

Nine Myths About Accessibility

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Electronic content accessibility is a complex topic, and it isn't at all uncommon to find pernicious myths building up around it in the minds of technical professionals. Nine myths are outlined below, and the fact that many of them are infuriatingly contradictory should serve to illustrate the challenges that accessibility presents.

#1: Accessibility Is Hard

Actually, not being accessible is hard. By making pages that are standards-compliant, you've already avoided a slew of unrelated problems. Web standards compliance is a great start, and depending on the complexity of your pages might be all you need.

Relevant Links

Designing More Usable Web Sites

<http://www.tracecenter.org/world/web/>

The Web Standards Project

<http://www.webstandards.org/>

#2: Accessibility Is Easy

Throwing up a text-only version might make your site sort of accessible, but you've just doubled your maintenance work. A bunch of style sheets will take a little more work up front but will pay off in a variety of ways. Running your site through an automated checker, like Bobby, is a good start and very easy—but it is not a definitive solution. Accessibility encompasses a lot of grey areas and often requires subjectivity that only a thoughtful person can provide.

Relevant Link

Evaluation, Repair, and Transformation Tools for Web Content Accessibility

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/ER/existingtools.html>

#3: Accessibility Is Ugly

It's only as ugly as you want it to be. With CSS, you can specify layouts for various user groups. What works best for blind people may be visually unappealing, but they are unlikely to care. Even without CSS, properly formatted HTML elements can be as graphically interesting as you wish—just give your users the tools to work around your masterpiece if all they want is the text.

Relevant Links

Accessify.com

<http://www.accessify.com/articles/attractive-accessible-sites.asp>

CSS Zen Garden

<http://www.csszengarden.com/>

User-Defined CSS

http://www.awarecenter.com/tips/essay_kb_03.html

#4: Accessibility Is Expensive

If it is a factor in design, development, and deployment, accessibility is going to add perhaps 2 percent to the overall cost of a site.

According to the W3C, "Designing a new site to be accessible should not add significantly to development cost. Some aspects of accessibility, such as use of style sheets, can actually reduce the costs of maintaining or updating sites, and this benefit should increase over time as style sheets are more evenly implemented in browsers and available as an authoring strategy in authoring tools."

Relevant Links

The W3C Weighs In on Cost

<http://www.w3.org/1999/05/WCAG-REC-fact#cost>

Developing a Web Accessibility Business Case

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/EO/Drafts/bcase/>

#5: Accessibility Is Cheap

Retrofitting an inaccessible site can be very expensive and time consuming, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise! This is more reason to do it right the first time.

From the W3C, "For existing sites, the ease or difficulty of making sites accessible depends on a variety of factors, including the size of a site, the complexity of a site, and the authoring tool that was used to make a site. Periodic upgrades or reviews of sites can be good opportunities to review the accessibility of sites. When compared with the broader audience that a site is available to, and the greater usability for other users as well, accessible sites can be cost-effective."

Relevant Link

Business-Based Cost Discussion

<http://www.eweek.com/article2/0,1759,1155471,00.asp>

#6: Accessibility Is Irrelevant

Assistive technology does the "accessifying" for you, right? Not so much, although products like screen readers are obviously helpful, even on noncomplaint pages. Making pages accessible benefits all users in many unexpected ways and is also a legal mandate, which makes it relevant.

Relevant Links

Unexpected Benefits

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/bcase/benefits.html>

Section 508

<http://www.section508.gov/>

#7: Accessibility Is for Very Special People

Think less about disability and more about universality. Users with disabilities are not inspirational success stories; they are people trying to get something done. Building accessible pages forces you to

think about universal design, information organization, and other things that will help all users. Specific features will also benefit mobile and handheld users.

Relevant Link

Principles of Universal Design

http://www.tracecenter.org/world/gen_ud.html

#8: Accessibility Is for Everyone!

Despite the feel good mantra, with some accessibility features you really are catering to a subset of your users. That's cool—know them, love them, take advantage of them. They know what works and what doesn't and are rarely shy if asked.

Relevant Link

Case Studies

<http://www.microsoft.com/enable/casestudy/default.aspx>

#9: Accessibility Is Somebody Else's Problem

No ... actually it is our problem. But there are lots of resources to help you out! Here are a few:

Relevant Links

Mark Pilgrim's Book, Dive Into Accessibility

<http://diveintoaccessibility.org/>

Getting Started: The W3C

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/gettingstarted/>