



SUMMARY

>> ABOUT TRENTON

After graduating from the University of Birmingham with a degree in Commerce, Trenton went on to spend three and a half years travelling and working abroad, including a two year stint in Japan. Having perfected the art of bowling and using chopsticks to eat everything (including sweetcorn) Trenton decided to return to the UK to start his own usability and accessibility consultancy, Webcredible, to help make the Internet a better place for everyone.

One site fits all

DID MANCHESTER UNITED HAVE TO DESIGN A WHOLE SITE FOR DISABLED PEOPLE? TRENTON MOSS DOESN'T THINK SO...

Unless this is your first time reading **.net** (if so, where have you been?) you'll know that Manchester United have launched an accessible version of its Web site, manutd.com/access. You'll know this because **.net** has mentioned it twice, once each in the October 2003 and January 2004 editions. This accessible version of Man-U's site contains some of the main features of the site, with all the accessible features you could ever dream of - resizable text, ALT tags, screen reader optimisation - the list is endless. Wow! That's great, everyone should make a completely separate Web site for people with disabilities, right? Wrong.

Food for thought

Last week I went to an all-you-can eat buffet at a local restaurant. The tables were on the ground floor but the buffet was situated on the first floor, up a flight of steep stairs. In order to serve its customers with disabilities, the restaurant had decided to offer an alternative version of the buffet, with most of the main dishes, on the ground floor.

The non-disabled customers weren't happy that they had to walk up and down all those stairs just to get something to eat; the guests with disabilities weren't happy at not being able to eat any pickles (they weren't deemed popular enough to be placed on the ground floor buffet); and the waiters were unhappy that they had to work so much harder to maintain two separate buffets. In

addition to this, the waiters were being told by their manager that the ground floor buffet would eventually have to offer all the same food as the full upstairs buffet, meaning even more work for the over-stretched staff!

What a ridiculous situation. If only the restaurant had set up a travelator to get to the buffet then the non-disabled guests wouldn't be unhappy about climbing those stairs, guests with disabilities wouldn't feel marginalised and the waiters wouldn't have to do the same job twice.

Actually, I never went to this restaurant. In fact, the restaurant doesn't even exist, except as a

waiters/web developers, having to manage two buffets/sites, and ultimately, they will be expected to provide the same amount of food/information to both versions.

Rebels with a cause

What Manchester United has done goes against the whole concept of Web accessibility. The positive press coverage it's getting for this site is actually damaging to the promotion of Web accessibility as a whole. If companies think they have to go to these lengthy extremes to make their sites accessible to everyone, then it will surely

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metaphor for the Manchester United Web site. The buffet on the first floor is the main site, a pain for disabled users due to its high inaccessibility. Menus rely on JavaScript (not supported by 6 per cent of internet users), ALT tags are missing from images (just 1 in 5 households are on broadband - users on slow connections can use ALT tags to turn off images, speeding up download time), and usability is incredibly poor.

In the upstairs buffet version of manutd.com, there are over 100 choices in the navigation menu. The downstairs buffet version, manutd.com/access, has eight. Only that's a lot of pickles being withheld from a lot of diners. Then there are the

discourage them to make the effort. To top it all off, manutd.com/access, although fully accessible to disabled and blind people, I'm sure, doesn't even pass the W3C Priority 2 checkpoints!

So come on, Manchester United, ditch this 'alternative' Web site and fix up your main site so that it's accessible to everyone, people with disabilities and those without. It'll save you time and money in the long run and there really isn't that much you need to do. Web accessibility isn't rocket science and doesn't have to be taken to the extreme lengths it's been taken to here. It's usually just a case of a bit of tweaking here and there. You certainly don't need to make a whole new site. ■

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>>> QUESTIONS >>>

Should Web designs build two different versions of their sites for different users or just make one site suitable for all? Let us know what you think, email us at mallus@netmag.co.uk