

Taking the broader view of disability

Debra Ruh argues that making digital publishing available to a broader range of people with disabilities is good for a company's image, and good for the bottom line

The advent of print-on-demand (POD) and ebooks has gone some way to making books accessible to more people with disabilities (PwD), but there is a long way to go. Part of the problem is that people think of disability in extreme or narrow terms, such as blindness and deafness, when it also includes many other types of disability, such as motor and cognitive impairment, and, in an ageing population, increasing cases of visual and hearing impairment. And part of the problem is that some publishers seem to consider accessibility something that has to be done to avoid litigation risk rather than understanding the real opportunities to expand business.

But it is a potentially huge market. Statistics show that more than half the global population has a connection to disability.

- The American Association of People with Disabilities estimates that the number of people with disabilities impacts an estimated 1 in 3 households in the US.
- Worldwide, this group numbers 500-750 million people.
- People with disabilities have almost two times the spending power of teens and more than 17 times the spending power of tweens (ages 8-12) – two demographics often sought after by businesses.
- The *New York Times* reported that spending by travellers with disabilities exceeds \$13.6 billion annually.
- Marketing studies of the Atlanta Paralympics (Solutions Marketing Group, 2003) reveal that even households with no disability connection felt goodwill towards companies that included people with disabilities in advertising and were more likely to buy their products.
- *WE Magazine*, a lifestyle publication for people with disabilities, reports that people with disabilities spend \$700 billion a year on technology.

And as we age, more people acquire disabilities.

- According to AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), 4 million Americans



Debra Ruh with her daughter Sara

turn 50 each year. Many adults will experience age-related physical changes that may affect hearing, vision, cognition and mobility after age 50. And while they may not think of themselves as having disabilities, they often seek out businesses that accommodate those changes by offering more accessible services.

- There are 76 million baby boomers in the US. AARP studies show that more than 46% of people over the age of 65 have a disability.
- Likewise, the 2000 US Census reported that almost 42% of older adults (65+ years) have one or more disabilities.

It is a potentially huge market. Statistics show that more than half the global population has a connection to disability

- In the same Census, the percentage of PwD is larger than any single ethnic, racial or cultural group. At 19.3%, the number of people with disabilities exceeds the next largest group – Hispanic people (14.9%) – by a fairly wide margin.

And these numbers do not include the family and friends that support inclusion for people with disabilities.

There may also be unexpected benefits for publishers' other customers. Many things that were designed for people with disabilities have, over time, benefited the

mainstream public too. Curb cuts were created for people using wheelchairs, but everyone uses them now – for strollers, shopping carts, vendors delivering to a store, etc.

Text-to-speech was created for people that could not communicate in the traditional manner, but now many kiosks and automobiles have this feature. My Toyota communicates with me via simple commands and the keyless entry is convenient for people with disabilities.

Captioning was created for people that are deaf or hard-of-hearing, but is now used more widely – on TV's in gyms, fast food restaurants and airports.

But sometimes the reverse can happen and something designed for the mainstream benefits people with disabilities. Outside the publishing world, one example is the front-loaded washing machine. A friend of mine, who is 3' 11", describes washing and drying clothes before the front-loaded washer and dryer were available. It is a funny story, but the interesting part for my purpose here is that she bought the front-loaded machines as soon as she saw them – even though she had not been in the market for these expensive purchases before.

Of course ebooks and POD are also examples; created for mainstream

convenience, they have become invaluable for people with disabilities.

One company that has seen the business opportunities of embracing our community is Apple. It is said to be taking steps to make its iPhone and iPad more user-friendly for people with disabilities. Since the products all use touch screens, someone with visual or mobility impairments can have trouble with the devices. However, in a recent filing with the US Patent and Trademark Office, Apple has said it is seeking to patent a method for connecting its products to accessories

that could act in place of a touch screen. Their products have always been thoughtfully designed, with assistive technology included in all of their devices as a standard feature. Now it looks like they are planning to take it a step further – raising the bar for accessible mobile technology.

Why would a company as smart as Apple care so much about this market segment? I would say that it is because Apple is getting a solid return on investment. My family will certainly continue to buy their products – not only because they are convenient and easy to use, but because we choose to support companies that make their products and services accessible to *all* people.

And there are examples from the publishing world too. The Hachette Book Group announced in June that it was making its website accessible to Americans with Disabilities, through a new alliance with eSSENTIAL Accessibility. A new tool will extend Hachette's online services to individuals with physical disabilities.

"Readers are naturally curious about their favorite books and authors," says David Young, Chairman and CEO of Hachette, "and our websites are rich with information. Providing the disability community with easy access to our sites helps foster the connection between reader and author. We are proud to be the first publisher to work with eSSENTIAL Accessibility in this initiative and to provide a more comprehensive service to our physically disabled customers."

Apple and Hachette are leading the way and proving that this can be good for the bottom line. I hope others in the publishing community consider reaching out to and embracing this virtually untapped market; it could be a real game changer across the board.

*Debra Ruh is the founder and CEO of TecAccess and Chief Marketing Officer at SSB BART. Follow her blog at debra.ruh.tumblr.com; email Debra.ruh@ssbartgroup.com; or visit www.ssbartgroup.com. See also *Accessible publishing – business case* at www.rnib.org.uk. ■*