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## Most UK Web Sites Are Illegal

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UK Disability Discrimination legislation includes specific accessibility requirements for website owners which are rarely followed currently.

**UK, June 12, 2006** -- However, with surveys showing that up to 80% of UK sites are in breach of the requirements and threats of prosecutions, how long can small businesses continue to ignore the law? Berkshire Internet Consultant, Graeme Rhodes, explains why a legal website is good for business and how the cost of compliance can be minimised.

It's one of the best kept secrets on the web, but following the final implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 2004 UK website owners have been legally obliged to provide universal access to the services that may be accessed via their sites. This means that your business' website must be user-friendly to everyone, regardless of any visual or hearing impairment or any other disability that could affect their use of the site.

The scale of the impact of this legislation has been illustrated in research undertaken by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) which found that 80% of sites sampled were in breach of the law with many being virtually impossible for disabled people to use. In fact, the code of practice governing the specific section of the DDA relating to accessible websites was actually published in 2002, so many of these site owners could have been breaking the law for up to four years!

Is your web site legal?

Given the figures above, the chances are that it isn't! But don't panic yet.

Legal action to date has been limited, and those companies that have been highlighted as being in breach of the law have remedied their sites before Court cases have begun. Given the length of time the Act has now been in place, though, this could change (with the potential penalty, if found guilty, of unlimited compensation.)

However, aside from the legal implications, there are other good reasons why businesses should be compliant - and it isn't necessarily expensive to make the changes.



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As the DRC has highlighted, businesses with accessible web sites are far better placed to capture a slice of the £80 billion spent annually by disabled people in the UK and, as an accessible site is by definition an easy-to-use site, all customers are likely to appreciate it.

Making the changes now could help businesses to get more from the Web

Building accessibility into a site is best done from the start and if your business is in the process of commissioning a site you must ensure that it is DDA compliant before you launch. But even businesses that are not currently able to budget for a replacement site can ensure they are on the right side of the law and make changes if they aren't.

The 175-page DDA Code of Practice detailing the areas to consider as a site-owner is available on line, but there are also several excellent guidelines published (such as those produced by the British Standards Institute for the DRC) which outline good practice in site commissioning and design to ensure compliance. It is, however, likely that some programming work will be required to make the necessary changes, so a specialist may be advisable and many good web designers will be able to help.

However, site owners should plan to maximize the return on their web investment by looking at all aspects of their site as they make it compliant. Many business' sites are actually under-performing because they are not correctly maintained or marketed. Incorporating some solid performance reporting tools and promoting the website with a well-targeted online campaign, as you make the accessibility changes, could recoup the cost of the whole activity and more.

Professional internet solutions providers or consultancies will outline both what is required on your site to ensure DDA compliance and also advise on additional web optimizations that could be implemented concurrently to improve your site's performance and return on investment.

Whatever you do – don't do nothing

With 80% of sites potentially breaking the law and punitive penalties for prosecution on the one hand and the opportunity to access a substantial market on the other; doing nothing is not the best option. At best, those businesses who fail to ensure that their site is compliant risk missing out on a market that their competitors will happily address and at worst will find themselves on the wrong side of the law.

Graeme Rhodes (<http://www.wsimarketing.com/grhodes>) is an Internet Consultant from the new Thames Valley office of WSI, a global internet solutions provider with over 1500 offices in 87 countries. Contact him for more information and a free leaflet on web accessibility.

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