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Canadian conceives fully accessible search engine

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Winnipeg — YouSearched.com bills itself as the world's first truly accessible search engine for those with a variety of disabilities.

Advertisement

It fills a valuable niche and actually brings something new to the Internet, according to the Canadian consultant who came up with the idea.

"It's really rare to find anything on the Net that hasn't been done," said Ross Dunn, of Victoria-based Stepforth Placement Inc., who suggested the concept to his client, a British-based website developer.

"In this case we were able to bring something to the table that not only presented him with a niche market that he could build on, but also something that was really going to offer some value to the Internet."

It has already earned the highest standard of accessibility certification offered by the Royal National Institute of the Blind in Britain, the World Wide Web Consortium and other certifying groups.

"You can't get any more approval," Mr. Dunn says.

There are a host of gadgets on the market to help those with disabilities use a computer, but none are much help if the stuff that's on the screen isn't compatible.

Refreshable braille devices turn what they see on the screen into braille text that can be read by those trained to use their sense of touch to replace their eyes.

Screen readers are another example, says Lee Roberts, the Oklahoma-based accessibility expert who worked with Mr. Dunn to make the site fulfill its goals.

They're marvellous machines that can turn what they see onto the screen into spoken words, albeit in what Mr. Dunn describes as Microsoft monotone.

But Mr. Roberts says they can't cope with the way many websites are laid out and will do what would amount to reading a newspaper and mixing lines of text from one column with lines of text from another.

"This website (www.yousearched.com) is designed and laid out in such a way that the content is deliverable in a manner that can be read correctly," he says.

"No other search engine out there has taken the chance or taken the time to make their site [fully] accessible, none."

Mr. Roberts has worked both at home and internationally on accessibility issues for the Internet.

The blind aren't the only people who have problems using many traditional search engines, and the easily understandable, large icons on YouSearched.com are also aimed at people with physical or cognitive disabilities.

Some people lack the fine motor skills to use the traditional mouse or keyboard. Others have difficulty comprehending what they see.

"They could have strokes, they could have dyslexia, they could have Down syndrome, any number of cognitive difficulties," Mr. Roberts says.

The best thing about sites like YouSearched.com for Deborah Stienstra, director of the interdisciplinary master's program in disability studies at the University of Manitoba, is they don't tackle accessibility as an afterthought.

"We need to think [about accessibility] at the beginning of our design process," she says.

She says making Internet websites in general more accessible is something that would benefit companies in more than one way.

"When you create something that uses plain language or something that is accessible to a screen reader you appeal to a market well beyond Canada and the United States and Europe and into emerging markets . . .

"There's a huge market where English isn't the first language or where reading isn't the regular means of communication."

Of course, any search engine is only as good as its ability to find the information a visitor is seeking.

For North Americans, the heavy weighting to European content and sponsored links makes YouSearched.com considerably less useful than it might be otherwise.

It requires major digging to find even basic sites, such as Canadian government departments.

Other attempts to find North American content produced complete non sequiturs, with the one constant being advertising.

It's a failure Mr. Dunn acknowledges and one he says they hope to address down the line. He calls it a "temporary setback."

"Since this is version 1.0, we know we've got a lot of work to do to make it useful to the other markets . . . I think we're one major step ahead at least hitting the Net and finding that niche other people seem to be ignoring."



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