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Ensuring Website Accessibility in the Self Storage Industry

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People across the globe use the Internet as a primary source of information, and for those with disabilities, common barriers make much of the content inaccessible. Videos without captions or transcripts, the inability to adjust text colors and sizes, and images without alternative text all make browsing the Internet difficult. Website accessibility is critical for all businesses, including those in the self storage industry.

If your website isn't accessible for everyone, it can lead to legal issues if not addressed properly. In fact, according to a recent blog, the number of website accessibility lawsuits filed in federal court under Title III of the ADA skyrocketed to approximately 2,250 in 2018, an increase of 177% from the year prior.

Self storage properties can provide a more inclusive user experience, reach more prospects and potentially avoid legal issues by ensuring their websites are up-to-date with the latest accessibility practices.

What is Website Accessibility?

Website accessibility refers to development and design best-practices needed so that all users, regardless of their ability, can perceive, understand, navigate and interact with a website. The most widely accepted standards for website accessibility are the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These standards provide guidelines for developing websites that accommodate users who rely on assistive devices, adding a layer of usability and improving the experience for all users.

Assistive devices, like screen readers, allow people with visual impairments to understand images and other visual content on a website. Accessible websites include features that improve usability with these devices.

Clearing Up a Common Misconception

Currently, although there are no enforceable legal standards to follow for website accessibility, a lawsuit may still be filed against your business. Most lawsuits filed against businesses for allegedly having inaccessible websites are filed under Title III of the ADA.

According to ADA.gov: *Title III prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in the activities of places of public accommodations (businesses that are generally open to the public and that fall into one of 12 categories listed in the ADA, such as restaurants, movie theaters, schools, day care facilities, recreation facilities and doctors' offices) and requires newly constructed or altered places of public accommodation — as well as commercial facilities (privately owned, nonresidential facilities such as factories, warehouses or office buildings)—to comply with the ADA standards.*

When the law was originally written,

companies did not conduct business online the same way they do today. No language in the law identifies websites specifically, though plaintiffs assert that websites are a "public accommodation."

Why Compliance is Important to Self Storage Operators

Self storage operators need to make website accessibility compliance a priority in order to mitigate legal risks and do their part in making the internet a better place for all users, regardless of impairment. Consider the following when updating your self storage website for accessibility:

Reduce risk. Get ahead of possible litigation by addressing accessibility issues, maintaining an accessibility statement and providing options for users to contact you when they encounter issues on your website.

Improve website performance. General accessibility updates can have a positive impact on overall website performance, including usability and search engine optimization (SEO).

Reach a wider audience. Following website accessibility best practices ensures all visitors to your website can have a good user experience and everyone can easily access information about your self storage facility.

Stand out from your competition. If a user cannot understand the content on your facility's website, they will likely move on to another one in your area. Ensure your website meets accessibility guidelines and it can help your facility stand out from local competition.

Show your customers you care. Communicate to your customers that you care by taking steps to make your website more accessible. An accessible website conveys to users that your company focuses on providing a positive experience for all of your customers.

Address These Factors to Make Your Website More Accessible

The World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) WCAG documents explain how to make web content more accessible to people with disabilities and impairments. "Web content" generally refers to the information on a web page or web application, including:

- User-facing information such as text, images, and sounds.
- Code or markup that defines structure, presentation, etc.

Following the WCAG principles helps you address factors to make your website more accessible for everyone.

WCAG Principles

Perceivable. Information and user interface components on a website or web application must be presented to the user in a way they can perceive. For example, text alternatives should be available for any non-text elements (photos, video). Use color, contrast and text size to make it easier for users to distinguish content on the page. Information should be presented in different ways without losing meaning.

Operable. Navigation and user interface components must be operable. For example, all website functionality should be operable through the keyboard. Pages display content titles, section headers, and labels to ensure navigability — and in a way that can be read without time limits. Be sure that content on your website doesn't cause seizures or physical reactions due to things like flashing content.

Understandable. User interface components and navigation must be understandable. For example, pages should be written in a readable language, not computer code or symbols. Labels or instructions are provided when content requires user input, and navigational mechanisms are repeated

on multiple web pages.

Robust. Content on your website must be robust enough to be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technology. Elements should have start and end tags and should not contain duplicate attributes.

Website Accessibility FAQs

Self storage operators have many of the same questions about website accessibility compliance. We answer frequently asked questions about website accessibility to give you more clarity on the subject.

Will making sure my website meets WCAG mean I won't be sued?

No, making sure your website meets WCAG principles doesn't guarantee you won't be sued. If you have legal concerns, we recommend consulting an attorney with experience in this field. However, by not addressing website accessibility, you put your business at greater risk of being sued.

How frequently do I need to check my website to ensure it's WCAG compliant?

Once your website has been updated to meet WCAG standards, minor updates could affect whether or not your site still meets those standards. It's a good idea to check that you are still in compliance every time you make a change to your website.

Does my online leasing software conform to WCAG requirements?

Most online leasing software platforms can be used with assistive devices, though the experience may be cumbersome. Consider providing a phone number to the self storage front office that can be used when customers with disabilities want to lease a storage

unit from your facility.

Should I include an Accessibility Statement on my website?

Yes. An Accessibility Statement provides guidance for users in case they encounter a usability issue with your website. This statement indicates that your business takes accessibility seriously and that you are working to provide a good user experience for all of your customers. The Accessibility Statement also needs to include a phone number that can be used during or after hours to assist customers.

Make Website Accessibility Compliance a Priority

As an innovative self storage operator, you have the opportunity to contribute to a more inclusive user experience on the internet, reach more prospects and mitigate legal issues by making website accessibility compliance a priority. Following WCAG standards by updating your websites to be perceivable, operable, understandable and robust helps make them more accessible to everyone, including users on assistive devices.

A better user experience and more accessible websites help you reach a wider audience, improve performance, stand out from your competition and show your customers you care. With a rise in website accessibility litigation, it's essential to ensure your websites are compliant.

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