



Digital Accessibility in E-Commerce

How to create accessible, engaging, and impactful e-commerce experiences

Leading online retailers spend millions annually to maximize the effectiveness of their e-commerce experiences. However, a large segment of the population still faces obstacles when trying to shop online: people with disabilities. Millions of U.S. consumers have a disability that may affect how they interact with digital experiences—or whether they can interact at all.

Creating accessible e-commerce experiences means ensuring every consumer, including consumers with disabilities, can engage and shop successfully. For example, can they find the right item, add that item to a shopping cart, and complete a payment? If even one small step in this key user flow contains a digital accessibility barrier, you could be putting sales at risk. And, in a market where organizations can spend millions to boost conversion rates, even incrementally, ensuring experiences work for every visitor is a crucial opportunity to drive maximum return on investment. Plus, an accessible digital experience reduces your risk of a reputation-damaging lawsuit.

So, where and how do you begin? In this guide, we explain the impact and importance of digital accessibility, its business benefits, and the six steps every online retailer needs to take to make an e-commerce experience accessible for the largest possible audience.

Growing channels, shrinking reach

E-commerce is here stay. According to [U.S. Department of Commerce \(DOC\) data](#), total e-commerce sales reached a new record of \$1.03 trillion in 2022, a 7.7 percent increase from 2021. In all, 14.6 percent of total sales in 2022 took place through e-commerce channels, consistent with the DOC's 2021 findings. To meet strong consumer demand online, retailers are spending many millions to make shopping experiences more captivating and dynamic. But too often, retailers unintentionally limit the success of these experiences by neglecting the needs of people with disabilities, a key consumer group. [More than 96 percent](#) of the million most popular homepages contain accessibility barriers for people with disabilities. For retailers, those barriers spell a particular problem when you consider that [69 percent of people with disabilities](#) will simply leave an inaccessible website and search elsewhere to find what they want.

Put simply, if your e-commerce experience is among the 96 percent, you're losing shoppers—and their expendable income. Maximizing conversion and revenue requires designing and building experiences that are accessible for all.

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Digital accessibility in practice

Digital accessibility is the practice of ensuring that the largest possible group of consumers can use your digital experience successfully. It recognizes that people interact with technology in diverse ways, and it accounts for those differences by providing accessible solutions.

An accessible e-commerce experience is usable for everybody, including people with disabilities. When your website or app is easy to navigate, simple to understand, and consistent, users find what they want faster and with less frustration, which leads to increased sales. In fact, research by Forrester found that 80% of consumers will spend more with organizations that offer an exceptional customer experience. But if consumers can't easily flow through the buying journey, they will take their business elsewhere—and they won't stop to ask you for help before they do.



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Want to learn more about WCAG?

[Access our Must-Have WCAG Checklist](#) for an interactive guide to validating your e-commerce site's accessibility.

Consider these examples:



A blind customer uses a screen reader to browse your online store. If your product images don't include alternative (alt) text, that user may not know which version of a product they're selecting. And alt text is just one consideration. Your flows and forms must also be coded to correctly communicate with a screen reader. If not, this customer can't complete their checkout process.



A customer with a motor disability may use a keyboard instead of a mouse to navigate your site. Your user flows need to be keyboard compatible—meaning this customer can logically “tab” through each page, easily finding, and purchasing, what they need.



A customer with a cognitive disability that impacts their memory and attention will need a simple interface—one that allows them to focus on selecting and purchasing their desired product without being distracted by flashing they can't pause, or incessant pop-ups that get in their way.

To create accessible digital experiences,

teams follow the standards set forth in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). WCAG is the international benchmark for web accessibility, with more than 70 specific success criteria developed to support accessible design and development.

Maximize conversions, and more: The added benefits of accessibility

Working-aged adults with disabilities in the U.S. control an estimated \$490 billion in disposable income annually. Create an experience everyone can enjoy, and you're tapping into this spending power. Plus, a frictionless buying journey will keep consumers coming back. But there are other major benefits to ensuring accessibility, both for your brand, and your bottom line.

Reduced legal risk:

Every year, thousands of businesses are sued because of an inaccessible website, app, or other digital product. By the numbers, roughly 14,000 digital accessibility lawsuits were filed from 2017 through 2022 in U.S. federal courts, with over 3,000 filed in 2022 alone. And retail consistently remains the most targeted industry. If you haven't made your e-commerce experience accessible, your organization is at risk of becoming the target of a lawsuit, which comes with negative financial and reputational consequences.

Boost to brand reputation:

One way in which brands can authentically demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is to prioritize digital accessibility. Consumers are more conscious of brands that share their values—DEI among them—and they're more likely to spend their money with those that do. Inclusive organizations receive an average of 28 percent higher revenue, 30 percent greater economic profit margins, and twice the net income of less-inclusive competitors.

Getting started: Six practical best practices

So where do you begin when it comes to creating accessible, engaging e-commerce experiences?

Start with these six steps:

- 1 **Shift left.**
- 2 **Test** with users in mind (*and in the room*).
- 3 **Focus** on the critical few tactical improvements.
- 4 **Check** third-party plugins.
- 5 **Think** about the elements beyond your e-commerce store.
- 6 **Commit** for the long term.

1 Shift left.

Great e-commerce experiences start with great user experience (UX) design. Accessible e-commerce experiences start the same way. The earlier you incorporate digital accessibility into your experience creation process, the fewer barriers you'll need to address before launch.

Shifting left starts with the foundational style principles guiding your content creation. Does your color palette support sufficient color contrast for people with color blindness or low vision? Are there accessible design considerations for your interactive buttons? Is your content written in a way that's easy to understand? Building accessibility into your design process prevents potential issues from making their way into the later-stage development process, saving you time and money. In this integrated approach, digital accessibility isn't just one person's, or one team's, job. The responsibility is shared by everyone involved in creating a digital experience.

If your e-commerce experience is already live, shifting left may mean approaching your site updates with these questions in mind. Consider the specific needs a user may have, and design that experience to accommodate those needs.

“There’s no established team managing accessibility at CarMax. It’s a shared priority, part of our company culture. When you embed accessibility in team processes and share responsibility, you also embed those values at a team level.”

Molly Covert,

Product Designer and Manager
of the Horizon Design System,
CarMax



2 Test with users in mind *(and in the room).*

You don't know what you don't know. There are a variety of free testing tools that will provide a snapshot of your site or mobile experience's accessibility "health" as a benchmark to get started. But some accessibility barriers can only be caught by a person actually navigating your site—so it's a best practice to engage a team to perform manual and functional testing. For the most thorough and authentic results, this team should include people with disabilities who are native assistive technology users.

Start by addressing barriers that are present in critical user flows like your checkout process. When you prioritize testing and fixing these key user flows, your customers can accomplish what they set out to do, and you can tackle the other barriers over time.

To learn more about testing user flows

and the advantages of this approach, access our full guide: [The New Accessibility Audit: A User-First Approach.](#)



3 Focus on the critical few tactical improvements.

The vast majority of accessibility barriers are often the same issue repeated across your site. Here's a handful of common accessibility barriers to address that, when fixed, will make a significant improvement:

- **Descriptive alternative text.** Be sure every non-decorative image has meaningful alt text so that screen readers can communicate important details about that image to users.
- **Proper color contrast.** Contrast is the difference between a foreground color and its background color. If your splashy landing page has a colored hero banner with text that doesn't meet contrast requirements, a user with low vision or color blindness may not be able to read it.
- **Video captions.** Visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing need captions to engage with your video content. Captions are also helpful for any user who's chosen to lower their volume or turn it off altogether.
- **Keyboard navigation.** Your user experience should be designed to support individuals who navigate by keyboard as well as people using a mouse. As keyboard users "tab" through a page, are there proper focus indicators showing where they are? Can they easily select any link? If "tabbing" takes an unusual amount of time, or gets them lost on the page, there's work to do.
- **Accessible forms.** Be sure your forms are keyboard accessible and contain proper labels that indicate the purpose of each field. Consider the form a consumer needs to populate to pay for your product. If it's not designed to be accessible, the sale is incomplete.

While this is by no means an exhaustive list of barriers to address, fixing these common mistakes will make a significant impact on your site's overall usability.

4 Check third-party plugins.

E-commerce experiences often integrate third-party plugins, like payment-processing plugins. While you can't control whether these plugins are accessible, you can control whether you incorporate them into your experience. As the operator of a site, you are responsible for the accessibility of the experience, even if it's provided by a third party.

Vendors are increasingly prioritizing digital accessibility; require proof of accessibility in your procurement process. Contract with those who will support, rather than unravel, your accessibility progress.

5 Think about the elements beyond your e-commerce store.

Your digital marketing campaign draws customers to your e-commerce experience. Is your marketing content accessible? Your emails? Your social media posts? Your videos? The digital documents you're sending? Beyond just your web or mobile user flows, consider the entire user journey—from awareness to purchase. Our guide, [Inclusive Digital Marketing](#), offers tactical advice for developing accessible campaign elements across channels and content formats.



6 Commit for the long term.

You're continuously updating your digital channels with new merchandise, new content, and new features. With every update, embed accessibility enhancements into your design process, and build with them in mind. Commit to a shift-left mentality, and view accessibility as an ongoing journey, not a fixed destination.

In practice, this can also mean a commitment to training and enablement. Engaging a comprehensive digital accessibility solution provider is the steadiest path to long-term enablement for internal teams. Seek a partner with dedicated training courses specific to roles like UX design, development, quality assurance (QA), and more. With the right support, over time, you'll build a motivated team of internal champions forwarding accessibility goals within your organization.

“Accessibility isn’t a one-time fix; it’s a cultural change. It should be a routine best practice like managing data privacy. It’s an essential part of running the business.”

Bakty Motiram,

Senior Program Manager,
Snapfish



Accessible design is beautiful design

An accessible website does not have to be stripped of modern functionality or lack sophisticated design. Quite the opposite, in fact. As the WCAG standards evolve, they've kept pace with many advanced trends in UX and user interface (UI) design, and accessibility-savvy designers are incorporating these standards throughout their entire creative process.

We must abandon the old-school thinking that accessible and beautiful can't go hand-in-hand. Or that you have to completely overhaul your organizational brand standards and visual identity to prioritize accessibility. Accessible e-commerce experiences can be visually striking, with the added benefit of being more usable for more people.

An experienced digital accessibility solution provider will help you navigate this balance, advising on everything from your design system and manual testing process to your long-term accessibility strategy (and every step between).

A powerful partnership

Digital accessibility is complex, and there's no need to go it alone. Level Access has extensive experience helping e-commerce organizations create accessible, compliant, and engaging e-commerce experiences.

Our solution equips organizations with advanced technology and expert support, including code-level technical assistance, in-depth, role-specific accessibility training, and legal guidance.

We're trusted by the world's leading brands, and we're ready to partner with you.

“Level Access helps us proactively address accessibility, beginning in the design concept phase and continuing through engineering, QA, and ongoing monitoring. It's been a very valuable partnership!”

Robertson Odom,

Principal Software Engineer,
CarMax



Let us show you how we do it.

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