Access by Design:
Web Sites for Audiences of All Abilities

Abstract: Accessible web sites are based on sound design principles. This idea market defines these principles of design, explores how they can be incorporated in web site design from the start, and discovers how good design can provide the same high-quality experience to audiences of all abilities.

Accessible web sites are not just for the disabled. Everyone benefits from a well-crafted web site based on sound design principles. Making a web site accessible is less a matter of following a set of mandated guidelines than it is a matter of following the principles of good design. We need to include accessibility in the design of a web site right from the start rather than impose it as an afterthought.

Well-designed sites are simple yet elegant. They get right to the point, and everything on the site is there to help the audience get that point. Above all, well-designed sites meet the needs and expectations of the audience. Focusing on basic design principles enables web designers to provide the same high-quality experience to audiences of all abilities.

Participants in this idea market will define their own principles of web site design and discuss how we can make web sites accessible to everyone by following these principles. We will discuss design principles in terms of how design elements are interpreted by different audiences and their adaptive technologies, including text-to-speech screen readers, screen enlargement programs, color manipulation programs, and alternative navigation devices. Samples of accessible and inaccessible designs will be available, but come prepared to contribute examples from your own experience.

Sample Web Site Design Principles
1. Simplicity
2. Economy
3. Coherence
4. Readability
5. Legibility
6. Clear Organization
7. Easy Navigation

Factors That Affect Accessibility
1. Font choice
2. Font and background color combinations
3. Use of images in place of text headings
4. Absence of HTML heading tags
5. Animations
6. Tables and frames
7. Graphics and image maps
8. JavaScript and Active X
9. Cascading style sheets
10. Dynamic HTML

By defining our own principles of web site design, we will discover new ways to improve the overall quality of communication of our web sites, enabling us to reach diverse audiences of all abilities.

Online References for Designing Accessible Web Sites:
Accessible Web Design from the California Home Page
        http://www.ca.gov/access/howtoweb.html
U.S. Government GSA Center for Information Technology Accommodation
        http://www.gsa.gov/coca/
Sun Microsystem's guidelines for accessibility
        http://www.sun.com/columns/alertbox/9610.html
Trace Research and Development Center "making information technology more usable for everyone."
        http://www.trace.wisc.edu
Read access instructions from an accessible page
        http://www.wgbh.org/wgbh/access/accesswgbh.html
Web Site Self-Evaluation Test
        http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/dmd/access/welcome1.htm
CAST: Bobby Web Site Analysis Tool
        http://www.cast.org/bobby/
HTML Accessibility Guide
        http://www.utoronto.ca/atrc/rd/html/html.html
What the Webmonkeys have to say about accessibility
        http://www.hotwired.com/webmonkey/design/design_more.html
        (search for accessibility)
Accessible PDF Files
        http://access.adobe.com/
Cascading Style Sheets, Level 2
        http://www.w3.org/TR/PR-CSS2/
Aural Cascading Style Sheets (ACSS)
        http://www.w3.org/TR/WD-acss

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Deborah recently left language teaching to devote herself full time to freelance writing. She is the author of a cookbook for the visually impaired, and she is currently writing an online advanced Spanish course for high school students.