

## **Business and Human Rights 2007: The Right to Internet**

New light was cast this year at the United Nations 2006 IPS International Achievement Awards Ceremony on the topic of a speech given seven years ago by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson. Her speech was titled "Giving a Human Face to the Global Market: The Business Case for Human Rights," and discussed the extremely close (and perhaps increasingly *interdependent*) relationship between business and human rights.

In her June 10, 1999 statement to the WinConference in Interlaken, Switzerland, Robinson pointed out that "business has responsibilities that extend beyond the priority task of protecting a company's own interests." Robinson's point is an obvious one, and few would argue that competitive global companies are not motivated to uphold sound human rights practices in order to gain financial and political benefits. But does it really matter *why* human rights are being protected, as long as they are?

Business is a larger player in international affairs than ever before: "the liberalization of world markets," Robinson said in her speech, "has contributed to raising the private sector to a preeminent position, not only in commercial circles but in society as a whole." The upsurge of interest in human rights by business leaders is a trend that is here to stay.

### **Business and the Rights of Disabled Persons, 2007**

December 3, 2006 marked the annual observance of the International Day of Disabled Persons, and this year's theme, E-Accessibility, could not have been more pertinent to marketers in 2007 and in the years to come. As the information revolution shows no signs of slowing, the power of the Web to bring work and education to all people in all parts of the world has at last garnered the diplomatic attention it deserves -- and it has earned its own international day of observance.

The UN estimates that there are 500 million persons with disabilities in the world today. Ensuring their rights are being protected must be at our own initiative.

Human rights are categorized into two different sets. The first, civil and political, is the louder and more highly publicized of the two. The second set pertains to the direct responsibility of marketers, the Internet community, and the business world at large. Essentially, everyone. It is the set that includes the economic, social, and cultural rights of each person -- or, the right of every person for equal opportunity to participate in society.

These rights, determined fundamental by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, include the right to work, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to education, to food, clothing, housing, and medical care. While all of these relate to the Internet in various ways, two rights stand out as falling directly under e-accessibility's domain -- the right to work and the right to education. Quite simply, the right to Internet.

### **Making Web Sites Truly Accessible**

Many people with disabilities are excluded from reaping the benefits that the Internet offers because of a lack of access to essential services. In most cases, the culprits of faulty and inaccessible Web sites are guilty not because they are intentionally denying anyone these fundamental rights, but simply because they are not aware of their *in-actions*.

Commissioned by the UN for the International Day of Disabled Persons, accessibility agency Nomensa tested the Web sites of 100 leading companies in different sectors around the world in the first official audit of the Internet: The UN Global Audit of Web Accessibility.

The aim of the survey, Nomensa states on its Web site, was not meant to be exhaustive but intended to establish the current state of equal Web accessibility for disabled persons as they use the Internet on a daily basis. Sites in the areas of travel, finance, media, politics, and retail were all included in the audit, and the results bear some bad news: only three sites achieved the basic accessibility rating. The sites, listed below, will make our friends in Spain, Germany, and the UK proud:

British Prime Minister's site (<http://www.primeminister.gov.uk/>);

German Chancellor's site (<http://www.bundestkanzlerin.de>);

Spanish Government's site (<http://www.la-moncloa.es/default.htm>).

### **Accessibility Compensates Business**

In the United States, where Internet *saturation* seems more suitable a term than Internet penetration, and roughly 75% of the population is online, why are we lagging behind in getting our sites up to par for disabled populations? Human rights abuses aside, we are excluding a huge group of people -- and marginalizing potential dollars.

Business leaders fear that incorporating new accessibility features and measures into their Web sites will be more time-consuming and expensive than the benefits will compensate. This is not true. WebAIM.org, a leading site for the advocacy of Web accessibility states, "The benefits of providing access to a larger population almost always outweigh the time required by a knowledgeable developer to implement that accessibility."

### **What You Can Do Now**

The WebAIM Web site ([www.webaim.org](http://www.webaim.org)) offers 11 simple changes that any Web site designer or IT department can make to enhance accessibility for disabled persons to a company or organizational Web site. Read more about these tips -- and why we all need to heed them -- in Here and There (Article V), this issue.

### **Guidance From the UN**

In one of his last public speeches as secretary-general, which I had the rare opportunity to attend, His Excellency Kofi Annan, after two terms as the face of the UN and over four decades of serv-

ice, accepted the Inter Press Service's International Achievement Award for outstanding leadership in pursuing the UN's mission, "a world seeking global peace, political stability, recognition of human dignity, and the pursuit of human development." He has repeatedly said, throughout his 10-year tenure, that we must guarantee that globalization benefits all the countries of the world and not just its more fortunate members. While there is progress in many areas, human rights progress in the all-important area of trade is still "more phrase than fact."

His message on the International Day of Disabled Persons just days before he claimed his last award while still in office expressed pleasure at the progress the private sector has made in improving e-accessibility. Governments and private corporations alike, he said, have recognized the economic and social benefits of making Web sites fully accessible, and have made the necessary software and hardware changes.

"Let us pledge again to do our utmost to achieve the vision of an inclusive, people-centered, development-oriented information society. And let us redouble our efforts to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their human rights and play their full part in the economic, social, and political lives of their societies."

The UN's Human Rights Web site (<http://www.un.org/rights/>) identifies nine larger steps a company can take to implement a plan and commitment to human rights:

1. Identify Human Rights Issues
2. Develop Policy Options
3. Operationalize Policy
4. Engage in Dialogue/Outreach/Collaboration
5. Educate Key Staff/Provide Training
6. Develop Appropriate Internal Capacity
7. Communicate With Business Partners
8. Ensure Internal Accountability
9. Utilize Independent Verification and Public Reporting

Large and small companies alike will benefit from taking even small steps to ensure social responsibilities are being fulfilled. One very simple first step is meliorating your Web site's accessibility:

Make your Web site accessible to blind and deaf users.

As the pressure on businesses to take stronger stands against human rights abuses grows heavier and the hot issue of e-accessibility gains support and awareness from consumers and companies around the world, your business will stand out as a leader and champion of social justice. On a more personal level, you may just feel the satisfaction from knowing you have helped a fellow citizen to realize his or her potential and to play a full part in this information age.

### **Business and Human Rights, and Web Accessibility Resources:**

UN and Business initiatives: <http://www.un.org/partners/business/index.asp>

Global Compact Web Site: <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/>

Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and Web accessibility info:

<http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility>

Webaim: <http://www.webaim.org>

Accessibility Agency, Nomensa: <http://www.nomensa.com/>

Nomensa's Global Audit:

<http://www.nomensa.com/resources/research/united-nations-global-audit-of-accessibility.html>

*-- Violet Vandever. Thanks to Mithre Sandrasagra of Inter Press Service for his contribution to this article.*

Written for Direct Marketing Association, Currents and Crossroads, January 2007