# ADA compliancy and your website

Ensuring that people with disabilities have full access to your website opens the door to a wider audience

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We're a national design company on a mission to help brands transform what is — to what could be.

# Federal Regulations

Two words that make everyone in your organization cringe, from the CEO on down to the latest hire: federal regulations. These are the regulations that can permeate every level and range from complicated to downright confounding. But many are designed to be helpful, to make things better, and though the actual regulations may require a translator to fully comprehend, in the end, someone or something benefits.

That is the goal behind the regulations currently being developed by the federal government regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the effort to create a world of websites that are ADA compliant, meaning that everyone including people with disabilities has equal accessibility to online resources. It is projected that the U.S. Department of Justice will complete these regulations by 2018. Subsequent enforcement, it has been said, will be on "a case by case basis."

Will these regulations be issued in time to meet the government's self-imposed deadline? We don't know. Should you just wait and see?

## No.

Why not? Because compliancy in many cases will not be extraordinarily difficult. New websites can be designed with ADA compliancy in mind, while current websites can be adjusted and renovated. Granted, there is no single button that a web designer can push to suddenly transform a website into one that is fully compliant. But there are different levels of compliancy.

Deciding which level is right for your website – and your brand – as well as how to reach it, will require time. Patience. Guidance. And experience.

The more a design team works with ADA requirements, the more the regulations become second nature.

We have been examining these requirements and monitoring their development. And while every detail isn't yet set in code, we have compiled a few things you can start thinking about regarding your website and its future ADA compliancy:

# BACKGROUND

**The ADA was passed into law in 1990. Title III of the act requires businesses and nonprofit services providers to make it possible for the disabled public to access the same services as people who are not disabled.**

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Justice issued the ADA Standards for Accessible Design. Originally applied chiefly to physical spaces, application of the accessible design requirements are evolving to electronic spaces, including websites when engaged by people with physical, sensory or cognitive disabilities.

The United States Access Board, originally the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, is an independent federal agency created to promote equality for people with disabilities through leadership in accessible design and the development of accessibility guidelines and standards. The board has proposed updating existing Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Standards under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act ("508 Standards").

"Since the existing 508 Standards were issued in 2000, mobile phones moved from devices with voice-only capability to so-called 'smartphones' offering voice, text and video communications. Desktop computers are no longer the only information processing hardware: mobile devices and tablets, which have very different input and output characteristics, can typically process vast amounts of electronic information," the board writes (www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/communications-and-it/about-the-ict-refresh/proposed-rule/ii-executive-summary).

"In recognition of these converging technologies, one of the primary purposes of the proposed rule is to replace the current product-based approach with requirements based on functionality, and, thereby, ensure that accessibility for people with disabilities keeps pace with advances in electronic and information technology."

Federal agencies, as well as entities that work directly with, or those that accept money from, the federal government are governed under Section 508 – and those directives can have a significant effect on website design.

Why is accessibility important? According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), worldwide there are 285 million people with some sort of visual impairment, 275 million people with moderate-to-profound hearing impairment, and many more with physical, speech, cognitive and neurological disabilities.

Much the same as a ramp allows a person in a wheelchair access to a building, assistive technologies enable many people with disabilities to use a computer. These technologies include screen readers, text-to-speech and speech-to-text converters, text enlargement software and computer programs that allow disabled persons to control the computer with their voices. Other assistive technology is built into computer operating systems. Some people with low vision are able to see computer displays by adjusting color schemes, contrast settings and font sizes. Others with limited manual dexterity use key strokes instead of a standard mouse.

**Making the online world more accessible to them is admirable. It also means seeing – and hearing, sensing and conveying – things differently than a lot of websites do today.**

# COMPLIANCY DEFINED

## What is accessible when it comes to websites?

Here is the government checklist, courtesy of the HHS (1194.22 Web-Based Intranet and Internet Information and Applications):

☐ A text equivalent for every non-text element shall be provided (e.g., via "alt," "longdesc," or in element content).

☐ Equivalent alternatives for any multimedia presentation shall be synchronized with the presentation.

☐ Web pages shall be designed so that all information conveyed with color is also available without color, for example from context or markup.

☐ Documents shall be organized so they are readable without requiring an associated style sheet.

☐ Redundant text links shall be provided for each active region of a server-side image map.

☐ Client-side image maps shall be provided instead of server-side image maps except where the regions cannot be defined with an available geometric shape.

☐ Row and column headers shall be identified for data tables.

☐ Markup shall be used to associate data cells and header cells for data tables that have two or more logical levels of row or column headers.

☐ Frames shall be titled with text that facilitates frame identification and navigation.

☐ Pages shall be designed to avoid causing the screen to flicker with a frequency greater than 2 Hz and lower than 55 Hz.

☐ A text-only page, with equivalent information or functionality, shall be provided to make a web site comply with the provisions of this part, when compliance cannot be accomplished in any other way. The content of the text-only page shall be updated whenever the primary page changes.

☐ When pages utilize scripting languages to display content, or to create interface elements, the information provided by the script shall be identified with functional text that can be read by assistive technology.

☐ When a web page requires that an applet, plug-in or other application be present on the client system to interpret page content, the page must provide a link to a plug-in or applet that complies with (regulation) §1194.21(a) through (l).

☐ When electronic forms are designed to be completed online, the form shall allow people using assistive technology to access the information, field elements and functionality required for completion and submission of the form, including all directions and cues.

☐ A method shall be provided that permits users to skip repetitive navigation links.

☐ When a timed response is required, the user shall be alerted and given sufficient time to indicate more time is required.

Got all that? Not likely. Put simply, it really is difficult to put simply. It basically means every page and every line of text, every color, graphic, video, chart and other element has to be examined from another perspective – that of someone with a disability.

It may be easier to understand with a couple examples:

Here is how the site appears online.
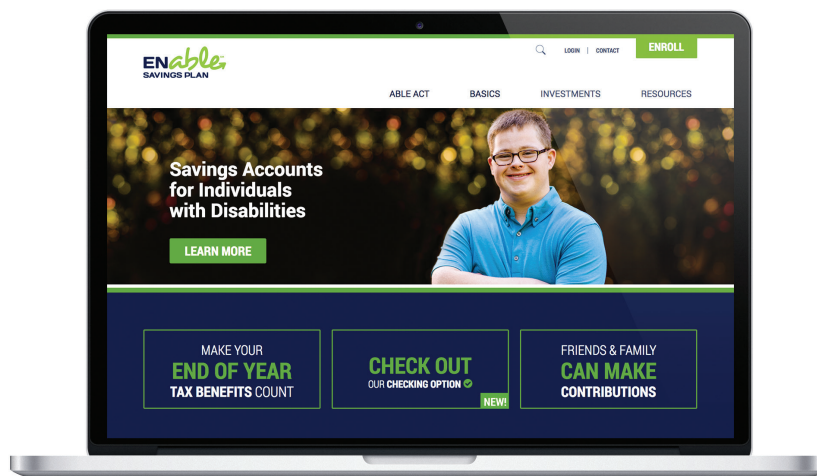
A look behind the scenes using the web accessibility evaluation tool (WAVE).
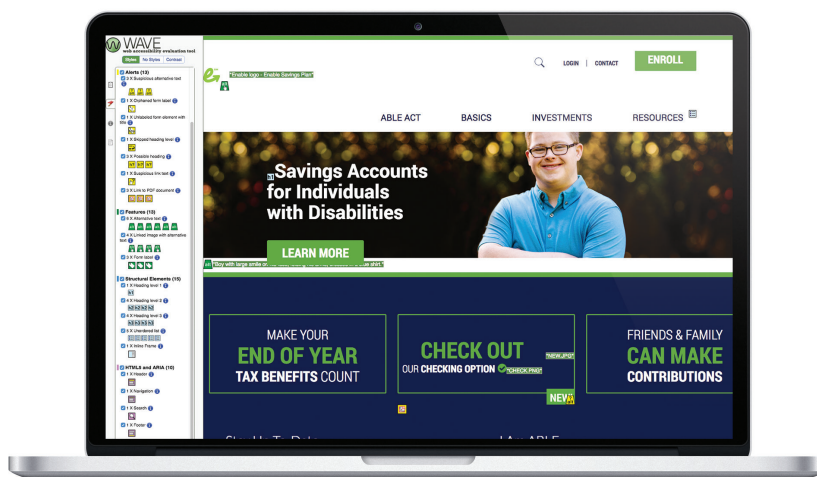
**Equivalent alternatives for any multimedia presentation shall be synchronized with the presentation.**

**Questions to be asked to check compliancy:**

- Does the multimedia presentation have captions?

- Are the captions large enough to be read?

- Are the captions presented on a solid background with high contrast so that they can be distinguished from the pictorial content?

- Are the captions synchronized with the audio in the presentation?

- Does the multimedia presentation have video description?

**Web pages shall be designed so that all information conveyed with color is also available without color, for example from context or markup.**

**Questions to check compliancy:**

- If color is used to convey information, is the information presented by another method?

- Are meaningful text equivalents readily apparent for any color-coded screen element?

In addition, the Access Board's proposed revision would incorporate by reference the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, a voluntary consensus standard developed by information and communication technology (ICT) industry representatives and other experts. It would also make WCAG 2.0 Success Criteria applicable not only to content on the World Wide Web but also to non-Web electronic documents and software such as word processing documents, portable document format files and project management software.

There are three levels of conformance with WCAG 2.0: A, which is the lowest; AA, and AAA, the highest. Determining which level you aim to meet depends on your users' needs and website objectives.

**Level A conformity offers very little to impaired users.** It largely makes it easier for browser readers to navigate and translate the website. This is like providing a step stool when the U.S. Department of Justice might prefer a ladder.

**Level AA makes sites accessible to people with a wider range of disabilities but won't change the appearance of your website as much as Level AAA.** It's likely that the majority of websites will aim for Level AA. While WCAG 2.0 Level AA closely mirrors the standards in Section 508, WCAG documentation is more detailed.

**Level AAA is the most demanding level of accessibility compliance and will significantly alter the design of the site.** Even the WCAG discourages aiming for Level AAA conformance for entire sites "because it is not possible to satisfy all Level AAA Success Criteria for some content."

LEVEL A
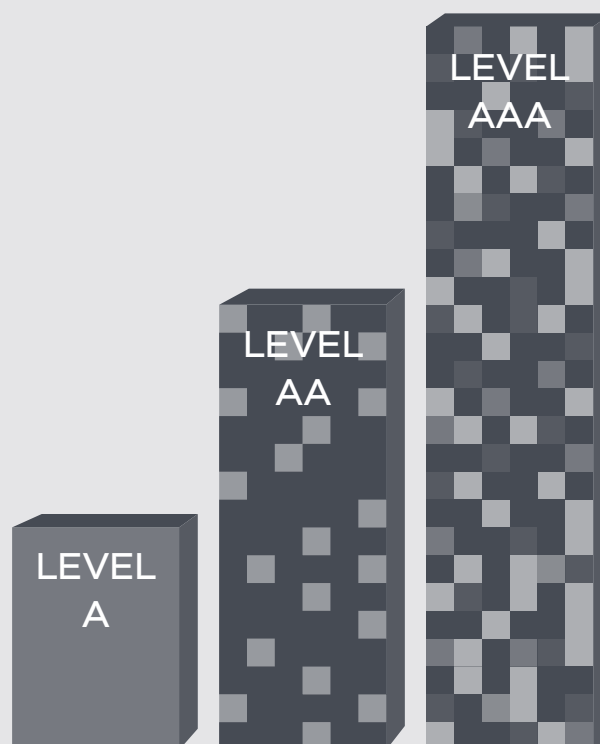
LEVEL AA

LEVEL AAA

There are variances in each level's specific requirements. For example, WCAG 2.0 requires that foreground and background colors have a 4.5:1 contrast ratio at Level AA, but a 7:1 contrast ratio at Level AAA.

# WHAT'S RIGHT FOR OUR SITE?

That is a gray area with considerable contrast. To be a little clearer, becoming ADA compliant will mean the same thing for every website. A site for a regional medical center must think of users beyond that of a commercial or retail site. But while their users' intentions and goals may be different, the users' limitations as defined by their disabilities remain the same.

In the end, it's not about meeting the easiest level or the most difficult. It's about good business.

**Your website is your front door to the world, and if that front door isn't wide open to everyone who wants to get in, why have one at all?**

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# a rebrand?

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