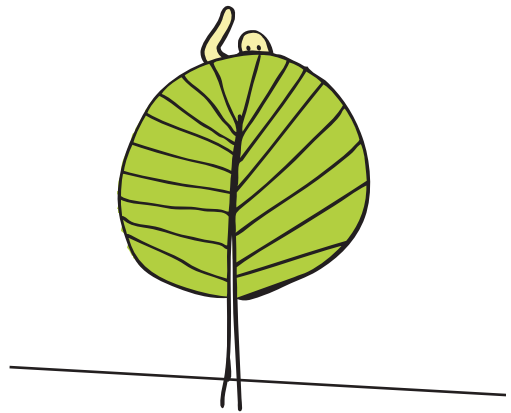

Accessible doesn't mean boring



Nothing beats the creative frisson of excitement as you review concepts, brainstorm and plan strategic derring-do. But you can see people switching off as soon as you mention accessibility. To put it bluntly, for years accessibility has been perceived as a necessity brought down from a higher-than-thou authority to ensure you can't have as much fun as you'd like.

Whenever 'accessible' was mentioned, it generated mental images of boring, text-heavy websites that looked like they were designed by geeks for nerds. One of the greatest proponents of accessibility, Jakob Nielsen doesn't dispel this assumption with his site www.useit.com which is just plain dull (*if usable*). But bear in mind that Jakob is one of the web's best known accessibility gurus and author of *Designing Web Usability*, a book that has sold over a quarter of a million copies. Now in its seventh print run, it remains one of the most influential texts on creating accessible websites.

While his research and opinion is highly regarded, it's possible that his message has been misinterpreted and mistakenly led to the creation of lots of boring-but-accessible websites.

The big misunderstanding - drop the images

The most common misconception is this: "I thought accessibility meant you had to remove all the graphics and invert the colours [1]".

Here's an interesting fact, thousands of boring websites are also completely inaccessible! There's no reason why a visually exciting website can't be made accessible; it has nothing to do with how exciting a website looks or how engaging the content is. Making a website accessible doesn't involve removing colour or taking out images. Instead, greater attention needs to be paid when thinking about colour usage i.e. is text legible on the proposed coloured background? Stop and think about providing content in a range of alternative formats so the whole of your audience can access it.

Even the most exciting 'experiential' websites created for blockbuster films and video games are being designed with accessibility in mind. These sites are often built with FlashTM, the developers of which have been working hard to ensure that the latest versions are as accessible as possible, with improved support for a range of screen-readers and text equivalents for graphical information [4].

Your audience may not be who you think they are

Research [6] shows that 14% of the UK population has some form of disability. If you are in the business of selling products online - be it information, music or a great night out - it simply doesn't make business sense to alienate this significant segment of your customer base.

While much attention is given to those with visual impairments, an accessible website will make it easier for all sorts of people to visit and make use of your services. Those people with hearing, mobility, cognitive and learning [5] impairments all have particular issues that need to be addressed. The elderly and the young can also benefit from the most basic attempts to make a site more accessible - simply allowing the user to resize the text in their browser makes articles and online forms easier to read and fill in.

Fortunately for these groups, whether or not you make your website accessible is no longer a choice. In fact, making your website accessible is enforced by UK law. Although the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 [7] does not refer explicitly to websites, it does state that it is illegal to discriminate against those with disabilities. And the DDA applies to any

one providing a service, including the public, private and voluntary sectors. It's not just those with disabilities who could be put-off visiting your inaccessible site. With the increasing numbers of people browsing the net with mobile phones, televisions, computer consoles and kiosks, your online audience is growing all the time.

Get more search engine traffic

There is one huge benefit of having an accessible website: search engine optimisation (SEO). It's no surprise to anyone who makes accessible websites that high accessibility overlaps deeply with effective SEO. Google, Yahoo and MSN all love an accessible website - so you're making your website accessible to another category of visitor - the search engine.

Conclusion

Accessibility doesn't mean boring, it means ensuring that all your customers can access your brand and take part in a relationship with it online. That makes good business sense, but more than that it's a legal requirement. Most importantly, as customers commonly review and comment upon their online experiences and share them with others in open forum, the importance of creating brand advocates across all your customer segments is vital - switch on all your customers.

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This is what we do...



Aardvark Media Ltd.

101 The Chambers, First Floor,
Chelsea Harbour,
London, SW10 0XF

enquiries@aardvarkmedia.co.uk

www.aardvarkmedia.co.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7582 7711

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7022 8740