

Accessibility & eCommerce

The Definitive Guide to Creating an Accessible Digital Storefront



ESSENTIAL
ACCESSIBILITY



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Introduction

Establishing an accessible ecommerce presence is essential to running a successful business. Achieving and maintaining digital accessibility doesn't just protect your brand from legal risk, it ensures your ecommerce store is open to all customers – including those with disabilities.

Despite a growing digital accessibility movement, the web remains a largely unwelcoming place for customers with disabilities. A 2019 study of **1 million popular homepages found that 98.1% had automatically detectable Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG) errors.**¹

With **69% of people with disabilities stating they will immediately abandon a site that presents access barriers**², this presents a huge problem for online retailers.

In the US alone, **1 in 4 adults has some sort of disability**³. According to the Institute on Disability, "If people with disabilities were a formally recognized minority group, they would be the largest minority group in the United States."

With an estimated **spending power of \$490 billion**⁴ in the US (globally, that number skyrockets to **\$6 trillion**⁵), people with disabilities are a demographic you can't afford to ignore.

1: WebAIM, 2: ClickAway Pound, 3: CDC, 4: American Institutes for Research, 5: W3C



The Cost of Inaccessibility

Without digital accessibility, you're preventing countless customers from interacting with your brand and purchasing your products and services. This isn't just morally wrong (and bad for business!), it can also put your company at great legal risk.

ADA lawsuits are surging – more than 11,000 were filed in 2019 alone⁶ – and retail and ecommerce sites are a top target^{7,8}.

With the average cost to defend an ADA lawsuit estimated at \$25,000⁹ (that's excluding remediation costs) it's in your best interest to achieve accessibility compliance and remove the threat. Accessibility lawsuits are not going away.



A 2019 study of 1 million popular homepages found that 98.1% had automatically detectable Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG) errors. (WebAIM)

6 Seyfarth Shaw, 7: eSSENTIAL Accessibility, 8: eSSENTIAL Accessibility, 9: Kris Rivenburgh/Medium

Global Accessibility Laws and Guidelines

What does it take to make your website accessible?

No matter where you do business, you're likely bound by some sort of anti-discrimination law. These laws will almost certainly require that you conform with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to achieve digital accessibility.

What is WCAG?

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is a set of standards that is considered the benchmark for achieving digital accessibility.

There are multiple versions of WCAG – each version adds new success criteria to the previous version, so nothing is undone if you conform to a preceding version. New success

69% of people with disabilities will immediately abandon a site that presents access barriers. (ClickAway Pound)

criteria are typically added to account for changes in the way we use and interact with digital properties. For instance, a dramatic increase in mobile usage from 2008 to 2018 prompted the inclusion of 12 new success criteria, several of which were related to mobile accessibility.

WCAG 2.0. Released 2008. Comprised of 38 success criteria.

WCAG 2.1. Released 2018. Comprised of 50 success criteria. (38 + 12 new criteria)

WCAG 2.2. Will be released in 2021. Expected to contain 58 success criteria. (50 + 8 new success criteria)

All versions of WCAG contain three conformance levels which have an increasingly higher standard of accessibility.

A (minimum accessibility)
AA (addresses the major, most common accessibility issues)
AAA (the highest standard)

Typically, anti-discrimination laws and regulations require conformance with WCAG 2.0 AA or higher.

We strongly recommend WCAG 2.1 AA conformance to ensure your ecommerce site follows current best practices.

Global Anti-Discrimination Laws



American with Disabilities Act (ADA): Prohibits discrimination and ensures that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. Under the current legal landscape, websites have largely been interpreted to be places of public accommodation, meaning they're required to be accessible to individuals of all abilities.

Section 508: Requires federal agencies and vendors contracting with the federal government to make their electronic and Information Communication Technology (ICT) accessible to people with disabilities.

Section 504: Requires agencies and recipients of federal funding to provide equal opportunity to persons with disabilities to participate in programs and benefit from services.



Upcoming Legislation

Online Accessibility Act (OAA): Amends the ADA to specifically “include consumer facing websites and mobile applications owned or operated by a private entity and to establish web accessibility compliance standards for such websites and mobile applications, and for other purposes.” Its intent is to increase web accessibility and reduce rampant web accessibility litigation.



Ontario

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities (AODA): Mandates that Ontario organizations comply with WCAG 2.0 AA to become more accessible to people with disabilities.

Accessible Canada Act (ACA): Will transform how the Government of Canada addresses accessibility across the country. It will apply to Parliament, Crown corporations, the federal government, and private sector businesses under federal jurisdiction.



Europe Accessibility Act (EAA): Aims to improve the trade between members of the EU for accessible products and services, by removing country specific rules.

EN 301 549: The European standard for digital accessibility in the public sector that requires all digital technology, including websites, software, electronic devices, and mobile apps to be accessible.

Achieving an Accessible Digital Storefront

Now that you understand the importance of digital accessibility, how can you achieve it?

We've outlined 5 accessibility issues that frequently occur on ecommerce sites (many are also cited in ADA website accessibility lawsuits).

Though full conformance with WCAG 2.1 AA should be your ultimate goal, improving these elements is a great first step to removing digital barriers on your ecommerce store.



1. Alt Text

What is it?

Alternate text (alt text), also known as alt attributes or alt descriptions provides a text description of non-text elements (images, logos, etc.) that appear on a web page.

Why it Matters

Many customers with vision impairments use screen readers to navigate web pages. Screen readers read out alt text descriptions so customers are aware of what images are displayed, and can then make purchases with confidence. Alt text also appears in the event images fail to load properly.

How to Improve

Review all important, meaningful images on your site (product images) and confirm that each image contains an accurate, descriptive alt-text value of what's depicted.

Be as descriptive – and concise – as possible without being overly redundant with the surrounding text. For example, don't use `<alt= "purse">`. Instead, use `<alt= "navy blue vegan leather purse">`.



Example





The alt text for this image reads: `alt="Rambler 18 oz Bottle with Chug Cap, Northwoods Green."`

This provides a clear, accurate description of the product displayed, so all customers understand exactly what's shown.

```
sfrm=jpg&q=100" primary-image-state="0" alt="Rambler 18 oz Bottle with Chug Cap, Northwoods Green" data-original-src="https://www.yeti.com/dw/image/v2/BBRN_PRD/on/demandware.stat..Northwoods-Green-18oz-F-1680x1024.jpg?sw=1152&sfrm=jpg&q=100">
```

Tips

 Many popular screen readers limit alt-text to 125 characters.

 Decorative images that don't convey important information (e.g., decorative banners) don't require detailed descriptions.

2. Label Elements

What is it?

Labels identify interactive elements on your ecommerce site. They allow customers using screen readers to understand what information or action is required.

Why it Matters

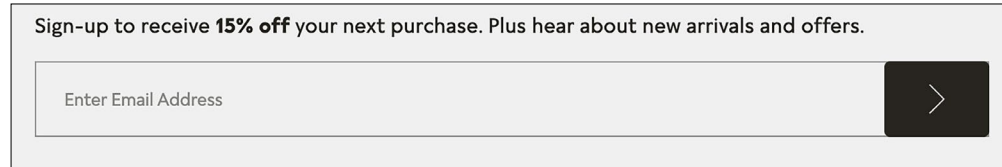
Without proper labels, a screen reader user might not know what input or selection is prompting them. For example, if your checkout form is missing labels for each field, customers may not know what information is required and would be unable to complete a purchase.

How to Improve

Review your website and confirm that all relevant interactive elements contain an appropriate label describing what information or action is needed.

This will include:

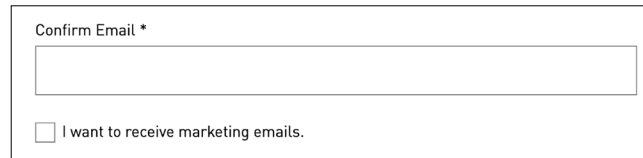
Text fields: Subscribe to email, enter address/delivery information, etc.



Sign-up to receive **15% off** your next purchase. Plus hear about new arrivals and offers.

Enter Email Address

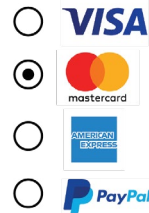
Checkboxes: Allow users to confirm a choice, e.g., consent to receive communications.



Confirm Email *

I want to receive marketing emails.

Payment Method



VISA

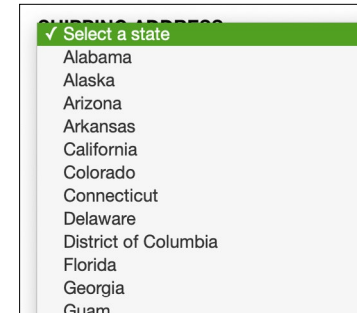
mastercard

AMERICAN EXPRESS

PayPal

Radio

buttons: Allow users to select one option from a predefined list of options.



Select a state

- Alabama
- Alaska
- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- District of Columbia
- Florida
- Georgia
- Guam

Drop down

menus: Used on forms to capture one correct response, e.g., select State/Province.

Examples



Tips



Provide a clear label and short description for every control



Keep options and descriptions simple



Use radio buttons instead of drop down menus when possible – they keep all options visible



Don't use placeholder text to convey what information is required – it often disappears when users start to type in a field

1 Delivery Details

First Name*

Last Name*

Address finder*

Start typing to find your address

Address line 2

This form fields contains labels that clearly indicate the necessary action or information required to move forward.

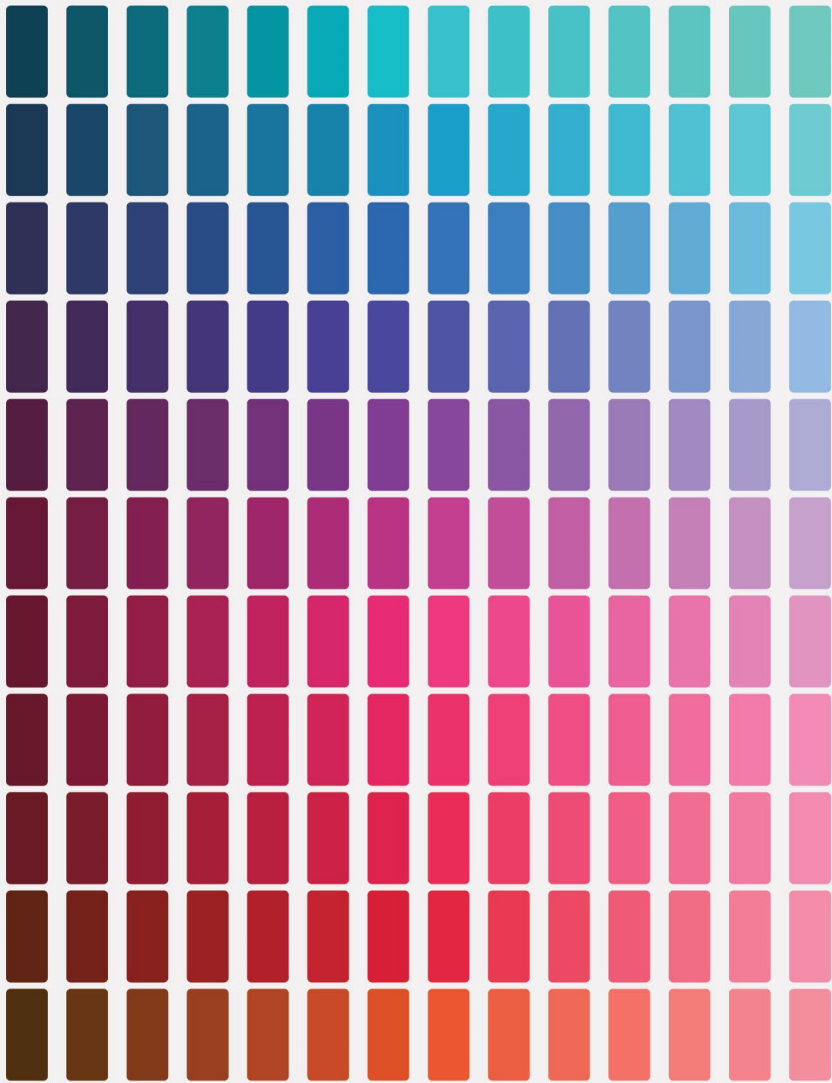
```
...</label>  
<input id="dwfrm_shipping_shippingAddress_firstName" class="input-text required error" type="text" name="dwfrm_shipping_shippingAddress_firstName" value="" maxlength="50" minlength="0" aria-describedby="dwfrm_shipping_shippingAddress_firstName-error" aria-invalid="true"> event
```



SEARCH FOR PRODUCT 🔍 ACCOUNT 👤 CART 🛒

```
<input name="x" value="" type="hidden">  
<input name="y" value="" type="hidden">  
<input id="search-box-field1" class="search-box-field1" type="text" placeholder="SEARCH FOR PRODUCTS" style="padding-left: 4px">  
whitespace  
<span class="icon search-box-color">🔍</span> event
```

This field is missing a label – customers using screen readers might be confused about what information is required.



3. Color Contrast

What is it?

A measure of the difference between two colors and how well they stand out from one another.

Why it Matters

Customers with visual disabilities might be unable to perceive information if the text and background color are too similar.

How to Improve

To be WCAG 2.1 AA conformant, your ecommerce website must have a color contrast ratio of at least 4:5:1 for normal text, and 3:1 for large text.

Large text includes **18-point font** and above, or **14-point and above if bolded**.

(Note: text in logos have no color contrast requirements).

You can use the free [WebAIM color contrast checker tool](#) to determine where you stand. If elements on your website fail, the best course of action is to increase color contrast.

Alternatively, you could consider increasing font size, or add an opacity layer that has a significant contrast with the text.

Examples



This website uses high contrast colors and large, clear text. All users would be able to perceive the information displayed.

Tips



Dark color text on light color backgrounds is typically easiest to read



Don't use colors alone to convey important information (e.g., input errors, graphs or charts)



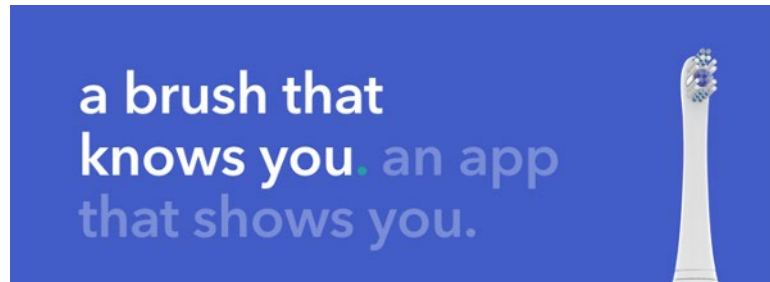
Avoid pairing **red** and **green** together. Customers with deuteranopia (the most common form of color blindness) have difficulty distinguishing the two



Never use similar text and background colors in the same element



The color contrast between the background and text in the second sentence is 1.87:1 which fails WCAG conformance requirements.



According to a WebAIM study, low contrast on text is the most common accessibility error.

4. Buttons

What are They?

Buttons are used to trigger an action or event on your ecommerce site.

Why it Matters

Buttons perform critical actions, (e.g., Add to Cart, Buy Now, Sign Up for Newsletter, etc.) that allow customers to browse and make purchases. Their implementation can impact how well customers can take actions on your site, and ultimately buy from your brand.

How to Improve

Review your ecommerce site and ensure buttons are designed and coded as buttons. (It's important to note the difference between buttons and links as they are not interchangeable. Buttons perform an action; links are used for navigation.)

Confirm that each button uses clear, easy to read text, and that the color contrast between the text and background color is accessible.



Tips



Use large buttons with ample spacing between them and surrounding elements to allow users with dexterity issues to easily activate



Keep the design of your buttons uniform throughout your site and in roughly the same location on each page



Avoid using ALL CAPS in buttons – some screen readers read all caps letter by letter which causes unnecessary confusion



Use sans serif fonts in buttons when possible – they are generally considered easier to read



If you have multiple buttons on a page, prioritize the button that performs the most important action. For example, if you have 'Submit' and 'Clear' buttons, prioritize the submit button, as that is likely the intended action.

Examples



This button is large, easy to read, and features an accessible color contrast between the text and the background color.



Gift Wrap Available

Quantity:

▼	1	▲
---	---	---

Add to Cart



Already have a coupon code?

REDEEM

This button is relatively small and features a poor color contrast between the text and button. Users with low vision might have difficulty engaging.

5. Headings

What are they?

Headings organize and provide structure for a page. They also describe the content that follows.

Why They Matter

Proper headings help customers using screen readers understand the contents of a page. When done correctly, headings enable efficient navigation for customers with visual disabilities and allow them to easily skip content that doesn't interest them.

How to Improve

Remember, headings aren't just for aesthetics – they serve an important function. Write descriptive headings and structure them in a way that makes logical sense.



A WebAIM study asked screen reader users how they preferred to find information on lengthy web pages - almost 70% of respondents said they preferred using headings on a page.

Your main heading, or <H1>, should be used to indicate the main content of the page (e.g., Sports & Recreation).

<H2> for a primary subtopic (e.g., Fitness & Exercise), <H3> for a sub subtopic (e.g., Treadmills, Ellipticals, Weightlifting), and so on.

Correct heading structure helps screen reader users know the importance and order. Don't skip or alter headings for design reasons – this will cause a disjointed experience.

Tips

- Ensure every page has an <H1> heading
- Keep headings descriptive and concise
- Use headings to break up text and make it easy to read

SPORTS & RECREATION

H1

Page heading

Whether you're into hockey, basketball, football, or anything in between, we have everything you need for your outdoor recreation and fitness.

FITNESS & EXERCISE

H2

Treadmills

Ellipticals

Weightlifting

H3

HOCKEY

H2

Sticks

Skates

Protective Equipment

H3

WINTER SPORTS

Sleds, Racers & Toboggans

Snowshoeing

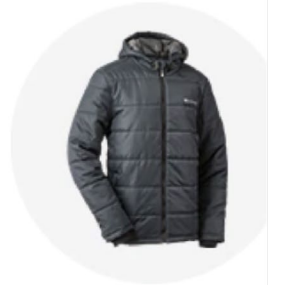
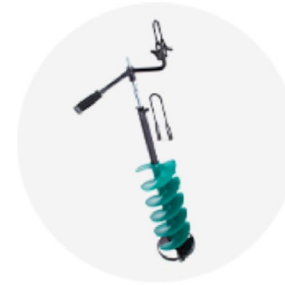
Ice Skating



Fitness & Exercise



Hockey



Accessibility Statement

Accessibility statements are an equally important part of a retailer's digital accessibility journey - and something you can address right away (bonus!). Although not required under WCAG, it's best practice to have one, both for customer support and risk mitigation.

What is it?

An accessibility statement is a statement posted on your website that signals your commitment to accessibility and your desire to comply with relevant anti-discrimination laws (e.g. ADA, AODA). They also provide information about the accessibility of your content, and contact information should customers encounter a problem.

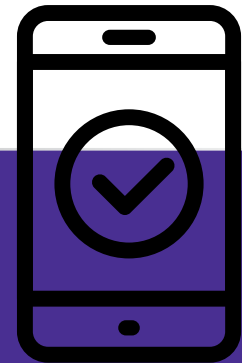
Why it Matters

Customers with disabilities often read accessibility statements when they have questions about how to use your website, how to get accessible help or information, how to reach disability-friendly customer service, or how to report a problem.

Lawsuits are also frequently citing accessibility statements in their claims – whether it's the lack thereof, or the inaccessibility of an existing statement.

Posting an accessible accessibility statement is another way to limit legal risk.

Don't forget – accessibility extends beyond your desktop site!
Be sure your mobile website and app(s) also conform with WCAG 2.1 AA
so all customers can shop freely on their channel of choice.



How to Improve

If you don't have one, post one! Your accessibility statement should include the laws and standards – and the level of these standards that you're committing to conforming with (e.g., WCAG 2.1 AA).

You should also let people with disabilities know how to contact your organization if they encounter barriers on your website or when using your products or services.



TACTICAL

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

We are committed to ensuring digital accessibility for people with disabilities. We are continually improving the user experience for everyone and applying the relevant accessibility standards.

Measures to Support Accessibility

We are taking the following measures to ensure accessibility of our website.

- Including accessibility throughout our internal policies
- Assigning clear accessibility targets and responsibilities
- Employing formal accessibility quality assurance methods

Conformance Status

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) defines requirements for designers and developers to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. It defines three levels of conformance: Level A, Level AA, and Level AAA. Our website is partially conformant with WCAG 2.0 level AA. Partially conformant means that some parts of the content do not fully conform to the accessibility standard.

Feedback

We welcome your feedback on the accessibility of our website. Please let us know if you encounter accessibility barriers.

Getting Started

Ensuring your ecommerce site is fully accessible can be tricky – but you don't have to go through it alone.


By hosting your retail business on an ecommerce platform like BigCommerce, you're already off to a great start – and leveraging the built-in digital accessibility compliance services offered by eSSENTIAL Accessibility will make the process much easier!

eSSENTIAL Accessibility's experts possess an in-depth understanding of the complexities involved with digital accessibility compliance and will work with you to ensure all accessibility issues occurring on your ecommerce site are identified and remediated. We offer the full range of services needed to achieve and maintain accessibility - all in one solution.

With eSSENTIAL Accessibility, you get:

- Automated and manual evaluations of your digital properties
- Assistance with creation of a remediation roadmap to resolve identified accessibility issues in order of severity
- A System of Record to track your accessibility progress
- Legal expertise, support on Demand Letter evaluation, and guidance on accessibility laws and regulations
- Assistance with Conformance and Accessibility statements
- Technical support and code-level recommendations
- Ongoing monitoring to sustain your accessibility progress and keep you compliant with new or updated laws and regulations... and more!

Leave accessibility to us and spend more time focusing on building your business.



Achieving digital accessibility compliance the right way takes time – don't be fooled by approaches that tout instant fixes with one line of code – these 'solutions' can actually increase your likelihood of being sued.

Q&A with BigCommerce Product Manager Albert Singh on the Platform's Move Toward Accessibility

Since mid-2020, BigCommerce has been making iterative improvements to its Cornerstone theme to deliver an accessible shopping experience out of the box. BigCommerce Product Manager Albert Singh delved a little deeper into what those improvements mean for Cornerstone, the merchants using it, and the customers shopping on their storefronts.

What accessibility features did BigCommerce engineers work into the Cornerstone theme?

Cornerstone today, out of the box, meets WCAG AA standards. We prioritized the challenges that surfaced most frequently, then worked our way down the list until Cornerstone satisfied WCAG AA guidelines.

Here are a few of the big ones:

- Enabling full functionality to be achieved via a keyboard interface and via a pointer input device so users can leverage the input device or method that is most accessible to them
- Ensuring users can complete tasks and access content even with reduced response times
- Establishing headings, labels, and a page hierarchy that can be easily understood by screen readers and navigable by keyboard, as well as providing methods for users to orient themselves within the website at all times
- Ensuring adequate contrast between text and background color for users with low visual acuity, color deficiencies or lost of contrast sensitivity

What will merchants still need to do to satisfy the WCAG AA guidelines?

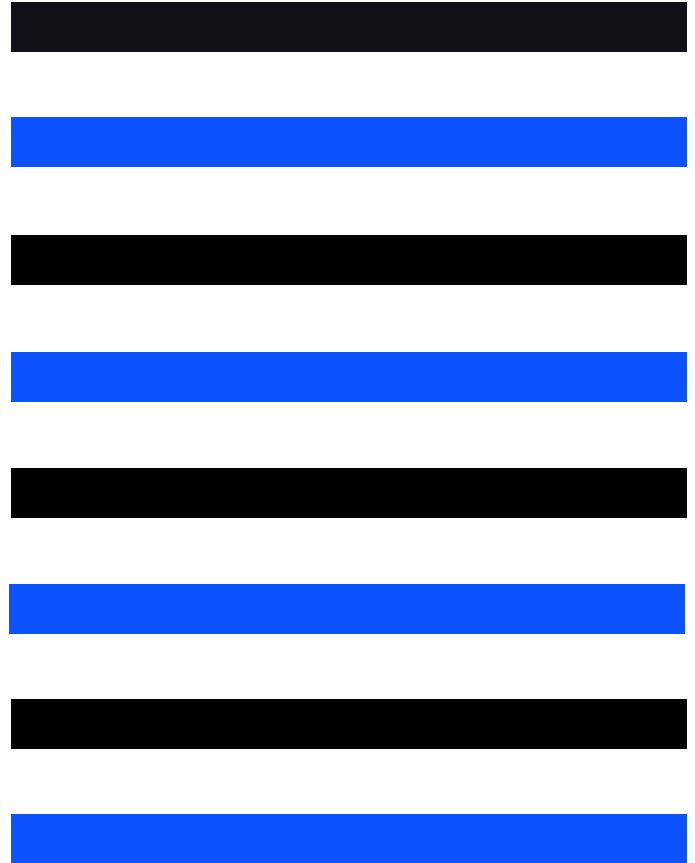
They'll need to make sure that they include alt text on images and that if they change theme colors, the contrast ratios stay the same. Once merchants start to customize, that's where eSSENTIAL Accessibility or other accessibility partners come in to make sure that those customizations also meet the guidelines.

Why is BigCommerce making accessibility a priority?

At BigCommerce we believe that accessibility is something we should invest in. And it's important for our merchants. When their stores are more accessible to people of all kinds of abilities, they open themselves up to a much larger market. It's also the right thing to do to make it easier for our merchants to serve the different needs of their customers.

What continuing steps will BigCommerce take with regard to accessibility and WCAG standards?

We'll be scheduling regular audits to ensure we're continuing to meet WCAG AA standards and putting standards in place so that when future work is done on themes those updates are also guided by the WCAG guidelines.



Don't close the door on customers with disabilities for one more day – learn how BigCommerce and eSSENTIAL Accessibility can help you create and maintain a fully accessible digital storefront.

Get started today!

Already a BigCommerce merchant?
Get the eSSENTIAL Accessibility app.



essentialaccessibility.com

Toll Free: 1 (866) 333-3909
Email: info@essentialaccessibility.com

bigcommerce.com

Toll Free: 1-888-248-9325