ACCESS FOR ALL CUSTOMERS

> If you stay on top of search engine optimization (SEO) practices, you know the value of ALT tags. These are HTML tags that allow you to describe images and other media in your website and contribute greatly to relevancy — the code looks like this: `<img src="/media/flowerphoto.jpg alt="photo of a flower">`. Search engines cannot “see” the content within these non-textual media so ALT tags “tell” engines what’s seen or said.

Improved search visibility is great, but consider all your customers with visual and other sensory disabilities who would benefit from this information as well. Most customers with disabilities view a website through software called a screen reader, which reads all text or text-equivalents (ALT) on a webpage.

Accessibility isn’t just a nice feature to have either. Federal regulations require businesses to address access for customers with physical, sensory or cognitive disabilities. Ignore these at your own peril; lawyers are on the prowl! (I recently helped an SAF member florist who is being sued for having a non-ADA compliant website.)

This month, we’ll review the federal guidelines (“Web-based Intranet and Internet Information and Applications, 1194.22”) and help you identify what you need to do to become compliant if you aren’t already — including getting rid of archaic technology that impedes website accessibility.

Determine Compliance

To figure out if you are compliant with current regulations, you can use a couple of tools: [achecker.ca/checker](http://achecker.ca/checker) and [wave.webaim.org](http://wave.webaim.org).

As you use these tools, you’ll discover mostly photos missing ALT tags, recommendations on color (best to have black text over white backgrounds), text labels for scripts and more. Do this for all your pages. Let’s tackle images first.

Focus on Images

Bottom line: every image or graphic on your website must have an ALT tag. `<img src="/image/name_of_image.jpg alt="detailed description of image">`.

There is a caveat dependent on whether the image, either with text within the photo or using symbols, is prompting the person to click it to produce an action.

In the Thanksgiving ad from Teleflora (photo), the ALT tag can’t just be ALT=“four thanksgiving arrangements.” Rather, it must let the visitor know of the action required: ALT=“click to enter a contest where three lucky winners will win a thanksgiving arrangement.”

Another consideration is images that prompt action based on color. A classic example is a red graphic button for “stop” or “don’t enter” and green for “proceed/enter.” Think of folks who are color blind. In this situation, in addition to proper ALT tags, consider displaying text right on the page as a caption for these graphics describing the button or call to action.

Verdict on Videos

As you may know, not all website elements provide an ALT option. A good example is videos you embed into your website by cutting and pasting custom code within HTML (think Vimeo or YouTube). This is already de facto practice. The work-around in this case would be to publish a detailed caption similar to what we suggested for colored buttons right on the webpage introducing the video.

Videos, described as a “multimedia” element in the guidelines, are also required to have an additional, potentially challenging accommodation. You need to provide within the video a running caption of what’s said that is synced with what’s happening in real time during playback. (For more info, check ADA Title III.) For audio-only files, you’d need to provide a text transcript.

Accommodating (or not) Old Technology

The bulk of the accommodations outlined in the guidelines address technologies from websites made back in the 1990s and early 2000s: audio files, image maps, frames, tables, Java applets, server-side scripts/image maps and Adobe Flash. Still have some of those on your site? Get with your website developer, bring this list and phase these technologies out!

Aside from not having to deal with accessibility requirements, another good reason is websites need to be built mobile-responsive first, and many of the older technologies listed are not mobile friendly (Flash is a good example). The only exemptions to this wholesale clean-up are the forms, such as your order form, which are technically tables that you need to properly make accessible using `<LABEL>` tags, and JavaScript, which continues to enhance the mobile experience. To accommodate JavaScript, check with developers to ensure they are using the “title” attribute of the `<a>` tag in addition to ALT tags within the code.

Our recommendation is to start immediately with your homepage, as this would be the first page scanned by means for non-compliance. Then, proceed to secondary sub-pages. Many website platforms (such as WordPress, Joomla and others) store all images and graphics in a media library that allow you to methodically cycle through and add an ALT attribute. Tedious? Yes, but you will be doing your customers with disabilities — and your SEO — a great service.

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