

Achieving Accessibility in Email Marketing

For Marketers & Designers

What Does Email Accessibility Mean?

As digital marketing continues to play a bigger role in everyone's lives, email accessibility becomes much more important—especially considering that 320 billion emails are predicted to deploy daily by 2021.¹ In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that everyone can access and read your emails, including people with disabilities who use assistive technology, such as screen readers, magnifiers, joysticks and eye-tracking devices. Another way to think about this is that you must build in alternate, accessible routes that lead different end users to the same information.

Global Stats

320B

emails are predicted to deploy daily by 2021

\$1T

opportunity to tap into tremendous annual disposable income

80M

people with disabilities in Europe will be affected by the digital accessibility legislation enacted in 2016

650M

people with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region will be affected by the CRPD treaty

U.S. Stats

13.7%

of adults in the U.S. have a mobility disability

10.8%

of adults in the U.S. have a cognitive disability, such as difficulty remembering

6%

of adults in the U.S. experience deafness or a serious hearing disability

4.6%

of adults in the U.S. experience blindness or serious difficulty seeing

What Do Digital Accessibility Standards Look Like on a Global Scale?

Across the world, accessibility legislation is slowly but surely making its way into the digital sphere, affecting the way almost 800 million people, about 15% of the global population,² engage with online content. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a treaty mandating accessibility standards across physical and technological environments, has been ratified by 84% of Asia-Pacific countries.

This treaty will affect the way that 650 million people in the Asia-Pacific region live with disabilities.³ In 2016, the EU adopted its first piece of digital accessibility legislation, a directive that maps out a timetable for compliance standards through 2021. This legislation will affect an estimated 80 million people with disabilities in Europe.⁴ Accessible design on a global scale starts with

¹ The Shocking Truth about How Many Emails Are Sent, Campaign Monitor

² World report on disability, World Health Organization

³ Issue Paper: Asia-Pacific Bureau—Digital Accessibility, Internet Society

⁴ EU Accessibility Legislation: Keeping the Public Sector Accessible, ICS

legislation and succeeds with education. For example, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) in Hong Kong has created an incentive program that encourages accessible design in digital spaces, while also providing workshops to raise awareness—

and as a result, the number of accessible Hong Kong-based websites has tripled.⁵ While global legislation has its sights on website and mobile app initiatives, the effects will also inevitably translate into email marketing.

Why Should Your Email Marketing Comply?

For one, you should ensure you are in legal compliance by reviewing current requirements with your own legal counsel. But it's just as crucial to understand how marketing strategies impact the one billion people worldwide who have accessibility issues.⁶ These range from visual or hearing deficiencies to neurological impairments such as ADHD and dyslexia. If you're not currently making your emails accessible, you could be excluding a sizable percentage of your audience, while also missing out on a tremendous opportunity to tap into \$1 trillion in annual disposable income.⁷

Beyond fulfilling legal requirements, this path to accessibility presents major revenue potential. And by making your emails accessible, you're demonstrating that you empathize enough to consider all your potential customers and their specific needs—and that you're not excluding anyone—which can create a positive halo effect for your business or organization.

Here Are a Few Approaches that Help Make Email Marketing Accessible to All, Regardless of Ability:



INCORPORATE RESPONSIVE DESIGN

to ensure that content will scale and display properly on multiple devices, including screen readers.



INDICATE WHICH CONTENT IS IMPORTANT OR UNIMPORTANT

so devices can focus on essential content the user needs to understand the email.



USE SEMANTIC CODE

(e.g., tags like <h1> and <p>), which helps screen readers differentiate between content sections.



QUALITY CONTROL AND ASSURANCE PROCEDURES

must actively evaluate for compliance, accounting for a variety of devices and use-case environments.



USE SHORT, DESCRIPTIVE AND RELEVANT ALT TEXT TO DESCRIBE VISUAL CONTENT

so assistive devices can accurately describe content and enhance the reading experience.



CREATE A RELEVANT TEXT-ONLY OPTION

and send emails in a multi-part MIME format. Offer both plain text and HTML options at sign-up.



Examples of Accessibility Issues

GHOSTING



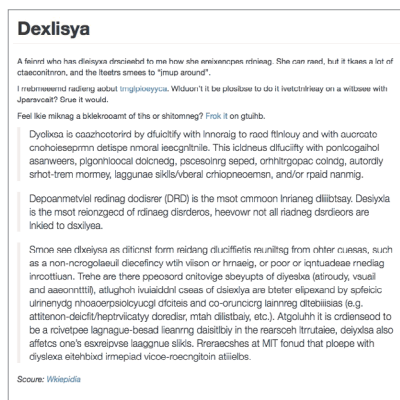
CATARACTS



LOW-ACUITY



DYSLEXIA



COLOR BLINDNESS



Vision/Print

Not everyone with a vision disability is unable to see. There are 253 million people worldwide who are visually impaired,⁸ and 320 million worldwide who are colorblind.⁹ Those with dyslexia, who comprise up to 20% of the global population,¹⁰ and other reading-related disabilities also encounter considerable hurdles when faced with text-heavy, misaligned emails. Older populations that experience myopia and may require glasses are also impacted by similar challenges. Consider the following best practices:

CHOOSE A READABLE WEB FONT

that's evenly spaced and not too condensed. Headlines should be at least 18 px and body copy should be at least 14 px.

ZOOM IN TO 200%

without losing readability, clarity or content.

⁸ Blindness and Visual Impairment Fact Sheet, World Health Organization, October 2017

⁹ Colour Blindness, Colour Blindness Awareness

¹⁰ Dyslexia Basics, International Dyslexia Association



Email Experience Council

LEFT ALIGN TEXT to produce a visual “rag” that provides an optimal reading experience. Harsh rivers and breaks in a justified paragraph are too difficult to follow. Aim for 50–70 characters per line.

SPACE OUT PARAGRAPHS by using a line height between 150%–200% for easier tracking.

SET THE HTML LANGUAGE ATTRIBUTE to ensure screen readers pronounce words correctly.

USE HEADINGS TO ORGANIZE page/email content. Screen reader users will scan content by jumping from heading to heading before listening to the entire email.

AVOID ALT TEXT TERMS LIKE “picture of,” “image of” and “link to,” as assistive technology will already relay this information. Use the fewest number of words necessary.

USE SUFFICIENT COLOR CONTRAST and don’t rely on one color alone to convey your message. Be cautious of red/green color combinations. Achieve a contrast ratio of 4.5:1 for body copy and 3:1 for large text.

LINK TO A VIDEO if the situation calls for a breakdown of more complicated information.

AVOID FLICKERING AND STROBE ANIMATIONS and large images with bright flashes. Avoid content that flashes more than 3 times per second.

USE ALT TEXT to present the content and function, not a description. Decorative imagery should have an empty ALT text value, and ALT text for images that link out should describe the link’s purpose.

HOT TIP!

Learn to use the Colour Contrast Analyser (CCA) tool to test for sufficient contrast. [Download the CCA here >](#)



Hearing/Audio

Globally, 466 million people experience hearing loss.¹¹ It’s important that external links with video or audio messaging have another sensory input option. Consider the following:

INCLUDE CLOSED CAPTIONING for live audio and video. Prerecorded audio-only and video-only media must have a transcript of the content. Prerecorded video with audio must have captions, audio description and a transcript of all audible and visual content. Captions must be synchronized, identify the speaker, include verbal content and describe meaningful non-verbal content, following caption standards.

CAREFULLY CHOOSE AUDIO EFFECTS AND BACKGROUND MUSIC as they may muddle video content by screen readers.

PROVIDE A WAY TO PAUSE OR HIDE CONTENT that moves or updates automatically (for 5+ seconds), and to pause or silence audio content that plays automatically (for 3+ seconds).

¹¹ Deafness and Hearing Loss Fact Sheet, World Health Organization, March 2018

Mobility/Touch

Those with a physical disability also require additional consideration in situations where clicking or tapping on a screen is necessary. Consider the following:

CREATE BULLETPROOF BUTTONS

(built at 48 px tall with code instead of an image) to distinguish them from other images and clearly link to a new destination.

GIVE LINKS MULTIPLE SENSORY CHARACTERISTICS

like color, boldness, underline, size, visual location, orientation and sound. Do not rely solely on one indicator.

HOT TIP!



Links should make sense when read out of context. Verify by using the tab key to jump from link to link and determine that the link text alone clearly tells you its purpose.

Cognitive

Users with cognitive disabilities could have trouble with memory or attention span—losing focus halfway through an email, for example. Consider the following:

CHUNK CONTENT INTO SMALLER PIECES and keep descriptive copy and subject lines brief.

CONSIDER CALENDAR REMINDERS to aid with memory lapses.

ESTABLISH A CLEAR HIERARCHY and place important information higher in the email for easier navigation.

PROVIDE LINKS TO VIDEOS for access to more digestible content.

You Wouldn't Build a Storefront Without a Ramp

Just as public spaces should be built to be as accessible as possible, your email campaigns should include the access points necessary to deliver content to all users. This represents a considerable amount of capital, both in savings from lawsuit losses to potential business growth and visibility.

Assistive technology and accessible designs not only help those with disabilities but give everyone a chance to easily interact with and understand information. Across industries, the concept of an inclusive experience is steadily gaining momentum, from NBA sensory rooms¹² to Apple's commitment to accessibility on all devices. There is considerable pull in the social sphere to emphasize inclusion and accessibility in all facets of daily life, which extends to the digital realm—especially with a tool as familiar and ubiquitous as email.

¹² NBA Creating Sensory Rooms at More Than Half of Its Arenas, Understood.org

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