Online Groceries: A Convenience to an Obstacle

User1st tested some of the most popular online food order sites for accessibility, finding critical errors that would prevent a person with visual impairments from ordering necessities

WASHINGTON (May 4, 2020) - Online shopping, once thought of as a convenience, has become an essential service for many but it may be presenting more obstacles than solutions. In some cases, online shopping may be the only way that some persons with disabilities and senior citizens have access to groceries and other necessities in order to avoid contact with the coronavirus. The problem – the majority of websites are inaccessible to people who may need to use assistive technology, such as a screen reader, or keyboard navigation to place their grocery orders.

Many consumers are already complaining about limited delivery windows, but for some persons with disabilities, they may not even be able to add items to their cart. Like many businesses, grocers may not have considered persons who use assistive technologies when building their website. Now, however, that issue is exacerbated by the proliferation of online ordering.

"As a volunteer delivery service, accessibility is always front of mind. Many of the people we serve are living with disabilities that make it difficult to engage with delivery services online. We are constantly learning more and adapting our policies to be more accessible to everyone in need of our services during this pandemic," said Liam Elkind, co-founder of Invisible Hands. "User1st has been essential to this process, advising us on accessibility and helping us develop a widget for our website to make our service disabled-friendly."

According to Statistica, online grocery sales were projected to reach almost $30 billion in 2021, up from nearly $22 billion in 2019. Due to social distancing and stay-at-home orders in the wake of the coronavirus, online grocery shopping is shattering all statistical predictions. The New York Times reports that a study by Earnest Research, which tracks credit card and debit card purchases of nearly six million people in the United States, shows a 79% increase in use of online grocery stores from March of last year. With many grocers limiting store hours and providing online shopping and curbside pick-up tips, consumers are even more encouraged to go online for their needs.

Downloads of Instacart, Walmart Grocery and Shipt have surged 218%, 160%, and 124% respectively just since February. The number of households now ordering groceries online is up 145.3% (39.5 million) compared to a Brick Meets Click survey in August 2019, which found 16.1 million, or 13% of households, bought groceries online that month. The Adobe Digital Economy

index reported "that from March 13-15 [2020], daily U.S. e-commerce sales jumped 25% from earlier in the month, largely driven by a doubling of daily online grocery sales."

User1st tested some of the most popular online order sites for accessibility such as Uber Eats, Door Dash, Instacart, and Grubhub. While User1st found these sites are doing a great deal to better serve their customers, some additional quality assurance measures (like manual testing with a screen reader or keyboard navigation) should be included in their accessibility effort to ensure the inclusivity of persons with disabilities. User1st performed manual and automated testing and found critical errors that would prevent a person who uses a screen reader or keyboard navigation due to mobility issues from ordering from these sites. Errors include but are not limited to proper context/description of a link, labeling of photos, separating and describing photos of food.

"Digital accessibility to food, cleaning supplies, personal care items, pet supplies and other critical items is non-negotiable for people with vision impairments. With brick and mortar access limited at best, significant barriers to shopping online thrust even greater negative impact on individual with vision impairments and those who cannot use website without needed adaptive features," said Susan Robinson, Speaker, Business Advisor and Interim Executive Director, InTandem Cycling.

Approximately 20% of Americans are living with some type of disability. More than half have disabilities which can make navigating websites challenging. Digital accessibility ensures grocers can reach the broadest, most diverse set of customers possible. It protects the grocer's reputation, while improving users' experience, and reducing risk of litigation.

The number of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) digital accessibility lawsuits totaled more than 2,000 by the end of November 2019, according to law firm Seyfarth Shaw. This does not account for demand letters and regulatory enforcement actions. Already in 2020, more than 500 digital accessibility lawsuits were filed prior to the coronavirus, and mainly in the retail sector. A recent article by Fox Rothschild LLC notes the critical importance of business websites and mobile apps being digitally accessibility to persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their obligations under Title III of the ADA.

"For shoppers with disabilities, their online grocery options can be much more challenging and extremely limiting, especially if they have vision or mobility impairments that impact website use," says Amihai Miron, CEO of User1st a leader in digital accessibility solutions. "Creating an accessible online experience, will ensure some of the most vulnerable people in our society will have access to food and essential goods."

How can grocers improve the user experience for persons with disabilities and protect themselves from litigation? The most common accessibility barriers mentioned in lawsuits involve the use of keyboard navigation and screen readers.

There are many people who navigate the Web without using a mouse due to low vision, limited mobility or dexterity, not having use of one or both hands, tremor, or arthritis which makes using a mouse painful. So, ensure the website works with keyboard navigation. A simple way to test is buy using the "tab" and "enter" keys to navigate the site and trying to complete and action like placing items in a cart without the use of a mouse.

Use Alt text to provide good descriptions of the images found on the website, such as "red organic apples", "skinless chicken breast", or "store brand tortilla chips." This allows users with vision impairments a description of the image while using a screen reader.

Be sure to fix any color contrast problems. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) recommend a contrast ratio of 4.5 to 1 for normal text, with 3 to 1 recommended for large text. Tackle this issue first to give a site a quick boost to its inclusive and accessible design. It will help all customers, not just those with disabilities.

Don't overcrowd the site and ensure everything is labeled correctly so it can be found using the search tool. Improper field labels can be a huge barrier for persons with disabilities to find what they need.

For many grocers, fixing accessibility barriers can be a daunting task. So where should they begin and how do they know if their website is accessible?

User1st aims to improve the digital accessibility through technology solutions that enable persons who use assistive technology to navigate websites and mobile applications successfully. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, User1st is offering special subscription rates to grocers and retailers in order for persons with disabilities to get the critical resources they need.

But here are things that grocers can do in preparation for adding digital accessibility tools to their digital assets. The first and easiest task is for them to add an accessibility statement to their website which communicates the company's commitment to an accessible customer experience. Develop a compliance program to ensure that all future digital assets are developed for accessibility. Work with a third party to determine the current state of an organization's digital assets. Finally, work with internal development teams and vendors to ensure future digital assets are accessible. [Also read User1st's tips for accessibility testing and compliance](#).

Technology has revolutionized the way we shop. Digital accessibility is a win-win for all because grocers can increase revenue and persons with disabilities will have access to food without exposure to the virus. Caring for customers through digital accessibility also demonstrates a grocer's willingness to go beyond ADA compliance. Grocers can keep their digital doorways open through digital accessibility even if storefronts have limited access. There is no greater time than now to serve persons with disabilities. We are in this together.

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About Invisible Hands

Invisible Hands is a community-based group of grassroots organizers and committed volunteers who deliver groceries, medicine, and other necessities free of charge to the most vulnerable members of our community facing the COVID-19 pandemic. They have been so inspired by the hard work of the medical practitioners on the front lines facing this disease who risk their lives to help those most in need. As people with some time on their frequently washed hands, they are committed to serving our neighbors and keeping everybody safe and healthy. For more information on how to reach Invisible Hands and place orders, visit the website at https://invisiblehandsdeliver.org.

About Susan Robinson

Susan Robinson is a leader making an impact on the world in a truly unique way. Through her corporate and conference keynote, commencement addresses, workshops, client initiatives and writing, she masterfully blends 25+ years of multi-sector leadership with her experiences being legally blind to shift thinking, elevate potential and inspire action. She has worked with global firms and Fortune 500 companies, top not-for-profit organizations, leading universities and the United Nations. For more information about Susan, visit her website https://www.susancrobinson.com/.

About User1st

Founded with the purpose of making the power of the internet accessible for persons with varied and changing abilities, User1st provides the most advanced web accessibility solutions on the market for testing, remediation, monitoring, and compliance. User1st's solutions are deployed in a variety of industries worldwide, including financial services, retail, government, education, and healthcare. For more information, visit http://www.user1st.com and follow User1st on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.