

FREE EBOOK

ACCESSIBILITY

How to make your website usable for everyone.



INTRODUCTION

“The power of the web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect.”

—**Tim Berners-Lee** | W3C Director and inventor of the World Wide Web

Your website is meant to be a place for your brand to connect with your audience—your whole audience. A place to give them a glimpse into the heart and soul of your organization. If just a certain percentage of your audience can engage with your website, though, you’re doing those who can’t a disservice. You want to be as inclusive as possible as an organization who exists to make an impact for good.

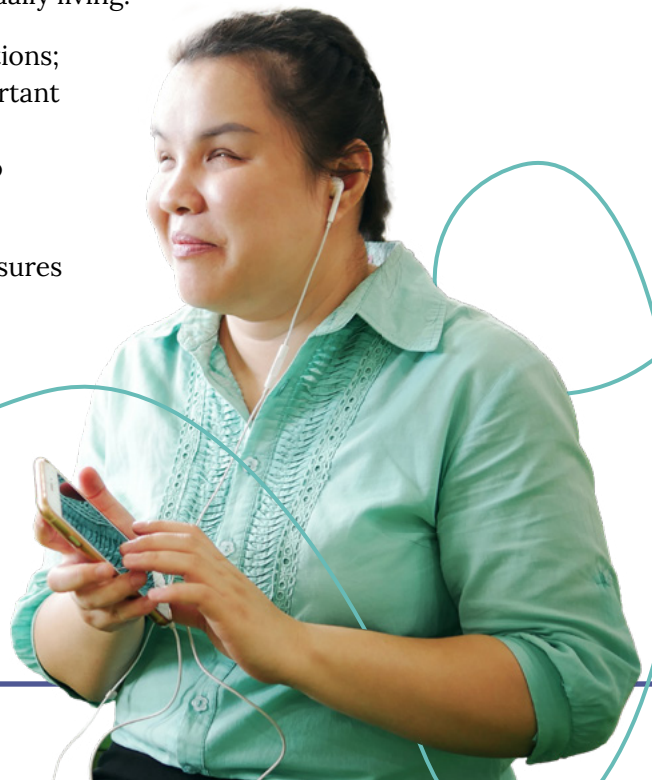
That’s why accessibility is so important.

People with disabilities may need to communicate in different ways than somebody without a disability. And according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

“Inaccessible web content means that people with disabilities are denied equal access to information. An inaccessible website can exclude people just as much as steps at an entrance to a physical location. Ensuring web accessibility for people with disabilities is a priority for the Department of Justice. In recent years, a multitude of services have moved online, and people rely on websites like never before for all aspects of daily living.”

Accessibility concerns are not just for specific organizations; they affect everyone who has a website. The most important question is how can you make sure you’re opening up your website to everybody, including those who need to communicate in a different way?

Let’s explore what website accessibility means and measures you can take to be sure that your site is accessible.



First, let's define accessibility.

Accessibility means that anyone can access, read, understand and use your website content. The Department of Justice has consistently deemed that the ADA's requirements apply to accessibility of website pages. Your website must be accessible and usable by people with disabilities if it's for use by the public.

Here are a few practical ideas of what this means:

- ▶ Closed captioning on videos helps those with a hearing impairment or disabilities. This can also benefit individuals in public places who are unable to use sound.
- ▶ Alt text descriptions of images and graphics that are announced by screen readers help those with sight impairments or disabilities.
- ▶ Enabling keyboard navigation shortcuts is helpful for those who may be unable to use a mouse.
- ▶ Headings to organize and structure content make it easier to navigate and comprehend.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) defines how to make your web content more accessible, and we'll go into more details throughout this ebook. But first, a simple way to evaluate your website's accessibility is to use the **POUR method**.

Perceivable. Is the content easily perceivable for all individuals?

Operable. Can those with disabilities easily navigate your website?

Understandable. Is all of your content easy to understand?

Robust. Does your website include content that can be interpreted by various platforms and tools, like those that help individuals with sight or hearing impairments?

If you answer “no” or “I don't know” to any of those questions, let's talk about easy steps you can take to make your website accessible to all.

We're going to focus on these three areas: alt text, website structure and closed captions.

HOW TO WRITE ALT TEXT

A picture may be worth a thousand words to someone who can see it, but what about those who can't? It's basically worth nothing—unless you use alt text to help tell its story.

Alternative text (or alt text) is a way of describing an image, graphic or visual on a webpage. Somebody who is visually impaired may be using a screen reader—alt text is what it reads to the user when it encounters an image on the page. Alt text can also be displayed in place of an image that won't load, which helps all users, regardless of ability.

To get started writing alt text, use this exercise: Imagine you're describing an image while talking on the phone. How would you talk about it? Make sure to give as much context as needed.

Here are some tips for writing alt text:

- ▶ Include any text or word bubbles within the image. Screen readers can't pick up text in images unless it's entered into the alt text.
- ▶ Use as much context as possible without adding unnecessary details. There are no character limits. However, you don't want your alt text to be so long that it causes problems for the screen reader.
- ▶ Don't keyword stuff—it doesn't help the user or your search rankings, and it could have a negative impact.
- ▶ You can include links to a longer description of the image outside of the alt text description. That way your website user can choose if they need or want to know more details.



Here's an image and some examples of alt text that vary in effectiveness. See which one works best? It's detailed, but not overly so.

Poor: Letterboard

Good: Potted plant and black letterboard

Best: A small pot of sprouts next to a black letter board reading: Difficult roads lead to beautiful destinations.

HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR WEBSITE

(+ HTML tags)

When navigating content on your website, headlines and structure help provide clarity. They break up large bodies of text or separate complex ideas into categories. That's why it's important to correctly input your HTML tags to your website. Screen readers will then be able to use headlines and site structures in the appropriate way versus delivering a jumbled experience for your users.

Consider how you might jump around on a page based on headings. When you input an `<h2>` heading tag for various headings (and so on for smaller heading tags), it allows someone using a screen reader to jump around between those h2 tags.

Screen readers also rely on HTML tags to tell them various intuitive information based on the tag. For example, a screen reader would be able to tell that `<p>` means a new paragraph and `` means an image is there.

Here are three HTML and site structure tips to guide you to a more accessible website:

- 1. Avoid using false headlines.** Text that is simply styled to look like a headline without the use of an `<h1>` – `<h6>` HTML tag can spell trouble for screen readers. When text is missing the structural HTML meaning, screen reader users are left without the functionality that structure provides. They may be forced to listen to all of the content and may skip important information because of frustration. If the headline is styled visually to look like a headline, make sure to apply the `<h1>` through `<h6>` headline tag.
- 2. When creating lists, use the preformatted bullet and numbered options.** When these options are used screen readers and keyboard tabbing can pick up on the list structure. Consider this: If you use an HTML numbered or bulleted list, the reader will hear 1 of 10 and so on, so the listener understands how long the list is and can skip parts if necessary or navigate back to an important point. They will be able to easily skip to the information that is most important to them.
- 3. Test the ease of navigating your website yourself.** Using your keyboard and a screen reader, you can put yourself in the shoes of someone who's trying to navigate your website—this will help you understand its accessibility. With a simple Google search, you'll be able to find tips and tricks on how to navigate using a keyboard, including hitting “SHIFT” and “TAB” to navigate backward.

One more note: Landmarks are also an important component of accessible websites, and Firespring's newest designs have them built in. [Learn more about landmarks.](#)

WHY YOU NEED CLOSED CAPTIONS AND HOW TO CREATE THEM

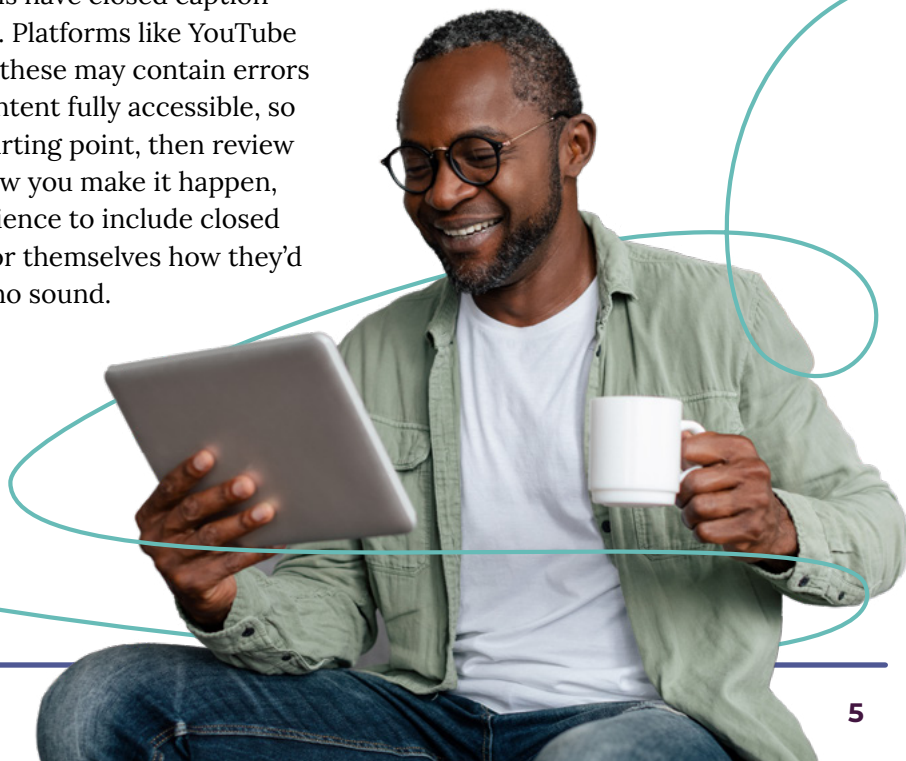
If content is king, video content is the king of kings—an important tool in every marketer’s arsenal. Video is one of the most engaging mediums with a reach that can’t be beat.

There’s just one thing: Not everyone can nor will consume your videos in the same way (with the sound turned up), so if you’re not making the right accommodations, you’ll leave many people out. People with hearing impairments (over 5% of the world’s population or around 460 million) should be able to interact with your content as well as those without, plus there are tons of public spaces where people are viewing videos, but they’re unable to use sound—and the answer to being inclusive for all of these people is closed captions.

Plus, there are other benefits to closed captions:

- 1. You’ll improve your SEO.** Search engines can’t watch or listen to a video (yet). That means they can’t index the content so that it shows up in search results. But they do index text, which is what you get when you include closed captions.
- 2. You can repurpose your video transcription for other content.** Have you ever created a video and thought, “That would make a good blog article,” or “We should create an ebook based on this?” Start with the transcription.
- 3. Closed captions improve a viewer’s comprehension.** Several studies have shown that captions help users remember more about the videos they watch—reading along with what they’re hearing helps them process and retain information.

The great news in all of this is that closed captioning is not hard to do: Video hosting and editing platforms have closed caption options available, and they’re easy to use. Platforms like YouTube automatically add text to video. Some of these may contain errors and aren’t sufficient for making video content fully accessible, so it’s a good idea to use these tools as a starting point, then review and revise the captions. Regardless of how you make it happen, it’s a win/win for both you and your audience to include closed captions, and let your audience decide for themselves how they’d like to consume your content: sound or no sound.



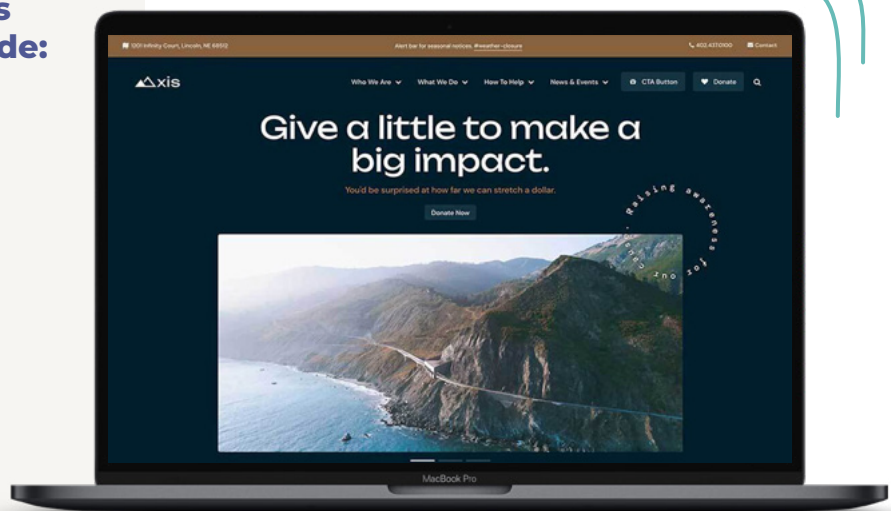
A WORD ABOUT FIRESPRING'S COMMITMENT TO WEBSITE ACCESSIBILITY

At Firespring, we're on the side of helping all potential website visitors have a good user experience. If you're looking for a solution that ensures access, our newest nonprofit website designs are built with accessibility in mind. That means you don't have to worry about overhauling your website or the code running your web design.

For example, Firespring's newest themes are built with "landmarks"—they define sections of the page layout in the underlying HTML code. These invisible landmarks allow users to scan a page, skip past repeated content or jump to the most important section for their task. Without the benefits of defined landmarks, your website may be more cumbersome for those who rely on alternative devices to consume your content.

Common landmarks in our themes include:

- ▶ Banners
- ▶ Primary navigation
- ▶ Search
- ▶ Masthead region
- ▶ Main
- ▶ Secondary navigation
- ▶ Footer



Accessibility is all about providing options for every user to consume your content. Whether they use a screen reader, braille refreshable keyboard or an out-of-the box digital device, these extra considerations make your content more inclusive. Built-in landmarks give screen reader users one more way to understand the layout and structure of a page and quickly get to the most important parts.

We're also proud to offer accessibility consultations for businesses and organizations. One of our certified accessibility experts can help review your website and supply a report to identify issues and provide recommendations to improve accessibility.

If making your website more accessible is a priority for your org, our experts would be happy to help. Get in touch at firespring.com/accessibility-assessment.