

Access Changes Everything Inc.

Quick Start Guide to Digital Accessibility for Nova Scotia Businesses

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Introduction

Almost 38% of Nova Scotians, over the age of 15, identify as having at least one disability (Canadian Survey on Disability, 2022, Statistics Canada). It is **vital** that business related online digital materials be made more accessible, for Nova Scotians with different disabilities.

Lisa Snider from [Access Changes Everything Inc.](#) conducted a survey in December 2022. It was titled, Business Online Accessibility for Nova Scotians with Disabilities Survey. This 'First Voice' survey asked Nova Scotians with disabilities, and organizations or individuals who support us, to share lived experiences from online interactions with Nova Scotia businesses.

The survey charted the overall accessibility of Nova Scotia businesses online, including what businesses did well, and what needed improvement. The survey results were used to form this Quick Start Guide, offered for free to businesses in Nova Scotia.

The goal of this guide is to help businesses in Nova Scotia start to identify, and lower, barriers in the digital realm. It will also support compliance with the [Accessibility Act](#), Goods and Services and Information and Communication standards.

Full access to Nova Scotia businesses online, without barriers, is crucial. With more awareness of lived experiences, and knowledge of how to lower barriers, businesses in Nova Scotia can become accessible for all.

Thank You

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Impact of Barriers

Survey respondents were asked how barriers impacted them, when accessing Nova Scotia businesses online.

Frustration, Anxiety, and Increased Time

Most respondents noted that barriers caused frustration, increased anxiety, and were time consuming.

“Frustration, lack of information, not being able to get our message out.”

“Emotionally and mentally, it causes more to overcome.”

“It is a delay to get things done, and need to try multiple times, and/or need to get help to finish.”

Less Independence, More Reliance, and Being Left Behind

Many respondents felt that barriers led to a loss of independence, increased reliance on others, and feeling of being left out, left behind, and excluded from society. Overall, respondents made it very clear that barriers **must** be taken seriously, and removed. It was also clear that human support was **crucial** when barriers blocked access.

“I often have to degrade my independence by asking someone to assist me with making calls. I should not have to do so.”

“It made it difficult, so I wasn’t able to do it independently. That made me very anxious and frustrated.”

“When people won’t write down or type down, so I can’t understand, because I am deaf, or they won’t let me have a ASL interpreter.”

“Mostly psychologically, a feeling of lack of inclusion and value as a human being.”

“They excluded us from attending events, and excluded us from community events.”

Health Impacts and Loss of Belonging

It was clear that barriers can impact mental health, worsen disabilities, and lead to a loss of belonging.

“Deep frustration, makes depression worse, means I give up and just don't get to do, or use, the service. Excluded from things I would like to do, but simply can't get the level of information help I need.”

“I broke my wrist trying to get into a store I ordered from, that had a pickup only option, nobody offered to help open the door while I got my walker inside.”

“Increased and exacerbated migraine and concussion symptoms, since unable to use dark mode, or a screen reader.”

Loss of Business

Some respondents clearly noted that they would go elsewhere for goods and services, due to barriers.

“I just don't follow through with accessing the service, or digital content, because it is too frustrating or difficult. I choose another service or source of information that is accessible, if there is another option.”

“I buy goods from businesses with accessible websites, processes etc. That often means I have to use Amazon, or look outside Nova Scotia.”

“I wish every business understood the importance of designing their interfaces to be screen reader friendly. It makes a huge difference to how, and whether, I interact with their content, and ultimately whether I buy anything from them.”

“Websites that are accessible to me, get my business. Those that aren't, lose money to those that are.”

Digital Accessibility Tips

The following tips are taken directly from the results of the Business Online Accessibility for Nova Scotians with Disabilities Survey. They will help identify, and lower barriers, in business online digital materials, for Nova Scotians with disabilities.

Tip 1: Make Digital Materials More Accessible

Businesses need to ensure that their online digital materials, such as websites, social media posts, PDF documents, videos, etc., are accessible. Survey respondents noted seven areas to focus on, to start lowering barriers.

Digital Materials Tip 1A: Font Type and Size

- Use a regular sans serif font, such as Arial, Calibri, or Verdana.
- Use a minimum font size for text of 12 point, or 100%.
- Allow users to change font type and size on small screens or magnified screens.

“There is often an issue of font size and type.”

“Some businesses have changed their font to be more visually friendly...”

Digital Materials Tip 1B: Layout and Navigation

- Use a clean and uncluttered layout for content.
- Keep navigation simple, consistent, and easy to use.
- Ensure layout, content, and search areas, are consistent on mobile, desktop, etc.
- Links should be clearly marked in a different colour and underlined.

“Things are not clear and concise, and can be confusing for people to navigate.”

“Sometimes websites are hard to navigate when you have a disability, I suggest to look at it with an accessibility lens.”

“Links do not work, or it’s unclear whether it’s a link or not.”

Digital Materials Tip 1C: Video

- Ensure videos are accessible for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, blind, Deaf-Blind, or have low vision.
- Many others, with or without disabilities, also use these features.
- Provide captions.
- YouTube provides free captioning, but check for errors.
- Provide text transcripts.
- Provide audio description to describe what isn’t in the dialogue.
- Add sign language, whenever possible.

“Captioning for visually impaired. Feeling included and valued in mainstream society.”

“When videos are being posted online, they should always have the text on the screen as well, for individuals with hearing impairments.”

Digital Materials Tip 1D: Images

- Images can be photographs, memes, animated gifs, graphs, maps, icons, etc.
- Provide a 'text alternative' ('alt text' or 'alt attribute') for important images.
- Non-important images must be marked for screen reader users, who may be blind, Deaf-Blind, or have low vision.

“Websites, docs, etc. not accessible by computerized screen reading software. Online orders impossible to complete, product information and descriptions inadequate, or lacking completely...Online presence based on the belief that everyone can see.”

“Adding descriptions to social media posts, to allow me to access information shared in images, is very helpful.”

“When images, and descriptions, of business physical location (or parking), are included [it helps me] to understand whether they are a disability confident business for PWD [persons with disabilities], to navigate the location.”

Digital Materials Tip 1E: Colour Contrast

- Use strong colour contrast for text and background.
- Check the colour contrast with colour checkers, using ratios from the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).
- WebAIM Color Contrast Checker (Online)
<https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/>
- Ensure that dark mode can be activated.

“Colour combinations that are difficult to read, may cause migraines.”

“Doesn't work with dark mode, which helps my migraines and post-concussion symptoms.”

Digital Materials Tip 1F: PDF Accessibility

- PDF documents, and PDF forms, need to be made accessible.
- This is especially important for people, who use screen reader technology, and are blind, Deaf-Blind, or have low vision.
- Ensure the font size and type stay at minimum levels suggested in Tip 1A.
- HTML based website forms that are made accessible, are preferable to PDF.

“PDF items are often not readable by screen readers. Even though my default is set at a clear print, when I go to fill in a form, the font automatically changes to a difficult one to read.”

“Many PDFs, or other docs, are not screen readable - though technology is certainly improving.”

Digital Materials Tip 1G: Plain Language Text

- Strive to produce text that can be read by students in Grades 6 to 8.
- Use the Word Readability checker, or online checkers like Hemingway Editor.
- Spell out acronyms the first time they are used.

“Information not provided in plain language...”

“Some of the acronyms used aren’t always known by viewers as well.”

Tip 2: Provide Online and Offline Options

Businesses should provide online and offline options for information, support, and to buy goods and services. The survey respondents made it clear that current, or potential, customers benefit from these options. These options should also include sign language communication, such as a [Video Relay Service](#), or a local interpreter.

“Providing an easy way to contact the business or organization if I need to, not making it seem like they don't want to hear from me by putting a phone number at the bottom of a page, or no phone number at all.”

“When businesses provide options for contact, such as call, text, in-person, social media messaging, TTY, this increases accessibility for all.”

“I am thankful for services that will deliver to me. Or come to me. With mental health issues, it's easier than having to take a risk, and go out some days.”

“Sometimes businesses don't have a delivery option, which means you must pick up in store. I have found it hard to do that, as I use a walker or wheelchair.”

“Not enough support for people with physical disabilities. No way to go to the businesses, so more mobile services should be offered. Also, cost is a factor. Too expensive for most disabled living on a tight budget.”

Tip 3: Provide Human Support

Survey respondents were clear that human support is critical to access, especially when major barriers are present. Human support is vital in Nova Scotia, because many people with disabilities are not tech savvy, or they can't afford, or lack access to, Wi-Fi, computers, devices with data, apps, etc.

"There are times I need to be able to talk to someone. I need to articulate my question, which sometimes takes time, [and I] need help categorizing my question into the silos, or categories, created by automated response systems, I need to talk to a person and have them walk me through it. Finding that information is sometimes impossible, as they don't offer it, and even if they do, it is very hard to find, and usually leads to another machine."

"I hear from people that it is difficult to find the information they want online. I hear from older adults that they would prefer to talk to someone on the phone, and this is becoming less accessible, as businesses shift to being more online."

"The option to renew vehicle plates online saved me a trip to Access NS. As you know, the price of gas has gone up dramatically, and I don't do well with crowds due to the PTSD. Being able to access more services like this helps a lot with decreasing my anxiety, and helps me keep within my tight budget, since I'm on a fixed income."

Tip 4: Ensure Awareness in Communications

When businesses communicate with potential, or current, customers, awareness of disability and accessibility is crucial. This awareness eliminates possible additional barriers in the communication process itself.

As well, businesses should be aware that people with intersecting identities can experience more barriers. For example, a Black or African Nova Scotian, who is blind, may experience barriers due to racism, in addition to accessibility barriers. Workshops and training are offered in Nova Scotia, to promote awareness of all barriers.

"...being required or asked to "call". This is frustrating when you know many are never expecting to have to communicate with someone who has a speech impediment - which is just another type of accent."

“Businesses need to be educated about the detrimental psychological impact ableism creates.”

“More employees need to know more about people in their communities, so they can better understand about disabled persons.”

“Listing accessibility options directly with the other information is great, so I know they have at least considered my experience. That makes me think they would be open to hearing other questions I might have or helping if I need it.”

Tip 5: Lobby for Internet, Technology, and Training Access

It was clear from the survey that respondents needed greater access to truly affordable, and fast, internet. Government has increasingly tried to provide internet access to many areas of rural Nova Scotia. However, businesses should lobby government for truly affordable, and fast, internet access for everyone in their community. As well, they should lobby for free, or truly affordable, training and technologies, or provide sponsorship for them.

Businesses in Nova Scotia, especially in rural, benefit from their community having increased access to free, or truly affordable, internet, computers, technology, and training. With increased access, comes more options for purchasing local goods and services.

“No access to affordable internet, and lack of support for usage training.”

“I've also heard from older adults that they don't have a computer, they don't use emails, and/or they don't have Internet. So those are huge barriers for people looking to access services.”

“Lacking basic and essential skills, and access to accessories.”

“Low-income households have limited access to internet or technology to use the internet.”

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