

Leveraging the Accessibility Community As An Asset for Universal Design

Notes from the Boston Accessibility Unconference, September 17, 2011

Kimberly Patch, Redstart Systems

Invited expert, W3C Accessibility Initiative, User Agent Group

Contact: kim@redstartsystems.com

This was a discussion -- a brainstorming session. What follows is the content we created during the session. It's mostly in question-and-answer format. I took notes on the questions and answers. I didn't take notes on what I said, so I put some thoughts in below. They are probably better than what I actually said. Apologies ahead of time if you said something and don't see it here. I got most things down, but I'm sure I missed a few.

FYI This document was produced using speech recognition software.

What do accessibility and universal design mean to you in 10 words or less?

- riding in cars you need to have pages read to you
- curb cuts, ramps
- designing things well from the get-go
- captioning for video -- helps you learn how to read if English is not your second language
- audio description is also good for searching content
- accessible web pages improve search
- self-checkout devices in stores have speech output, this is good if you have trouble reading
- usability as best practice
- voice output helps learning disabilities
- there's a new font type designed for dyslexic readers -- I can read it better, easier for everyone
- web service that shows if a site is good for users is also helpful for Web designers
- build accessibility in -- start with accessibility
- text dyslexia -- if you put dashes in the right places its easier to read through the word
- population is aging -- small print is harder -- we benefit from big print everywhere
- accessibility and universal design are synonymous
- make things intuitive -- to everybody
- designed for universal design -- as good as possible without having to do a retrofit -- accessible from the get-go
- snazzy and cool and cost-cutting
- helps to put resources to better use -- rebuild it if it doesn't work -- efficient for everyone

- removing barriers to use and creating independence
- VCRs only some people can use
- universal design is not just about appearance but how we describe something
- universal design -- identify lowest common denominator and enhance
- it's about not sacrificing your core values
- presenting information in different modalities work for everyone
- why would you ignore a practical model
- social networks -- standards so there are no issues for applications
- I don't think universal design and accessibility are the same, universal design is catering to as many people as possible, accessibility is making so it meets specific needs

What's most important to you in terms of accessibility?

- text on the web
- color contrast
- keyboard accessibility
- train people from the start
- separate content from presentation

Modification of the question -- what's most important terms of most basic?

- keeping things simple and intuitive
- usability
- awareness of need
- be aware that there's a solution

Where did your awareness of the need for accessibility come from?

Most people in the room were familiar with disability and the need for accessibility from personal experience -- either for themselves or watching someone close to them. The rest of the people in the room had stories of people they respected who brought disability and accessibility to their attention. These included a teacher, a librarian and the experience of working for the elderly.

So how do we get the message out to people who don't have a personal connection or someone they admire who cares about accessibility? How do we increase awareness of the need?

I told about how at my company, Redstart Systems, we found that folks who need to use speech-recognition software because they can't use their hands are the best testbed for efficiency and productivity for everyone else. The best testers are folks who can't cheat -- who must use the software. Able testers will sometimes cover up inefficiencies with other input methods -- without even knowing it. The principles of efficiency that we uncovered in providing hands-free access also turned out to be valuable applied to a completely different application -- efficient dictation for clinicians.

So in our experience the accessibility community is a valuable asset for business.

How do we tell or show people that accessibility is important not only because it's the right thing to do but also because it can improve everyone's experience?

We came up with a lot of answers -- both sticks and carrots, but more sticks than carrots:

- regulate stuff - ADA
- procurement regulations and processes
- education
- has to be accessible in class
- hammer it home -- label everything
- better tools to make it easier for people to create accessible web sites
- encourage more development of extensions to modify browsers
- extensions marketed more universally
- more e-books to listen to in the car
- we've forgotten to communicate with each other -- does this work, why etc., we've become more litigious
- you bring in a user that represents accessibility and has talent and people will quickly understand from firsthand experience on the developer side how valuable that person is - firsthand experience on the developer side
- how do we get people to listen -- story of blind user who in one week recorded every problem and wrote to the companies involved in and got the same sort of answers ranging from sorry to we know we don't care.
- positive feedback is a catalyst for change
- letter of the law and spirit of the law
- a carrot - if you're selling something your text label can be a major draw for web site traffic
- we're \$1 trillion market with 2 billion discretionary spending - cost benefit analysis
- awards and humor
- bragging rights
- about conferences -- we need to not just talk to ourselves.

If you had an audience with the top software makers, what would you tell them?

- use text
- keyboard access
- make it usable
- keyboard access (again)
- set standards
- make it intuitive
- make it accessible
- documentation support for accessibility, and good access to the documentation
- modular design for different disabilities
- keyboard access (again)
- keyboard access (again)
- know what to make as user preferences -- users know their own needs

- we're all equal, stop excluding some of us
- making something usable versus accessible isn't mutually exclusive
- be prepared for getting older
- think about usability and user-friendly
- I would appeal to their wallets -- larger market, more money

Closing Thoughts

- we need more folks with disabilities to help with testing for major companies. Some of these companies don't know it yet. How do we let them know?
- a diverse group raises the intelligence of the group. We add diversity to a group.