends.”

Southwest Airlines



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THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *to improve the customer experience for ALL customers in ALL ways.*

Wells Fargo, the diversified financial services company, sees web-site accessibility as an extension of the modifications the company has made to other customer channels. Like talking ATMs and roomy branch offices that are easy to maneuver in, Wells Fargo's accessible web site is part of the company's intense focus on the user experience. Wells Fargo doesn't calculate ROI numbers, or even how many customers use screen readers to access the web site. But it has formalized accessibility requirements for all software development. For example, its hiring process for engineers and developers includes inquiring about candidates' accessibility know-how. Good citizenship is a worthy motivation to build an accessible website, but it is also likely that improved ease of use for all visitors will result in reduced costs, increased website traffic and an enhanced brand image.

Various companies: compliance

THE BUSINESS OBJECTIVE – *to comply with published technical standards.*

Whereas the companies that see accessibility as part of a broader corporate vision rarely speak about technical guidelines, there are those that are driven just by those standards. The common thread in interviews with compliance-orientated organizations revolved around W3C compliance and litigation.

There was little or no discussion of the effect on the business or how it fits into a corporate strategy. In fact, accessibility was generally considered a technical issue handled by the technical groups. Often, the impetus comes from technical departments that monitor the evolution of accessibility guidelines and champion the needs of the disabled community. In geographic regions where legislation is tighter than the US (such as the UK), compliance was a bigger factor especially in job applications and productivity. Whereas compliance and potential litigation can be useful drivers to get accessibility on the agenda, it is not a goal in itself. We have not named companies that responded that compliance was the overall goal, they were in the minority and in fact are probably the least likely to be in the top segment of the next accessibility benchmark.



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IMPROVING THE ONLINE EXPERIENCE

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The Customer Respect Group is an internationally recognized leader in the creation and measurement of benchmarks in the arena of online customer experience and respect. Benchmarks have been shown to provide an invaluable means to consider comparative performance, learn from the leaders and take advantage of strengths. The Customer Respect Group has objectively measured websites since 2003 and has amassed a huge database of knowledge and data.

For more information, visit
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