

How N.J. businesses need to be inclusive in their online outreach, specifically for people with disabilities

By **Brittany Liscoe, Easterseals NJ** (East Brunswick) - September 20, 2021



(https://d3f1hg3lfk57q.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/john-schnobrich-FIPc9_VocJ4-unsplash-crop.jpg)

Brittany Liscoe is a member of the communications team at Easterseals NJ. - *Easterseals NJ*

Why your online outreach is lacking by over 30%

Gone are the days of word of mouth and traditional advertising. The internet is king, and it's up to business owners to adapt or fall behind. Whether it's through Facebook ads, Instagram reels or a great website, having a strong web presence is critical to remaining relevant among consumers. You may think you're doing a good job using the limitless reach of this digital landscape to your full advantage, but here's some bad news: You're probably not. Until you assess the accessibility of your content, your reach is nowhere near as extensive as you think it is.

How does accessibility affect business?

The inaccessibility of your content doesn't go unnoticed; at the same time, the effort you make to assure that your content is inclusive will have far more of an impact than you may imagine.

Speaking on how inclusivity impacts purchasing decisions, Erin Hawley, a digital content producer who has muscular dystrophy, stated:



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"It's important to me that a company puts effort in to be inclusive and accessible. It means they value all their customers, including people with disabilities, like me. This leads to my loyalty to their brand and products, and I am more likely to recommend them to my friends and family."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, around 61 million adults in the U.S. have a disability. Although each of these disabilities provides a unique experience, there are still various standard measures you can take to assure that these populations are not overlooked, or, in this case, these customers are not overlooked.

Accessing the internet typically requires three things from us (aside from an internet connection, of course): sight, hearing and mobility to navigate. People without these abilities may still be able to access the internet, but their experience can be much more difficult if even the most basic accommodations are not met. According to the CDC, if we combine the number of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, have low vision or have a motor disability that would impact their internet usage, it equates to over 34% of the U.S. population. Let's say you have the potential reach of 100,000 people. Overlooking the accessibility of your content could cost you over 34,000 potential customers. That's over 1/3 of your reach! So, what can you do about it?

Assure that your content is screen reader friendly



A screen reader is a technology, typically built into a phone or computer, that converts elements of a web page into speech or braille. According to accessible.com, over 7 million people in the U.S. utilize screen readers, so it is critical that your content be accessible through this device. How can you do that? Make sure to insert alternative text when posting a photo or moving image. Alt text offers a description of your advertisement or message for visitors who are blind or have low vision. You should also limit the use of repetitive emojis, as screen readers will describe each one aloud, making your outreach disengaging and irritating to hear.

Hashtags are a fantastic way to increase engagement on social media and attract attention from potential customers. When using hashtags consisting of multiple words, capitalize the first letter of each new word so screen readers can differentiate between them. Otherwise, the device will combine the words into one, often not making a bit of sense to the person consuming your content.

Good visuals get attention, but only from those they are accessible to

When posting on social media, make sure to pay attention to the color contrast of your content. Aim to use a contrast of at least 4.5:1 to ensure that visitors with low vision can differentiate the foreground of your content from the background. You should also offer closed captioning on any videos you post, so deaf individuals can receive your message without depending on the audio. If closed captioning is not an option, use the caption area to provide context for the video. Make sure to also avoid flashing lights in your content and to use short links where possible.

Assure that your site is easy to navigate

Check out our menu items!



Check out our menu items!

In addition to social media, having an engaging website is another element of business promotion. But consider this: If it's difficult to navigate, visitors aren't going to spend much time on it. As you reassess the ease of navigation on your site, here are some more things to think about. Just as with social media, add alt text to any images or gifs on your site. If there is an audio file, such as a radio interview, for example, offer a transcript for deaf or hard of hearing visitors to reference. You should also ensure that site visitors are able to enlarge elements of your page without disrupting the layout. Make sure to avoid thin fonts that may be difficult to differentiate from the background and make any buttons large and easy to click on.

A few other things to keep in mind are to provide captions for videos, assure that your website can be navigated through a keyboard and to avoid moving or flashing content on your webpage.

Need more convincing?

While this may seem like a lot to implement, these are just minor tweaks to actions you are already performing. Not to mention, today's social media and web platforms have developed extensive accessibility features that do a lot of this work for you. Regardless, the amount of time you spend fixing your accessibility issues is invaluable. The amount of profit you are missing out on by overlooking potential customers with disabilities may very well exceed any amount of money you would have to spend to implement these solutions, which by the way would be very little if any.

Think of it this way: A few small tweaks to your current practices can earn you tens of thousands more customers. Not to mention, you will be on your way to fostering a more inclusive and welcoming environment within your business, which is something no advertisement can earn you.

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