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Articles

How Does the DDA Affect Website Owners?

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The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) came into force in October 2004. For many people, the obvious consequences of the act concern measures that help disabled people to access buildings, such as ramps to entrances, lifts and the position of light switches. While the DDA is relevant to landlords and property owners for these reasons, it affects website owners too.

A website is regarded, under the DDA, as a "service" and website owners should be aware of this. For several reasons, it's possible that websites will be more heavily targeted under the DDA than buildings because:

- disabled people may be more inclined to access services online rather than visit a business' premises.
- websites are in the public domain and, therefore, easy for authorities to access and check
- it is almost certainly less expensive to rectify accessibility issues with a website than it is with a building

How does this affect me, as a website owner?

The DDA does not go into detail about what a website owner should / should not do in order to achieve accessibility compliance. Instead, it demands that a website owner take "reasonable steps" to ensure either that their website is accessible or that an alternative service that is acceptable to disabled users is made available.

This is broadly interpreted to mean that a website should be compatible with "screen reading" software, which a blind or partially-sighted user may well use in order to digest content on the Internet. A poorly built site will not enable screen reading software to access its content fully or correctly; a well built site, on the other hand, will enable full access to semantically accurate content.

There are various validation tools that a website owner can use to check the accessibility of their site. While these tools, such as the W3C's Markup Validation Tool at <http://validator.w3.org>, are not legally-enforced tests, they do provide a good benchmark of the "quality" of your website's construction.

So what should I do?

As a website owner, you should contact your website designer for advice, as they should know, based on their experience, what can be construed as "reasonable steps" with regards to your website's accessibility.

You can also try some of the online accessibility tools as these are generally free to use.

Your solicitor will be able to advise on the specifics of the DDA and how this may affect your website and, similarly, your insurance firm can confirm whether you would be protected by your existing policy(-ies) against a claim under the DDA.

In a nutshell...

The DDA is now a well-established law and it seems likely that more and more businesses will be prosecuted under the Act for non-compliance. You don't want to be one of the businesses affected by this so it is important that you take (and document) "reasonable steps" to bring your website into line with current accessibility guidelines.

Why not consider this a positive business development? There are approximately 8 million disabled people in the UK, some of whom may well be prospective clients of yours, so why not improve their experience of using your website with a view to generating more online sales or business leads?

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