# The Virtual Lobby: Is Your Website as Welcoming as Your Front Desk?

Many hoteliers are well aware of the new regulations issued in 2010 under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), especially the specifics about how to handle reservations for accessible guest rooms.

Hotel operators know they need to provide detailed information about the hotel’s accessibility features, ensure that guests with disabilities can book accessible guest rooms in the same ways that standard rooms can be booked, and guarantee and hold reserved accessible rooms. Those activities are likely to involve the use of websites!

Online hotel room bookings have increased dramatically in just the past few years. The use of mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones is also growing significantly (recent statistics indicate that 65% of same-day hotel reservations are made from smartphones\*).

Most hotels these days have an online presence through independent or corporate websites, and often via merchant sites like Travelocity and Orbitz as well. Websites feature colorful images and detailed information about properties, services, and local communities, and they offer a way to make room reservations that’s convenient for both guests and hotel staff. But guests with disabilities may encounter difficulties gaining access to websites and taking advantage of the convenience they offer.

Just like brick-and-mortar buildings, websites need to be designed with accessibility in mind to ensure they are usable by people with a variety of capabilities and limitations. Many accessibility features are relatively easy to implement on existing websites, as well.

## What Are the Barriers?

People with various types of disabilities encounter barriers online. People with mobility disabilities, especially those that affect the use of their hands, may not be able to use a standard “point and click” mouse; they may use alternate input devices or software that allows them to interact with the system by speaking, or they may simply use keyboard strokes to input commands. People with vision disabilities often have the same limitation; if they can’t see where a mouse is pointing, they have to use an alternative input method. Certain website features can prevent or interfere with the use of these alternatives, so developers need to ensure flexibility.

Many people who are blind or have low vision use “screen readers,” which are software programs that scan content and convert text to mechanized speech – essentially reading material out loud. But screen readers can only read *text*; they can’t interpret photographs, images, or other graphic elements that lack alternative text in their “behind the scenes” coding. Alternative text (or an “alt tag”) is a brief text description of a visual image. Screen readers can perceive an alt tag and read it, so the user can get the information the image conveys.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing may need alternatives to access audible information such as speech or other sounds. For example, an audio-video clip without captions is only half the story. Captions – on-screen text of speech and sounds – provide the information in a way that can be seen rather than heard.

These are just a few examples of the problems that can occur if websites lack accessible features. Any organization advertising or conducting business online has good reason to be interested in accessibility.

## The Business Case

Many website accessibility features benefit users who may not have disabilities, including people who are new to using the Internet, and people using mobile devices, older equipment, or slow Internet connections.

For example, alt tags make information available to anyone who has turned off images. People using smartphones often turn off images for the sake of economy, and people with slow Internet connections might do so in order to speed up processing. The information in alt tags is also picked up by search engines, which can help drive more traffic to the business.

Making sure that websites are accessible and user-friendly is also socially responsible; it may enhance your public image and increase your customer loyalty.

Additionally, accessible websites may help reduce legal liability, especially in light of the new ADA regulations designed to promote parity in room reservation systems, as well as future rulemaking activity on the horizon.

## Get Ahead of the Curve

The Department of Justice (DOJ) issued an Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) to signal its intent to consider revising the ADA regulations to address websites operated by covered entities, including hotels and other businesses. The Department has always held that the general provisions of the ADA require that businesses ensure equal and effective opportunities for individuals with disabilities when websites are available to communicate or conduct business. Now DOJ seems poised to establish a more specific framework. Although the initial public comment period has already closed, there will be additional opportunities to participate in the rulemaking process as it moves forward.

In the meantime, businesses can benefit from getting ahead of the curve.

* Make it your policy and your goal to have an accessible website
* Talk to your web developers; find out about their knowledge, understanding, and experience related to accessibility
* Insist that accessible practices be followed when developing or updating your website

\*Statistic Brain: <http://www.statisticbrain.com/internet-travel-hotel-booking-statistics/>

### RESOURCES

Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)

<http://www.w3.org/WAI/>

Part of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the WAI provides information, guidelines, tools, tips, presentations, and tutorials related to online accessibility.

U.S. Department of Justice

<http://www.ada.gov/>

DOJ provides information and materials on the ADA and its regulations, as well as proposed rules and rulemaking activities.

ADA National Network

*Hospitality Initiative*

<http://adahospitality.org/>

1-800-949-4232 V/TTY

Ten regional centers across the country provide information, guidance, and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act.

*This document was developed by the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center under a grant from the Department of Education (DOE), NIDRR grant # H133A110017. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the DOE, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.*