

HTML Issues for SEO's: Web Accessibility. . . Making your Pages

Friendly to People with Disabilities

By Robin Nobles

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Did you know that nearly 20 percent of all Web users have some form of disability?

“Making your site accessible for all is a matter of courtesy, is good business practice, and is not difficult,” explains Robert Roberts, a professional SEO who owns the SEO Toolbox (<http://www.seotoolbox.com>).

In fact, Roberts believes that Web accessibility issues are so important that he’s been having monthly chat sessions on the subject for students at the Academy of Web Specialists (<http://www.onlinewebtraining.com/courses.html>). He’s also created a special section of his Web site that’s devoted to accessibility issues (<http://www.seotoolbox.com/htmlchat/accessibility.html>).

Roberts states that disabilities can be anything from “simple” color blindness to more severe disabilities.

The Use of Alt Text to Solve Accessibility Issues

“Let's start with image alt tags. You can use the alt tag to your advantage, not just for SEO purposes. The alt description tells those users with assistive technologies what the image is about.

“There is the issue of lots of clear images meant to be used as spacers in layouts. Should you use an alt tag for every one of those? Yes, in a sense, you use what's called the Null Alt, meaning an empty alt tag, like this: alt="". Notice that there is no space between the quotes, which means that assistive devices will bypass the image and not try to explain it. But if you don't use it, assistive devices will show a blank where the image would be or cause other display issues.

“The alt tag for navigation images is critical. Actually, you should use text navigation wherever possible, as good SEO's, but there are times when the layout uses buttons, which brings up another issue - that of navigation preceding content.”

Solving the Problem of Navigation Preceding Content

Roberts continues, "When a person using an assistive device opens a Web page, he or she is usually greeted by lots of navigation before getting to the content. Furthermore, an assistive device like a screen reader will read ALL of the navigation every single time. One solution is to include a "skip navigation" link that allows the person to jump to the page content. This can be in the form of a tiny hidden clear image linked to an anchor tag.

"If you would like to see an example, take a look at the source code for any page at SEO Toolbox (<http://www.seotoolbox.com>). The logo at the top of the page is linked to the menu, because the menu markup is actually at the bottom of the HTML code. You would be able to use this strategy with any assistive device or in a text browser like Lynx."

Why Accessibility Issues Are So Important These Days

"One of the reasons all of this is so important," says Roberts, "is because of a lawsuit in progress that looks like it may get to the Supreme Court. A blind man in Florida is suing Southwest Airlines because he is unable to complete normal transactions on their Web site."

By means of explanation, the Americans with Disabilities Act provides provisions on the accessibility of public accommodations to the disabled, and this is the Act that is being referenced in the case.

The plaintiffs in the case claim that Congress wrote the ADA so broadly that the Internet is covered, meaning that it 'applies to Internet Web sites just as it does to brick-and-mortar facilities like movie theaters and department stores.'

The defendants (Southwest Airlines and American Airlines) have taken the position that Congress never meant to include the Internet, because cyberspace was in its infancy at the time the law was written. So, the argument is whether a Web site is a 'public accommodation' under Title III of the ADA.

"But," continues Roberts, "there is a precedent that will surely influence the outcome. In Australia, a similar suit was brought a couple of years ago by a blind person against the Olympic Committee because he could not get tickets online. The suit resulted in a win for him: a \$20,000 damage settlement.

"What all this means is that sooner or later, any Internet site offering goods and services will have to comply with accessibility standards."

In Roberts' accessibility section (<http://www.seotoolbox.com/htmlchat/accessibility.html>), he's placed a link to the lawsuit, if you'd like to learn more.

What if you have an image that conveys information, such as a pie chart, graph, or schedule? A simple alt tag description isn't sufficient to convey that information adequately. Roberts explains a work-around for this problem:

"There are a couple of things you can do, with one being right in the tag itself: you can use the 'longdesc' element. The longdesc is actually a link to another page where you can lay out the information in text format.

"Here is a sample tag:

```
IMG src="chart.gif" width="66" height="66" border="0" alt="food sales for 2000"
```

longdesc="sales2000.html"

“The problem with the longdesc attribute is that it is not widely supported by assistive technology. As a result, an alternative convention is suggested, using a D-Link. This is a text link placed immediately after the image. It is a link to the same descriptive page contained in the longdesc attribute. This way, you are sure that it can't be missed.”

Here's an example using the D-Link:

```
img src="graphics/chimpgraph.gif" width="494" height="253" alt="Graph of Number of Chimps in Asia by Location" longdesc="chimpgraphdesc.htm" a href="chimpgraphdesc.htm" title="Description of Asia Chimp Location Graph" D/a
```

Some Accessibility Solutions Are Actually Beneficial from an SEO Standpoint

Since Search Engine Marketers often use alt text as an extra spot to place keywords, can it still be used in that manner?

“Bear in mind that it should not be only for keywords, because it really is an assistive aid. What I've done is something like this: ‘keyword keyword - link to description page’,” explains Roberts.

Roberts continues, “A link to a more informative text explanation of a pie chart or whatever can only add to search engine relevancy because you can make the additional page focus on a keyword. Accessibility also applies to things like WAP, handheld devices, and telephonic devices.

“People need to see what your information is and how to get to it. The matter of tables is important not only because of accessibility but because it will actually be easier for search engines to get around in them. There is a brief example of this on the regular SEO Toolbox site: <http://www.seotoolbox.com/spider-friendly-tables.html> . There is more complete information, with two examples, at: http://www.seotoolbox.com/htmlchat/tables_layout.html.”

“After all,” Roberts continues, “which do you think will be better for relevancy? If a spider must wade through yards of code before getting to your content, or if the spider can see your content first thing? The answer is pretty obvious.”

If you aren't using Lynx, Roberts recommends adding it as part of your Web development arsenal for seeing how your pages look in a variety of browsers. (<http://lynx.browser.org/>)

Lynx is a free, predominately text-based browser that will give you an idea of how those with disabilities view your site. Many Web visitors prefer it because it doesn't support JavaScript, Flash, or DHTML and is free of popups.

For More Information

According to Roberts, one of the best books on the topic of accessibility is Constructing Accessible Web Sites by Jim Thatcher. The book just hit the shelves and covers what you need to know in an efficient, easy-to-understand manner.

And, be sure to keep a close watch on Robert's accessibility section of the SEO Toolbox: <http://www.seotoolbox.com/htmlchat/accessibility.html> . He'll be adding more information to the section as he conducts chat sessions at the Academy.

Academy students can attend any of Roberts' upcoming chats, or even if you're not an Academy

student, you can read the transcripts afterward at the Chat Index area:
<http://www.onlinewebtraining.com/chat/chatindex.htm> .

Robin Nobles, Director of Training, Academy of Web Specialists, (<http://www.academywebspecialists.com>) has trained several thousand people in her online search engine marketing courses (<http://www.onlinewebtraining.com>) and is the content provider for (GRSeo) Search Engine Optimizer software (<http://www.se-optimizer.com>). She also teaches 4-day hands-on search engine marketing workshops in locations across the globe with Search Engine Workshops (<http://www.searchengineworkshops.com>).

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