Top tips for accessible communications

This guide is for marketing and communications professionals who want to communicate more accessibly, and ensure that the needs of disabled customers and stakeholders are being met within their organisation.

This advice will help you to:

- Understand the importance of disability to your communications.
- Be aware of the communication barriers experienced by disabled people and your role in addressing them.
- Make immediate, practical changes to your communications to better engage with both disabled and non-disabled people.
- Be aware of assistive technology and alternative formats.
- Use inclusive design while maintaining creativity and brand integrity.
- Understand the importance of user testing, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Make sure your designers and other suppliers understand accessibility.
- Understand best practice and the law.

Accessibility: not just an HR issue

Accessibility matters in marketing and communications as much as in Human Resources.

Being aware of the diverse needs of customers and stakeholders is vital for good communications.

What is disability?

Disability includes: physical, sensory and cognitive disabilities as well as long-term health conditions.

- The Equality Act (2010) defines disability as: “A substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.”
- Disabled people are not a homogenous group. They have different needs, interests and views.
- Some disabilities are visible, others are not. The barriers disabled people face may not be immediately obvious.
Disability myths and facts

• MYTH: “Blind people don’t use the internet”
  Assistive technology, such as the ability to vary web site colours, font and text sizes, and text-to-speech software, allows visually-impaired people to fully access the internet.

• MYTH: “Deaf people can’t access YouTube”
  YouTube, and all major TV catchup/on-demand providers, provide subtitles for those with hearing impairments.

• MYTH: “Everyone can read our website...”
  The average reading age in the UK is 9.

• MYTH: “We don’t have any disabled people visiting our website”
  Approximately 12 million people, or 1 in 5 people in the UK, have a disability.

• MYTH: “PDFs aren’t accessible”
  PDFs can be made accessible. This document from Adobe offers an introduction to creating accessible PDFs for document authors: [http://www.adobe.com/enterprise/accessibility/pdfs/acro6_pg_ue.pdf](http://www.adobe.com/enterprise/accessibility/pdfs/acro6_pg_ue.pdf). Saving documents as PDFs rather than in Word format can also preserve some features that make reading easier for people with visual impairments or dyslexia, such as font size or colour.

• MYTH: “Accessibility is all about big fonts”
  There are other important aspects to accessibility, including voice-to-text or text-to-voice technology, use of colour and use of language.

Knowing your audience

To help you communicate more accessibly, think about all aspects of your communication:

• **Message**: What you want to say – your key messages.

• **Audience**: Who you want to say it to – customers, employees, stakeholders.

• **Delivery**: How you say it – internal or external delivery channels.

Accessible communication is about being aware that everyone receives information in different ways, and not making too many assumptions about who your audience is.

Knowing your channels

Professional communicators use a blend of different channels to reach your audiences. All your channels should aim to reach the right audience.

These channels can include:

• Magazines and newsletters;

• Websites, intranets, e-Newsletters and e-Marketing;

• Social media;

• Posters and infographics;

• Advertising.
Understanding communication barriers

Different kinds of impairment can present different challenges. Barriers people with disabilities face when accessing services can include:

- **Speech and language:**
  - “What do you want me to do?”
  - “Do you want me to buy something?”
  - “I don’t understand what you’re saying…”
  - “Which form do I fill in?”
  - “I can’t read this…”

- **Hearing and visual:**
  - “I can’t access that file…”
  - “Is telephone the only way to get in touch?”
  - “Do you have that in a different format?”

- **Physical:**
  - “Where do I go for more information?”
  - “Can I do that by email instead of in person?”
  - “I’ve filled in the wrong section by mistake…”

- **Mental:**
  - “Form-filling/speaking to strangers in person makes me anxious.”

Easy accessibility solutions

Some immediate, practical strategies to help you communicate better:

- Start each campaign by asking “Can everyone access this information?”.
- Survey your internal/external audiences; ask what their communications requirements are.
- Develop an accessible communications policy that applies to all internal and outbound communications.
- Start using plain English. See the section of this guide on use of language, or visit the Plain English Campaign’s website [http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/](http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/)
- Incorporate accessibility & user testing into all new digital projects or campaigns.

Alternative formats

Providing information about products and services in alternative formats makes your communication more accessible. These formats can include:

- Accessible PDFs & accessible Word documents.
- Audio descriptions.
- Captioning and signing on videos.
- Easy Read.
- Textphone and text messaging.
• Plain text versions of email flyers and newsletters.
• Transcripts.
• Braille.
• Accessibility software, such as Recite for people with dyslexia.

Inclusive design

Inclusive design is an approach that aims to make design material accessible to the widest range of users, while allowing creativity and brand identity.

All internal or external designers working with your organisation should have a good understanding of inclusive design.

You should include inclusive design as part of any design brief, and ask your designer for examples.

Review your brand guidelines and house-style regularly for accessibility. Font styles, colour palettes, layout formats and image libraries all need to be considered carefully.

Some simple guidelines are below.

Text, images and colours

Do use

• Sans Serif fonts like Arial, Calibri or Candara.
• Sentence case (Not Title Case).
• Bold for emphasis.
• Minimum of 12 pt (14 pt for Easy Read).
• Clear headings and sub-headings.
• Left-aligned text.
• Plain English.

Don’t use

• Serif fonts, or hard to read fonts.
• Cursive script (joined-up writing).
• TOO MUCH UPPER CASE.
• Underlining, capitals or italics for emphasis.
• A mixture of fonts.
• Text speak, too many abbreviations or #hashtags.
• Text over images.
• Images that rely on colour for meaning.
• Negative images of disability, such as a wheelchair user sitting outside a group.
Use of language

Make sure you use language that is clear and does not stigmatise disabled people.

• **Use short sentences.** People with learning difficulties or disabilities find complex language hard to understand.

• **Use plain English** wherever possible.

• **Break up long texts** using headings, chapter numbers, icons for important information.

• **Be aware of disability etiquette.** See the Business Disability Forum’s Disability Communication Guide for guidelines.

Examples of good practice:

• **A clear Accessibility statement:** The Buckinghamshire County Council website has a page dedicated to Accessibility, with a statement, advice on navigating the site, and examples of how to use accessibility keyboard shortcuts. There is also a link to the BBCs how-to guides to help disabled web users.

• **Plain English:** The Network Rail jargon buster is a searchable list of plain English definitions for common terms in the rail industry.

• **Clear signposting:** The Brook Advisory Service website, providing sexual health and relationship advice for young people, makes good use of clear headings so that users can quickly navigate to the information they need. Brent Council’s website offers a quick menu for the most popular areas, with the option to click through to an advanced menu for more.

Examples of poor practice:

• **Assuming all your customers are drivers:** Business or venue websites which give visitor directions by car only can be off-putting to customers who do not own a car or drive.

  - **How to improve:** To be accessible, include directions by all forms of transport. If your office or venue is rural or remote and only accessible by car or taxi, such as Stratfield Saye House, give the approximate fare from the nearest train or bus station, and details of reputable local taxi firms.

• **Complicated login procedures:** Universal Job Match, the jobs database managed by Job Centre Plus, requires users to memorise a twelve-digit security code which cannot be changed.

  - **How to improve:** Allow customers to create usernames and passwords which are meaningful to them, therefore easier to remember. Avoid making usernames and passwords unchangeable.

• **Unnecessary or confusing compulsory fields:** Popular recruitment website LinkedIn requires users to enter a personal message when they ask to ‘connect’ with another user. This is unnecessary and confusing if the user is connecting with someone they already know. Additionally, the field is described as optional but leaving it blank causes an error and the user is told it is compulsory.

  - **How to improve:** Consider whether a form field really needs to be filled in. If the information it asks for isn’t applicable to everyone, don’t make it compulsory.
User testing

User testing is an effective way to measure the success of your communications and make your products and services more accessible. You should budget time and money for user testing into all new campaigns.

• Involve disabled people in your creative and design processes. Remember the motto: “Nothing about me without me.”
• Involve disabled employee networks, colleagues or customers. User-experience agencies can help.
• Websites, digital communications and apps should all be user tested and accessibility tested. Business Disability Forum can advise on suppliers.
• Begin user testing early into a project. It can be costly and time-consuming to make changes later.
• Remember that everyone’s experiences and solutions are different.
• Don’t just rely on computerised accessibility testing. Always involve service users.

Suppliers and procurement

A commitment to accessible communications should apply to everyone involved with your organisation, including external suppliers and contractors.

• Make accessibility an essential criteria for all projects, tools and campaigns.
• Use suppliers with a commitment to accessibility and inclusion.
• Make sure all your websites are accessible. Read Business Disability Forum’s guide on commissioning accessible websites.
• Don’t pay for anything that isn’t accessible.

Disability and the law

• The Equality Act 2010 requires UK service providers to make reasonable adjustments to the way services are delivered and how information is provided. Public bodies in the UK must adhere to the General Equality Duty, an anti-discrimination duty covering age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation.
• Global web accessibility guidelines: WCAG 2.0 are an International Standard. The EU wants all 761,000 public sector websites to be accessible by 2015. The current figure is 74%. Only 32% of private sector websites are accessible.