



GOLD IN OLDIES

Want to get slapped with a fine of \$100,000 a day? Treat all your customers like they're 20 and your company just might. Legislation on accessible communications is about to take effect for many Canadian businesses. Here's how to nab the lucrative aging population

By Alicia Androich

If creating communications that are accessible for everyone, regardless of age or physical abilities, isn't near the top of your to-do list, consider this: many Canadian businesses could be charged with a \$100,000-per-day fine if they don't start doing it soon.

The reason for that disruptive landmine just ahead that few marketers see? In an acronym, it's AODA—the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act—the next phase of which comes into effect for all organizations in Ontario with one or more employees starting Jan. 1, 2012. A key piece of the legislation is a customer service standard to which public sector organizations already comply. Now it's the private sector's turn.

Originally passed in 2005, AODA is aimed at developing, implementing and enforcing standards to achieve accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities.

The act includes direction on transportation, built environment and employment that will be phased in until 2021.

But it's the customer service standard that you need to consider in the immediate future. Since marketers create brand messaging and resources through which customers learn how to access and use products and services—from websites to printed FAQ sheets—the coming legislation falls squarely into their domain.

Providing user-friendly online and print communications is becoming increasingly important as Canada's population ages. Statistics Canada data shows just how massive this audience is: there are almost 5 million seniors 65 and over in this country today. And as soon as 2026, seniors could exceed 20% of Canada's population.

David Berman, an expert in web accessibility

and principal of Ottawa-based David Berman Communications, adds that most people will likely have some sort of physical difficulty or disability in their lifetime, and nearly everybody starts to have some level of sight deficiency in their 40s. "If you're leaving that much of your audience behind, it's just bad business," he says.

Especially when you consider this group's purchasing habits. Susan Eng, vice-president of advocacy at CARP, a non-profit organization aimed at protecting the rights of aging Canadians, says CARP's online membership review shows a significant number have above-average income levels. And even if they're not buying for themselves, "they buy for their kids and

Basics for making your site accessible

Right into the landing zone

Users with motor skills issues appreciate sites that incorporate "landing zones." That way, rather than having to move a mouse precisely over a button on a site, the vicinity around the spot becomes clickable.

Get in line

Screen reader software reads out the text and describes graphics from a web page. To make a web page screen-reader friendly, the coding should use linearization to help software identify the order in which things should be read.

Picture it

An alternative attribute (or "alt attribute," in developer speak) is the hidden text behind each photo that describes it. This feature benefits the visually impaired and also helps people with a low-speed internet connection see phrases like "picture of a dog" when photos take a long time to download. It's also handy for smartphone users that turn off the graphics.

Frontload your sentences

Get straight to the point at the beginning of paragraphs. People using screen readers or braille readers tend to skim a web page by reading the first few words of a paragraph and then use "quick keys" to skip to the next one to find the information they need. "They can surf faster than fully sighted people using these tools so they get very frustrated if the material is not well organized," says web accessibility expert David Berman.

Caption it

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act points to the WCAG 2.0 web accessibility standard, a part of which demands captions and audio equivalents—an audio track description of what's going on—for video content. This tends to be the biggest cost with making a site accessible, says Berman. It could cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to do audio equivalents on training videos, for instance. The good news is the deadline for the equivalents is years later than the other AODA deadline.

grandkids, and they never wait for a sale for that," says Eng. She believes Canadian marketers are missing a huge opportunity by overlooking older Canadians.

Thankfully, it only takes a few basic steps to come into compliance on AODA's customer-service standard.

Is your website ready for 2012 legislation?



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CASE STUDY: AN ACCESSIBLE (AND EFFECTIVE) HR GUIDE

Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters (CME), a government-funded organization that supports small-to medium-sized businesses from all sectors, wanted to deliver an accessible and easy-to-absorb HR guide about hiring people with disabilities through its Business Takes Action (BTA) best practices program. The original 376-page PDF draft wouldn't cut it. Instead, the group delivered the guide in an interactive format via a microsite at BusinessTakesAction.ca. Carolina Perrotti, marketing and communications specialist for BTA, explains how.

- Users have the option to choose between four text sizes. The web developer included font size toggles that reside on every page in the site.
- The site reduced the use of sans serif fonts since the words blend together for many people with visual challenges. "The main feedback we received was [the new serif font] was easy to read," says Perrotti.
- A contrast tool was added so that users can adjust to higher contrasts to see certain shades better. "We moved away from light grey on white, which is usually very stylish to use, but for someone experiencing macular degeneration it's very tough to read."
- The site moved away from Flash to incorporate more accessible images. "For users with low or no vision it's a little more maintenance to include certain markups embedded in Flash, whereas you can actually embed markups or tags within TIFF images," says Perrotti. Someone using a braille reader or text reader is now able to capture more information from the website rather than missing its layers and backgrounds.
- Those accessing the HR guide can use speaking avatars. And rather than embed closed caption for deaf users, they can download the guide in PDF and Word files. For users with a visual impairment who don't want to listen to avatars, screen reader software is an option.

Accessibility audits are a good start. Christine Saunders, vice-president of Toronto's H2 Central Marketing & Communications, uses a website audit as an example. These audits can rank several quantitative and qualitative factors, from appropriate use of meta tags to contrast ratios (since it's hard for aging eyes to make distinctions between elements with similar tones).

Other plentiful resources can help Canadian marketers prepare for the looming legislation. NABS, the Canadian charity that helps people in the marketing and communications fields, has just created a toolkit to help marketers, agencies and media companies plan for the upcoming AODA standards. The NABS Turnkey Toolkit includes an HR training program that covers compliance and best practices.

If coming into compliance seems overwhelming, take heart. It's a misconception that preparing for the incoming 2012 legislation involves a massive rebuilding of all of a brand's marketing collateral and websites, says Saunders. "Usually you can do it just by lifting up the hood and giving [things] a bit of a tune... it's really about putting a few basic pieces in place for your marketing communications."

And the good news for web teams, says Berman, is the legislation doesn't require them to reconfigure existing sites to make them accessible. (And Berman knows all about creating accessible web content—his agency worked with IBM to help Statistics Canada deliver the first census Canadians could complete online in 2006.) AODA points to the WCAG 2.0 web accessibility standard, which is published by the World

Wide Web Consortium. It only has to be applied to new sites.

While there's no official word whether these AODA standards will eventually be applied in other provinces, Saunders believes the general policies and statements of goodwill will be reflected across the country. "I think as the population of disabled people is predicted to grow, that in the coming decades the legislation will move to reflect the size of that group of people."

That can only be a good thing, says Berman. He believes designing for people with disabilities tends to benefit everyone. For instance, he recalls the pushback when the government first made sidewalks more wheelchair accessible. People questioned spending millions of dollars considering the number of people in wheelchairs, but that modification also helped those riding bikes and pulling suitcases. "Now we'd all complain if that were gone," says Berman.

The same concept applies online. When a company's website gives the option for users to increase on-screen point size, it benefits those with sight impairments as well as the droves of people that make use of the handy feature on their handheld devices.

If you think enticing clients to get onboard with making their communications accessible for Canada's aging population may be tricky, you could always try the pitch Saunders' team at H2 Central uses to get a client's attention: "If you could make it easier for 20% of your customers to do business with you, would you?"

For more statistics on the power of Canada's aging population, check out pg. 70.

