

POV

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DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY IN PHARMA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Creating content and tools that can be accessed by people with disabilities is vital to healthcare marketers. Digital accessibility is a major hurdle for people with visual, speech, physical, neurological, cognitive, and auditory disabilities: 97% of the top million websites do not meet accessibility standards. But updating, or creating, more accessible digital content is far more feasible and achievable than you might think. In this POV, we explain the importance of doing so, the top issues, and how to begin improving access to your digital content.

INTRODUCTION

Digital accessibility is one of the many societal problems that has been highlighted by the pandemic. As the [Bureau of Internet Accessibility](#) put it, “COVID made access to timely information and resources beyond critical, but most wasn’t accessible.” This spotlights a concern that has been present since the internet was born – information shared digitally is not always equitably accessible. Healthcare information has always been critical to our patients, caregivers, and healthcare professionals. Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean that every digital pharma resource has been flawlessly accessible for people with disabilities.

Let’s discuss what accessibility means, what it looks like, where our industry lands on the spectrum of accessibility success, and what we can do to improve.

BACKGROUND

Internet access is seen [in some countries](#) as a basic human right. But this consideration often centers on rights to privacy or to expression, or on rights to access broadband data transmission, or to access the internet without censorship.

For people with disabilities, hurdles exist well beyond internet access itself. As the W3C’s [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) (WAI) states, “currently many sites and tools are developed with accessibility barriers that make them difficult or impossible for some people to use.” Visual, speech, physical, neurological, cognitive, or auditory disabilities are among those that could affect a person’s digital access. And, according to [an accessibility analysis](#) done earlier this year, they are indeed affected: 97.4% of the top million home pages had Web Content Accessibility Guidelines failures (and healthcare pages weren’t demonstrably better than the rest).

DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY CHECK LIST

-  VIDEO CAPTIONS
-  CONTRASTING COLORS
-  VOICE RECOGNITION
-  TEXT TO SPEECH
-  CLEAR LAYOUT & DESIGN
-  NOTIFICATIONS & FEEDBACK
-  LARGE CONTROLS
-  CUSTOMIZABLE TEXT
-  UNDERSTANDABLE CONTENT
-  KEYBOARD COMPATIBILITY



WAI CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACCESSIBLE DIGITAL CONTENT

The WAI offers [10 examples](#) of “how accessibility is essential for people with disabilities, and useful for everyone.” Here’s a synopsis:



VIDEO CAPTIONS

Captions are useful for anyone using a silenced device or in a noisy environment; but as with all of these examples, what’s useful for everyone is vital for some. For deaf or hard-of-hearing (HoH) users, and particularly with more video content online than ever, captions matter more than ever.



CONTRASTING COLORS

Sharp contrast is more than a pleasing design aesthetic; it’s a necessity for those with reduced vision.



VOICE RECOGNITION

Dictation makes it possible for people with temporary or permanent physical disabilities to use a digital interface, but — like all examples — it requires properly designed and built code to function correctly.



TEXT TO SPEECH

Similarly, having a digital page read aloud requires properly coded properties. Not only does this help those who are visually impaired, dyslexic, or simply multitasking, but — yet another shared benefit across these features! — it can improve SEO.



CLEAR LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Clarity and consistency are at the heart of any good user experience.



NOTIFICATIONS AND FEEDBACK

Clear information helps a user understand what has happened and why.



LARGE CONTROLS

Anyone can relate to the exasperation of tapping frustratedly at a link on a small screen that you can’t quite activate, but people with limited dexterity experience this frustration far more often.



CUSTOMIZABLE TEXT

The ability to change a text size can improve its readability — and as you’ll notice is consistent here, it can improve the experience for people who don’t have disabilities, and for search engines, too.



UNDERSTANDABLE CONTENT

It’s very easy, particularly for experts, to write content that is too complex or jargon-heavy. We must remember not to write to showcase information, but to communicate it, ensuring that the recipient understands it.



KEYBOARD COMPATIBILITY

Not everyone has, or can use a mouse, trackpad, or touchscreen. Again: proper coding makes your property navigable by all.





THE MAJORITY OF PHARMA OR LIFE SCIENCES BRAND SITES ARE NOT FULLY ACCESSIBLE

CURRENT STATE: PHARMA + DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

As the analysis mentioned above noted, there isn't a lot out there that's perfect. I recently spoke to [PharmaLive](#) about digital accessibility in our industry, noting – I'll paraphrase – that while many sites do include some accessibility features (think font resizing, or color/contrast adjusters) the majority of pharma or life sciences brand sites are not fully accessible. There are many reasons why. It can be a lack of awareness that such things are even possible, or a lack of realization that it's necessary. Time and budget can factor in, too; oftentimes updating an existing digital property can be time- or labor-intensive, and internal timelines may not allow it. Usually, the sites that provide more accessibility accommodations are those for brands that treat a condition that affects vision or movement, since they can't help but be aware that their audience needs to access the content.

BETTERING PHARMA'S DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

Pharma is legendary for its hesitancy to change – and, make no mistake, improving digital accessibility can indeed require a great deal of change and investment. But as brand managers begin to become more familiar with acronyms like ADA (referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act) and WCAG ([Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#)) – and as lawsuits against non-accessible digital properties continue to proliferate (for more on this, you can see our 2018 POV, "[US Government Reasserts Commitment to Ensuring Accessible Websites](#)") – brands are coming around to the need for these improvements.





To embark upon the process of improving digital accessibility for your brands, consider these five steps:

AA DECIDE WHAT LEVEL OF WCAG COMPLIANCE TO AIM FOR

Intouch recommends targeting WCAG [Level AA](#), the second of three levels of conformance. It meets the majority of compliance issues and covers a wide range of disabilities.

? DETERMINE YOUR AUDIENCE AND THEIR UNMET NEEDS

The easiest way to do this is to ask. Test your digital properties with members of your audience, and be sure to be as inclusive as possible to get the most valuable information from your conversations.

\$ ASSESS YOUR BUDGET

Accessibility is, as noted above, an investment, but it's an extremely worthwhile one. And, creating a newly accessible site, or updating a current one to be more accessible, can be completed in phases. We shouldn't avoid accessibility because of budgets.



FIND A KNOWLEDGEABLE PARTNER

A good partner can help you with discovery (audit your current properties to see where you are compliant, where you need to update), design (what needs to be done, and what the timeline for those updates can be), development, testing, and education — for you and your team — on the nuances of accessibility.



FIND INTERNAL ACCESSIBILITY CHAMPIONS

Ideally, every brand can have an expert — or experts — of various abilities who can help ensure the new properties are meeting accessibility needs.



CONCLUSION

Accessibility awareness is growing, and it builds upon itself. Once brand teams become more aware, they start thinking of the comorbidities their customers may have and want to make sure what is being built will accommodate their needs. But being, or becoming, more accessible isn't a quick fix. Phased approaches can help a brand get where it needs to be – a thoughtful process toward an important goal.

Nothing inspires progress like a deadline, and the pandemic made the deadline 'now' for many digital upgrades. But not all accessibility issues were resolved. We shouldn't wait for everyone's life to be upended to improve our work in ways that will make things vastly better for some of us (and, yes, more helpful for all of us).

Perhaps the following provides a useful summary.

First, as the [WAI](#) states, **“accessibility is essential for people with disabilities, and useful for everyone in a variety of situations.”**

Second, as the above-mentioned [PharmaLive](#) article said, **“customer experiences aren't worth much if the customer can't experience them.”**

Finally, as a recent [CNet](#) article pointed out, wider accessibility accommodations like those that the pandemic hastened (closed-captioning for videoconferencing, for instance) were “adjustments the disability community requested for years before the pandemic.”

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For more on this topic, you can see our 2018 POV, [“US Government Reasserts Commitment to Ensuring Accessible Websites,”](#) as well as the 2021 [PharmaLive](#) article by Josh Slatko, [“And Access for All,”](#) and the W3C's [WAI](#) website. This POV used information from those excellent sources.





Want to learn more?

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