



Web site design REPORT by Phil Muncaster

## Top sites fail to offer easy access to all

A new study suggests retailers' recent efforts to boost accessibility and usability have stalled

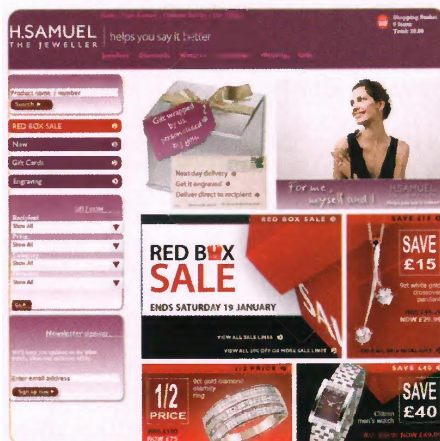
New research by web consultancy Webcredible indicates that many e-commerce firms are still struggling to make their web sites easy to use and accessible to all members of society.

For its recent *E-commerce Accessibility for UK High-street Retailers in 2007* report, Webcredible tested the sites of 20 of the UK's top high-street retailers chosen at random against 20 pre-determined guidelines covering the entire shopping process. Each site was marked out of five for each guideline and given a web accessibility index rating out of 100.

Jeweller H Samuel came out top with 76 per cent, while HMV, B&Q, John Lewis and Argos made up the top five. Currys came last with a score of just 34. Although the study found a general improvement in retailers' efforts to make their sites more accessible, many still fell down at the payment stage, according to Webcredible director Trenton Moss.

"Even H Samuel had certain elements that were show-stoppingly awful from an accessibility point of view," he added. "And any user with a screen reader could not use Argos's checkout at all."

Moss bemoaned the "sloppiness" of many sites when it came to accessibility, including several that failed to add alt-text descriptions to important images. Text-to-speech screen readers rely on alt-text descriptions to make sense of a page.



H Samuel's site came out top for accessibility, despite some glaring flaws

However, many sites went too far the other way, including alt-text for decorative images. This produces too much text for the screen reader to process and means the user ends up spending twice as long trying to find the desired section of the site, according to Moss.

Most of the sites surveyed would benefit from more skip links to help users to navigate content more easily, Moss said. "Eleven sites provided skip links but five hid them in such a way they were also hidden from screen readers," explained Moss. "It shows developers are trying, but they're also being slightly misguided."

However, there is help at hand for developers, not just from the

third-party agencies that specialise in usability and accessibility. "There are many books and training courses that can help - you don't need to specialise in accessibility to get to a reasonable level," said Moss.

He warned, however, that automated testing tools are only useful to firms if they are used to discern trends at a macro level - to measure the progress of different teams or sites.

"Accessibility hasn't improved massively in the past two years - some are taking it seriously and some do the absolute minimum," he added.

### Little progress

Webcredible's annual research on usability, featuring the same retailers and methodology as its accessibility report, found that the average score was the same as in the previous survey. "The good guys dropped slightly and the bad ones improved a little, so there was consolidation," said Moss. "The problem is that usability can be dropped and the [IT team] can still make the deadline - often designers get set unrealistic targets by managers who don't know how

things work," he added.

Top of the usability chart was HMV, with a score of 70; Game and Mothercare completed the top three with 66 and 64 respectively. At the bottom were Woolworths with 48 and Top Shop with 47.

Typical mistakes highlighted by the research included a failure to integrate online and offline channels. To illustrate this last point, Moss said many retailers had a policy of withdrawing products from their sites when they became unavailable to buy online, even though the same goods could still be bought at high-street outlets. He said this policy was short-sighted as it ignored the needs of shoppers who like to research online, but buy in store.

Other basic errors included failing to change the colour of previously visited links, not giving the user the option to change the number of items displayed on a single page, and failing to provide information about products in the form of user reviews or best sellers.

However, the poor performance of many firms may stem from the inflexibility of their e-commerce platform; on some it can take up to a month to make even a small text change, explained Moss.

Conversely, platforms that do enable operators to make quick changes can also be problematic. "Ten years ago site refreshes were very fashionable but not anymore because it alienates users," Moss said. "The smarter sites make incremental changes over time."

Shaun Ryan, chief executive of site search provider SLI Systems, argued that web managers should monitor usability. "The most important thing is to watch visitors, understand how they shop, and continually improve your site."

Alexander Craig, chief executive of internet application developers bit10, said that it is easier to implement usability and accessibility when it is built in from the beginning. He added that a common barrier to improving usability and accessibility is a conflict between "back-end office systems and the web front-end".

The importance of usability and accessibility was highlighted by the latest e-retail sales index from industry body the Interactive Media in Retail Group (IMRG). The report found that 15 per cent of all retail spend is now online, with December's sales almost 50 per cent higher than 2006.