

Breaking Down Online Barriers for People with Disabilities

By **Shirley Sexton**, Director of Internet Marketing, Easter Seals
and **Andrea Knudsen**, Internet Marketing Manager, Easter Seals

In the 12 years since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), businesses and organizations in communities nationwide have made strides in accommodating people with disabilities. But while physical barriers in public buildings and workplaces continue to disappear, the design of many Web sites stands like a flight of stairs between users with disabilities and the potential of the Internet.

Easter Seals has actively supported the independence of people with disabilities for more than 80 years. The services we provide have helped relatives, friends and neighbors find jobs, go to school, travel and participate in community life. A leader in promoting access offline, Easter Seals recently took a hard look at its online presence about 90 Web sites representing national and local offices and decided to invest in tools to meet accessibility standards for individuals affected by a full spectrum of disabilities. These standards ensure that all visitors to Easter Seals sites are able to access resources, from locating services to finding information on specific disabilities and solutions to common challenges.

In Fall 2001, Easter Seals planned a strategic overhaul of <http://www.easterseals.org> and affiliated sites to create a more effective network of Easter Seals Web sites, and chose Convio's Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) tools to achieve its goals. Convio's commitment to Web accessibility was a key factor in that choice. What is an accessible Web site?

An accessible Web site is designed to account for differences in abilities among Internet users worldwide. Accessibility issues may include:

- **Mobility:** limiting a user's ability to use a keyboard or mouse
- **Vision:** requiring use of a screen reader, using a small screen (handheld computers and wireless telephones) or connecting to the site through a slow Internet connection
- **Hearing:** requiring captions or descriptions for sound and videos files
- **Cognition:** inability to understand certain types of information due to mental disabilities

Accessible design follows the principles of usable design, emphasizing easily navigable site architecture and fast download times. Site visitors who may not consider themselves "disabled" also benefit for example, people recovering from an injury or who have difficulty reading small type on a screen.

A thoughtfully designed site offers a flexible interface to meet each person's needs. Accessible sites usually include images with alternative text tags for graphics and

image maps, captioned audio and descriptions for video, and avoid the use of frames, confusing navigation and low-contrast text.

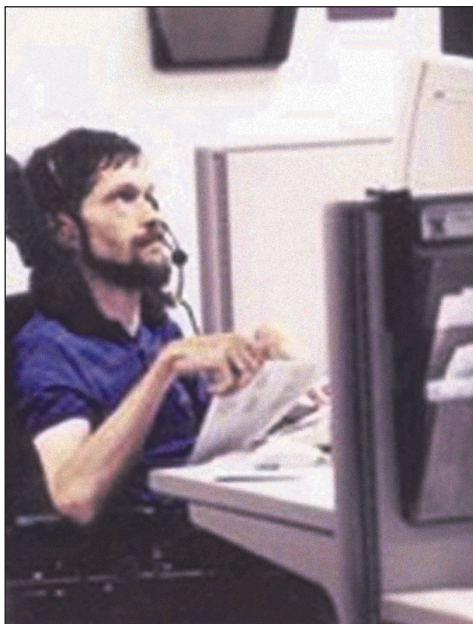
Why should an organization provide access for people with disabilities?

According to the U.S. Census' 1997 disability data, one in five Americans (20 percent) has a disability, comprising the nation's largest minority group. In the past 25 years, many more children born with disabilities have not only survived, but also have received a public school education, graduated from high school, earned undergraduate and post-graduate degrees and entered the workforce. Meanwhile, their Baby Boomer parents, now in their 50s and 60s, are beginning to experience the effects of aging, more frequently reaching for the ibuprofen and reading glasses. Their grandparents are living longer and working to maintain their independence.

Equality for people with disabilities including access to the Internet is a matter of civil rights. It's also good business sense. Ignore people with disabilities, and an organization ignores their combined discretionary income of \$175 billion (U.S. Department of Labor, July 1998).

How does an organization create an accessible site?

There are several good resources for organizations that need information on how to make their Web sites accessible. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has developed common protocols that promote the evolution of the World Wide Web and ensure its interoperability. The U.S. government also has provided federal accessibility guidelines in Section 508,



the 1998 Congressional amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which requires federal agencies to:

- Eliminate barriers in information technology;
- Make new opportunities available for people with disabilities; and
- Encourage development of technologies that will help achieve these goals.

W3C has established checkpoints identified by three priority levels: Priority 1 checkpoints have the greatest impact on accessibility and must be addressed; Priority 2 checkpoints should be addressed to ensure different groups are able to access information; and Priority 3 checkpoints may be addressed or certain groups may find it difficult to access information. Easter Seals meets or exceeds these requirements, when applicable. Easter-Seals.org also follows the guidelines of Section 508.

How can an organization make its existing site more accessible?

- Always use the alt attribute, an alternate text description added to a Web page's code, to describe the function of each image.
- Provide captioning and transcripts for audio and video.

- Use hypertext links that make sense out of context. For example, instead of "Click here," use "Click here for financial information."
- Use relative rather than absolute font sizes for the text on your site. This allows users with visual impairment to increase the size of the font from within their Web browsers so that they can see it more clearly.
- Visit <http://www.w3.org/WAI> for a full list of tips.

How can Convio tools help an organization make its site more accessible?

Convio offers an accessibility checker in its content management product. The accessibility checker functions like a spell checker the person creating the content does not have to have any HTML knowledge. With one mouse click, the accessibility checker scans each newly authored page for violations according to the W3C's guidelines.

Although the Internet has not yet realized its full potential to serve users with disabilities, Easter Seals' plan to make its 90 Web sites accessible will move the world another step closer to achieving that important goal. Easter Seals hopes not only to better serve its constituents, but also to be a model for how a corporation

or organization can make its Web site more accessible, usable and valuable to a broader range of people.

About the authors

Shirley Sexton is Director, Internet Marketing, Easter Seals national headquarters. Sexton leads Easter Seals Internet strategies, developing and managing organization-wide initiatives for online service delivery, brand building and fundraising.

Andrea Knudsen is Internet Marketing Manager, Easter Seals national headquarters. Knudsen manages site content and brand strategy, builds personal and corporate relationships with Easter Seals clients and donors, drives site traffic, analyzes online marketing efforts, and facilitates staff Web publishing.

Easter Seals provides services and support to more than one million children and adults with disabilities and their families each year through 450 centers nationwide. For more than 80 years, people with disabilities seeking greater independence have come to Easter Seals for therapy and expertise. For more information, see <http://www.easter-seals.org>.



To learn more about Convio products and services, please contact us at 1-888-528-9501 or email info@convio.com.

Reprinted with permission from Half The Planet Foundation.