Is Your Website Truly Accessible to Seniors With Vision Impairment?

by Virginia Jacko

Experts predict that by 2030, rates of vision loss will double along with the country's aging population. In Florida, it's estimated that more than 2 million seniors have a visual impairment, according to Florida Agencies Serving the Blind.

We must act now to ensure this growing population can regain fully productive lives. For members of the Florida Council on Aging, many of you are providing critically important services to seniors – but can those with vision impairment fully access your site? The answer is likely, no.

Here's why.

Blind and visually impaired seniors use screen reading software to help navigate and use websites. The software deciphers what's on the screen and electronically read it out loud, making it possible to access what they can't see. It's a technology that levels the playing field.

But, this group is literally locked out when confronted with websites for brick-and-mortar businesses that aren't coded to be navigated by blind IT experts. If seniors are trying to order groceries, book a hotel room, shop or access their medical records and the site isn't set up for access, they are out of luck. Imagine trying to get any of these tasks done without being able to read the screen; that's what the blind and visually impaired senior confronts every day.

Prevent Your Site from Becoming an Achilles Heel

For large businesses, the move toward a fix is straightforward. They have the resources and compliance, legal and IT staff to quickly bring their websites into line with the ADA's requirements.

But, small and medium-sized businesses and organizations are more often resource challenged. This can be easily addressed to everyone's benefit. Consulting with advocacy groups for the blind and visually impaired can be a great start for these organizations, and there are a number of guidelines to keep in mind as they begin the process of achieving ADA compliance with their websites.

What You Can Do to Ensure Your Website is Accessible

*Confirming
Your Website is Accessible*

- Work with your compliance officer or professional to ensure that your websites are fully in line with ADA regulations and the internationally recognized WCAG 2.0/2.1 website accessibility standard.
- Seek counsel from advocacy groups for the blind or visually impaired, like Miami Lighthouse for the Blind. They can offer website consultations, audits, and access to tools that can keep you in compliance.
- Ensure that your website is accessible for Seniors using screen reading software by:
    - Labelling buttons, links and images with text descriptions, known as 'alt tags.'
    - Adjusting designs so that foreground and background colors have sufficient contrast;
    - Ensuring that your website is easily navigable by keystroke commands.
    - Including an accessibility statement with a contact phone number and email address.
- Use free trainings and online resources to stay on top of the law.

These actions benefit organizations in many ways: by being inclusive, you invite more customers and supporters in through your website - the front door of your organization. By taking the lead, you improve public perception; your value increases when you create more opportunities for access. That's why Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired was one of the first to offer businesses and corporations nationwide website consultations to ensure compliance with the ADA.

Ultimately, this is about doing what's right. Inclusiveness is not just a good thing – it's the right thing.

Virginia Jacko is President and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired which annually transforms the lives of over 90,000 people by showing them how it's possible to see without sight.