SEO & ADA COMPLIANCE

The Most Comprehensive Guide To
SEO & ADA Compliance On The Internet

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Table Of Contents

Why Should You Care About ADA & SEO?

Thirty-nine million people are blind, and 325 million are visually impaired. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), websites must be accessible to the visually impaired. Unfortunately, many websites neglect to make their content — both written and visual — accessible to the large population of potential customers with visual impairments.

The good news is, SEO can help with ADA compliance; there's a significant overlap between SEO initiatives (images alt text, anchor links, heading tags, and more) and accessibility initiatives.

Screen readers, for example, are similar to search engine crawlers in that they utilize page code to navigate and understand the content.

300%
Increase in lawsuits since 2018

25%
Websites that get sued more than once

98%
Websites that are inaccessible

20%
Percentage of the population who have a disability

The Hard Truth

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" "If your SEO or performance marketing agency hasn't talked to you about ADA compliance, fire them. Web accessibility is a human right easily improvable using SEO. If you couldn't do something as simple as ordering pizza online, how would you feel? That's how Guillermo Robles felt and why **he sued Dominos Pizza.** We created this guide as a labor of love to help you optimize and to demonstrate how SEO impacts ADA compliance." "

Lavall Chichester
AdAge 40 under 40
Founder, GrowthSkills.co

The Main Points

- Use SEO to help your ADA compliance — improve accessibility and search visibility.

- Install software like AccessiBe as additional support to the SEO and ADA work.

- Find an ADA Compliance specialty company to become 100% ADA compliant.

SEO and ADA compliance are symbiotic — they function together, increasing visibility and access to your website and content.

SEO: Increases content visibility (websites, videos, images, apps, etc.) on search engines.

ADA Compliance (Web accessibility): Increases the accessibility to (websites, videos, images, apps, etc.) in screen readers that function much like search engines.

SEO + ADA Compliance: Gives your brand and content maximum visibility and protects you from lawsuits (Dominos). And they're not the only ones, here are more examples of ADA lawsuits.

> "**Web accessibility is a set of rules, behaviors, code standards, and design guidelines, that are meant to allow people with disabilities to effectively use websites.**"

The American Disabilities Act (ADA) is not new; it was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990. While always a vital Act for the country to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities, it has become increasingly important in today's fast-paced digital world.

Since 1990, millions of people have grown to use and depend on the internet.

The internet has become one of the most vital tools for communication, information, and entertainment in today's globalized world. While some regions still lack the infrastructure needed to provide sufficient online coverage, others see internet penetration rates of close to 100 percent.

As a global hub of technological innovation and home to some of the world's leading internet companies, the United States has increased its digital population for over two decades. Today, over 85 percent of Americans have access to the internet, many of whom could no longer imagine a life without it.

313m

Internet
users in the
United States

85.8%

Internet user
penetration in the
United States

274m

Mobile internet
users in the
United States

Today, the Minnesota Department of Transportation reports that the U.S. has a population of 325 million. Of those U.S. residents, about 50 million people or more face challenges while living with a disability that falls under the ADA.

What is ADA Compliance?

To be ADA compliant, the Americans with Disabilities Act states that all electronic and information technology must be accessible to people with disabilities.

All businesses need to be compliant, but it's particularly essential for public-facing entities.

- Public transportation needs special safety features and priority seating.

- Civil engineering departments provide safe walkways and ramps throughout cities.

- Government, nonprofit, and private sector businesses with stairways and parking lots or parking garages provide ramp access, safety handrails, and accessible parking spots.

On September 15, 2010, the Department of Justice revised regulations for Titles II and III of the ADA, adopting and enforcing new accessibility standards called the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design. This revision reflects society's increasingly digital nature, calling to ensure that web accessibility is a fundamental right for Americans with disabilities.

The ADA now encompasses much more beyond the daily external, physical realm. It reflects the internet's critical nature for everything from work and shopping for essentials to browsing for pleasure or gaming. The crux of the law is to ensure that everyone can experience the internet equally.

The following types of organizations must comply with ADA Standards for Accessible Design:

- **State and local government agencies**

- **Private employers with 15 or more employees**

- **Nonprofit or businesses that run for the good of the public**

Even if the revised ADA does not apply to your startup's or small business's website or project, it's important to design and run a website that everyone can use.

Practical things businesses are doing to comply with ADA web accessibility guidelines include:

- **Providing tools like screen readers**

- **Facilitating the use of keyboard-only access to consume online content**

- **Including videos, audio recordings, blog posts, and specialized online services**

Ultimately, a website must be perceivable, operable, robust, and easy to understand.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are Available for Review

People need help understanding the ADA policies to comply. Many business leaders visit the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and other resources like Accessibe and Growth Skills to learn about providing web accessibility.

ADA Lawsuits & Stats

You might wonder how businesses are doing as far as ensuring ADA web accessibility. Judging by the stats, many companies still struggle to comply.

According to the United States Courts, the percentage of ADA-related civil rights cases has soared, increasing by 395 percent from 2005 to 2017.

In November 2020, Forbes shared that people filed about 11,053 ADA Title III web accessibility-related federal lawsuits in 2019, a 9 percent increase over 2018.

The top three states facing the most issues with compliance are New York, California, and Florida.

ADA Compliance Helps Prevent Lawsuits & Protect Your Brand

While it might seem confusing, there are resources available to ensure that your website speaks to everyone, including those with various disabilities.

Updating your site will help you avoid facing expensive and reputation-damaging lawsuits while simultaneously showing that you care about the rights of people with disabilities.

The Intersection of SEO & ADA Explained

Put simply, good SEO aids ADA, and ADA compliance improves your SEO.

Business executives, marketers, and web admins all know the importance of growing their organic search acquisition channel. SEO drives the most traffic to websites across industries and business models. That organic traffic results in more conversions and higher revenue.

What if we told you that avoiding an ADA lawsuit and growing your profits go hand-in-hand?

Even Beyonce's official website got sued for ADA compliance. If people are willing to sue Beyonce then they'll sue anyone. And guess what was listed as things that were not ADA compliant.

No alt-text on images

No accessible drop-down menus

These are both SEO ranking factors.

Calculate your return on investment (ROI)

Still not convinced of the importance of investing in SEO and ADA? Let the numbers speak for themselves. Calculate your potential ROI by comparing average costs for yearly professional SEO support with ADA lawsuit settlements' expenses. Let's break it down:

* SEO Annual Investment
$120,000

What you get:

- More site traffic, leads and revenue
- Improved ADA compliance

** ADA Settlement
$300,000

What you lose:

- Money and time
- Brand reputation and customers

* Any reputable SEO agency is going to charge at least $10,000 a month.

** Target paid $6 million in a class action ADA lawsuit (not including the $4 million in legal fees and the hours wasted in court). You can't even calculate the damage to your brand reputation.

Read More about the price of ADA litigations →

Read More about the top ADA lawsuits →

12 Organic SEO Ranking Factors That Are Also ADA Requirements

Several on-page elements are critical to successful SEO campaigns. These details ensure that pages are accessible to the hundreds of millions of visually impaired internet users.

If accessibility isn't taken into account when optimizing, visually impaired potential customers will likely bounce within moments. Or worse, take action resulting in a pricey settlement.

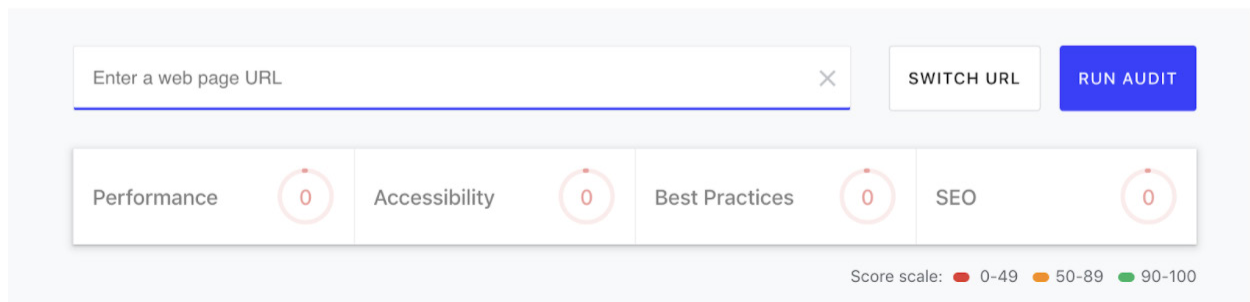Here are 12 elements that you should optimize for both search and web accessibility:

1. Core Web Vitals

Google is rolling out a new Core Web Vitals algorithm update. With this update, they've created a tool that allows you to run a Core Web Vitals audit. Below you can see that accessibility is key to ranking.

Also, it looks like Dominos got their act together.
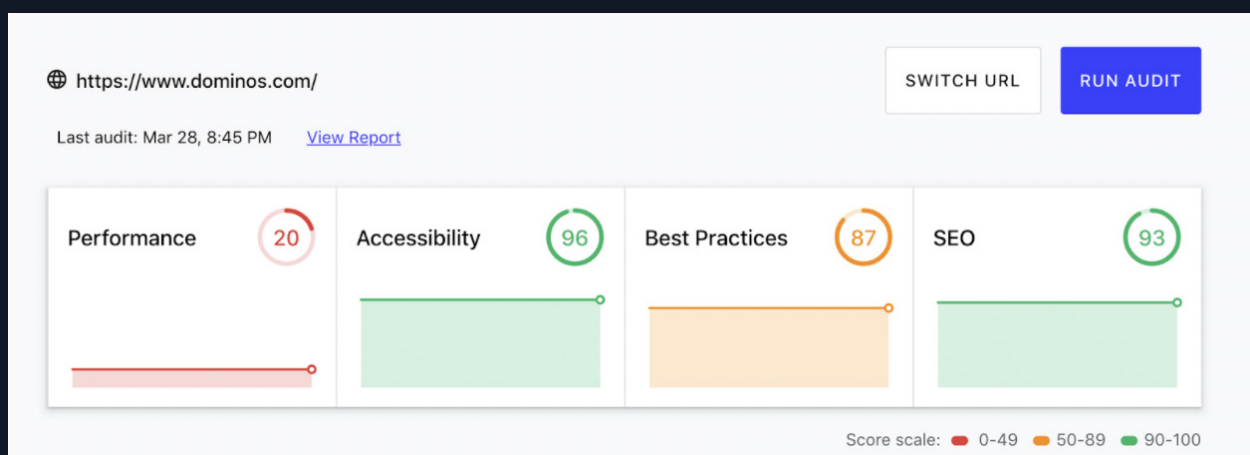
2. Heading Tags (H1-H6) Hierarchy (AKA Content Structure)

Header tags allow search engines and users to understand the page contents. Adding keywords to the header tags is how SEO professionals optimize a page to rank for a specific term; header tags are also how you get a chance at the Google answer box.

Braille and other screen readers also use header tags to understand the page — they read the header tags aloud.

Heading Tags For SEO:

<H1> Most Important

<H2> 2nd Most Important

<H3> 3rd Most Important

<H4> 4th Most Important

<H5> 5th Most Important

<H6> 6th Most Important

Visually impaired Internet users navigate the web using screen readers like VoiceOver or Jaws. These screen readers rely on the back-end code to understand its content.

Therefore, when heading tags are improperly coded (for instance, used for styling rather than the hierarchy of the on-page content), the experience is confusing for visually impaired people.
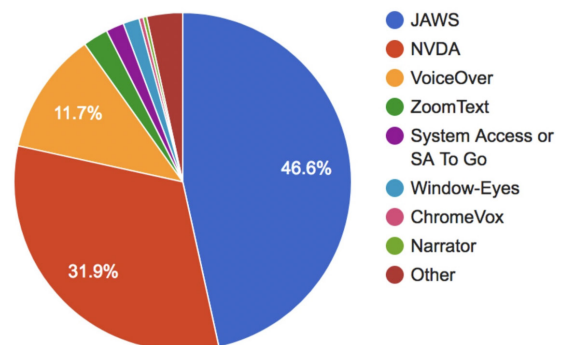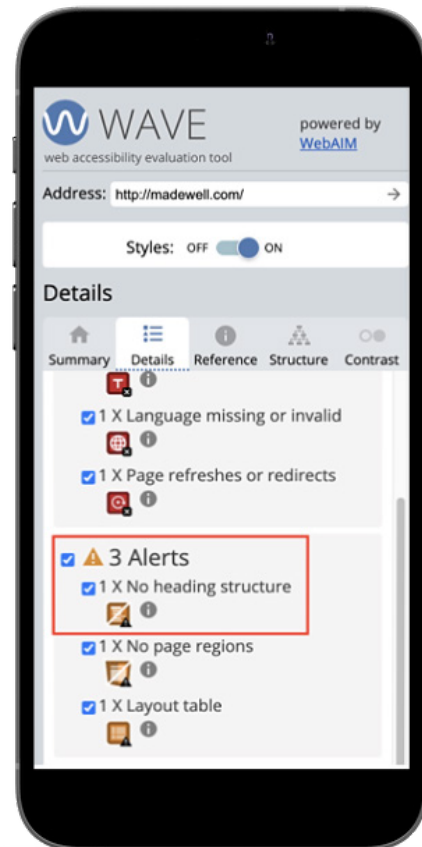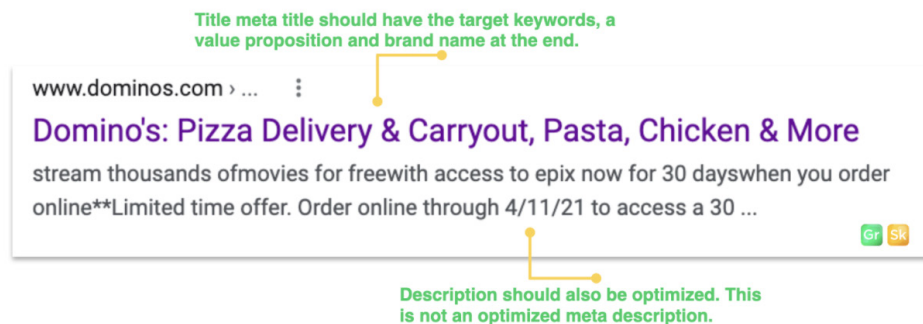

Pie chart from the Screen Reader Survey 2017, showing that JAWS, NVDA and VoiceOver are the most used screen readers on desktop.
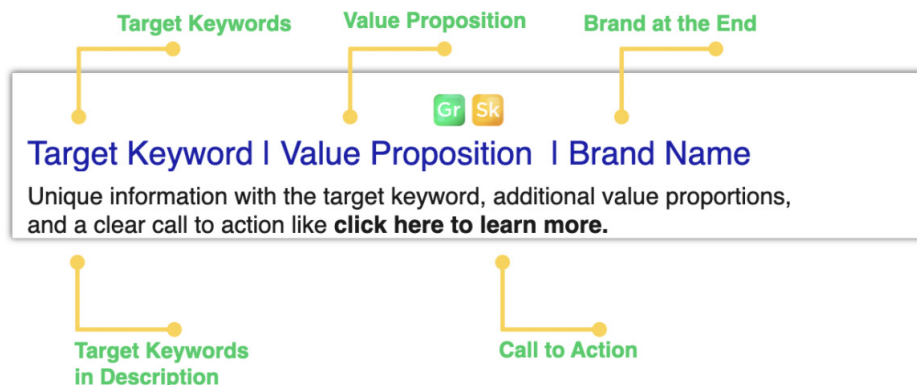
3. Meta Title Tags

Meta titles are one of the most critical SEO ranking factors. They're also a deciding factor for users scanning the list of results post search — meta titles (and descriptions) are your book cover.

Search engines look for the title's keywords to tell if the page is about the target keywords. Then, relying on accurate SEO, screen readers read the list of meta titles to visually impaired users.

For example, let's look at Dominos again. The layout of their meta title needs work, and they don't have a meta description. Google pulled copy from their site's home page to use as the meta description — yikes.


Title meta title should have the target keywords, a value proposition and brand name at the end.

www.dominos.com › ...

Domino's: Pizza Delivery & Carryout, Pasta, Chicken & More

stream thousands of movies for free with access to epix now for 30 days when you order online**Limited time offer. Order online through 4/11/21 to access a 30 ...

Description should also be optimized. This is not an optimized meta description.

Here's a quick template for optimizing meta titles and descriptions (for both SEO and ADA compliance):

Target Keywords Value Proposition Brand at the End

Target Keyword | Value Proposition | Brand Name

Unique information with the target keyword, additional value proportions, and a clear call to action like **click here to learn more.**

Target Keywords in Description Call to Action

4. Navigation Accessibility & Optimization Across Devices

Website navigation is another big area for SEO and ADA. Elements like navigation bars and dropdowns help users traverse your site and connect the dots for search engines. Optimized navigation also helps distribute domain authority across the site to other pages.

For example, the navigation on one of our websites broke, causing the keyword rankings to drop drastically. As a result, the traffic also plummeted. When we fixed the navigation, the rankings and keywords immediately came back.

Menu	▼

`aria-expanded="false"`

Menu	▲
Menu Option 1	
Menu Option 2	
Menu Option 3	
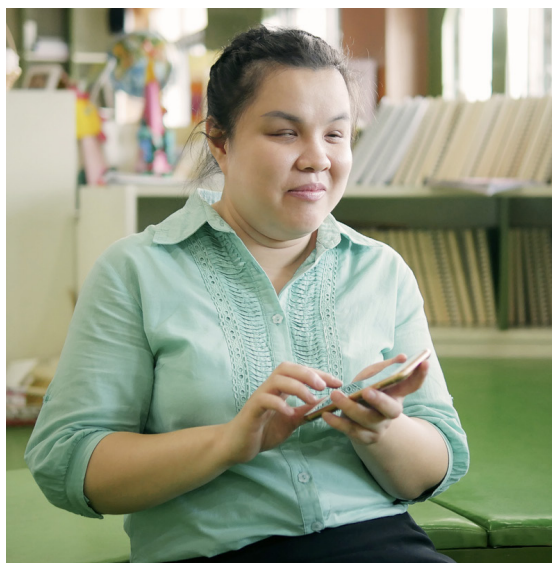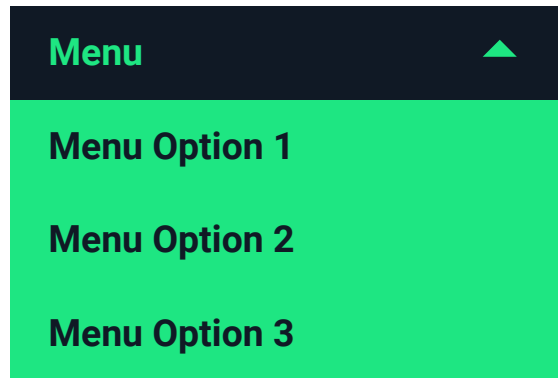
`aria-expanded="true"`

`aria-haspopup="true"`,

`role="menu"`, `role="menuitem"`

A visually impaired user will reply on the tabbing function to use a web page. Developers should code some aspects of a page for the tab key to hover over. Similarly, other elements get excluded as not to confuse the user.

For context, optimizing a page for the tabbing function also includes an outline that shows where the tab is on the page and more.

5. Responsive Web Design

Responsive website design (RWD) refers to a website built to be fully accessible to users on all devices (desktop, mobile, tablet). The design objects are dynamic, ensuring the contents are visible regardless of the screen's size, width, and orientation.

For example, the screenshots below are of the Growth Skills website at full screen and mobile sizes, showing that the site is dynamic.


For over ten years, responsive websites have had an organic edge over non-responsive ones. At this point, RWD is non-negotiable for both SEO and ADA.

6. Image Alt-Text and File Name

Image alt attributes describe to search bots what the image shows or where the image points (if the image is a link). Screen readers also read alt attributes on images. It's crucial to give visuals descriptive names pre-upload and add alt text on the back end.

Let's check the Peloton site as an example.
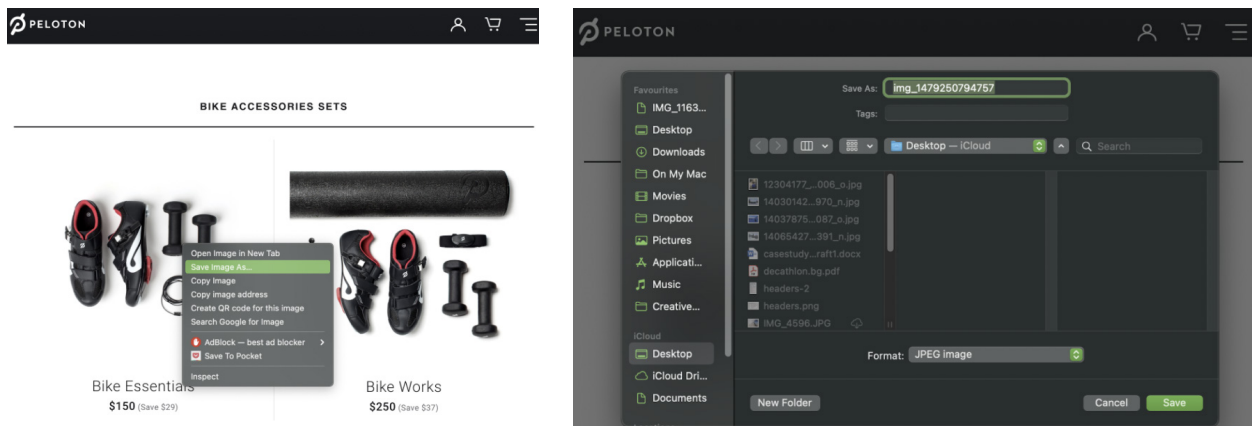
Right-click an image and save the image to your computer.

Here you can see that the image on Peloton's site does not have an optimized filename (img_1479250794757). The image filename should've been something like, "Peloton bike essentials."

Avoid text-as-images; they're not machine-read. Even though the Peloton image says "Bike Essentials," if the image doesn't have alt-text and a filename, it's not optimized for SEO or ADA.

Infographic Tips

✓ For accessibility, you should be able to determine what the infographic says effortlessly.

✓ Adhere to color contrast requirements and consider ARIA-describedby.

✓ Infographics are easily shareable and, thus, useful for SEO link-building campaigns if they're properly optimized.

7. Video Embeds

When you embed a video on your website, make sure it's optimized. YouTube has the opportunity for optimization within the platform, including transcription.

Video transcription is the translation of audio into text. Closed captions give hearing-impaired visitors the option to read along and break down language barriers if translated.
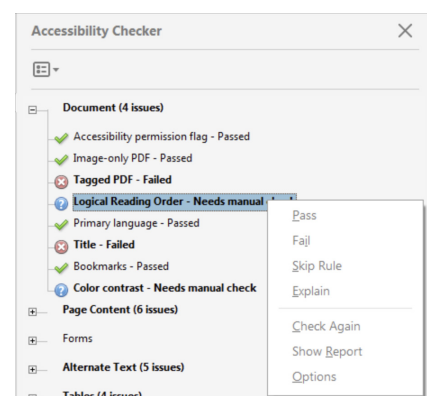
Additionally, video titles provide context to visually impaired users and a strong signal for SEO rankings, similar to how a meta title functions.
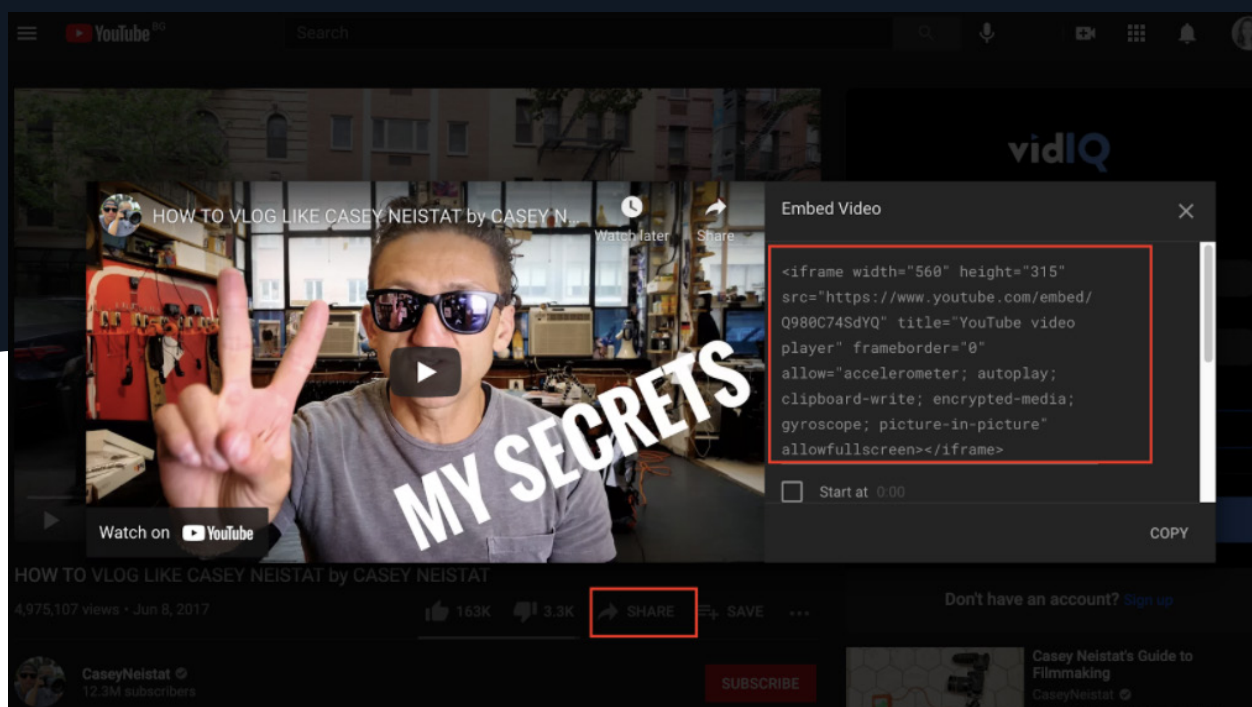
8. PDF (.pdf) Optimizations

Optimizing PDFs for SEO and ADA helps searchers find .pdf files. Make your PDFs ADA compliant using this guide from Adobe.

Within the guide, you'll learn to use the PDF Accessibility Checker.

9. Security Protocols (SSL Certificates)

Security is a top priority for every organization, and a website must. Your SSL certificates, HTTPS instead of HTTP, and the padlock next to a URL, help keep your customer's data protected and ensure a secure connection using encryption.

Without SSL certificates, websites are highly vulnerable to data breaches such as theft of credit card details, passwords, and usernames.

HTTP vs HTTPS

User	Insecure connection	Normal HTTP
User	Encrypted connection	Secure HTTPS
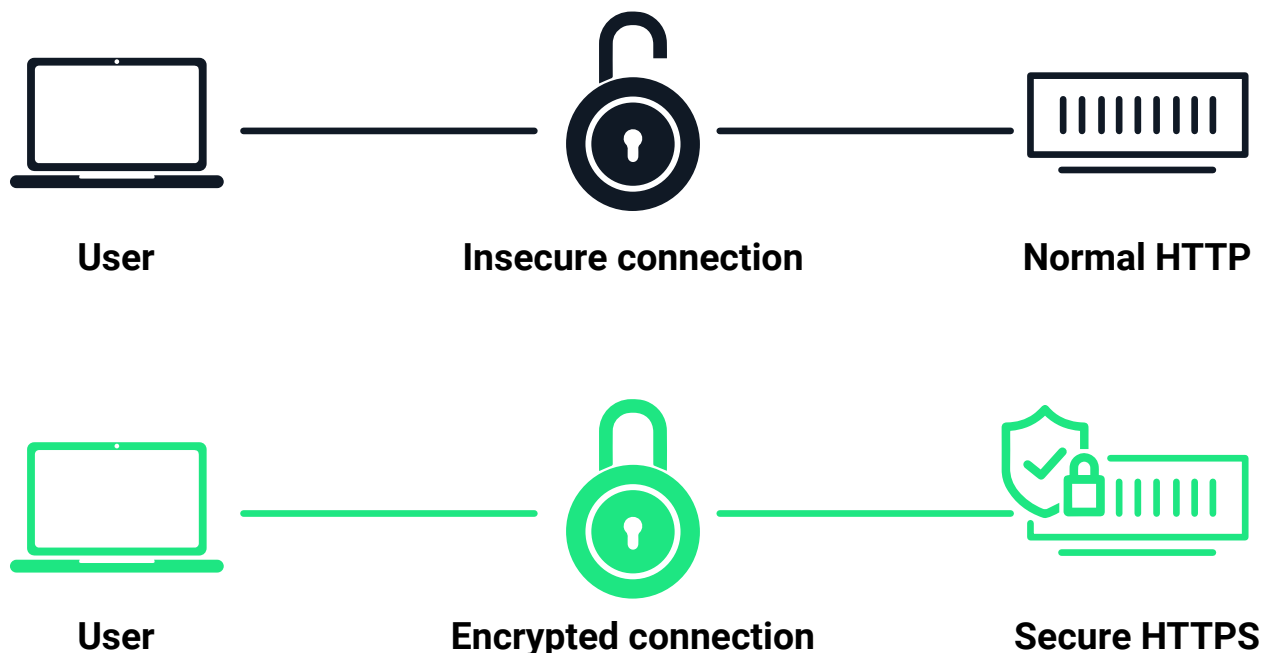
Site-wide security has been an official SEO ranking factor since 2014 when Google announced that it's one of the easiest ways for sites to boost SEO rankings.

10. Internal & External Links

Internal and external links are the lifeblood of a page; links pass domain authority and traffic from one page to another.

For ADA compliance, braille readers use anchor text to understand the linking page. The readers announce the links out loud like they do with header tags. Your anchor text must contain the keyword and information about the linked page.
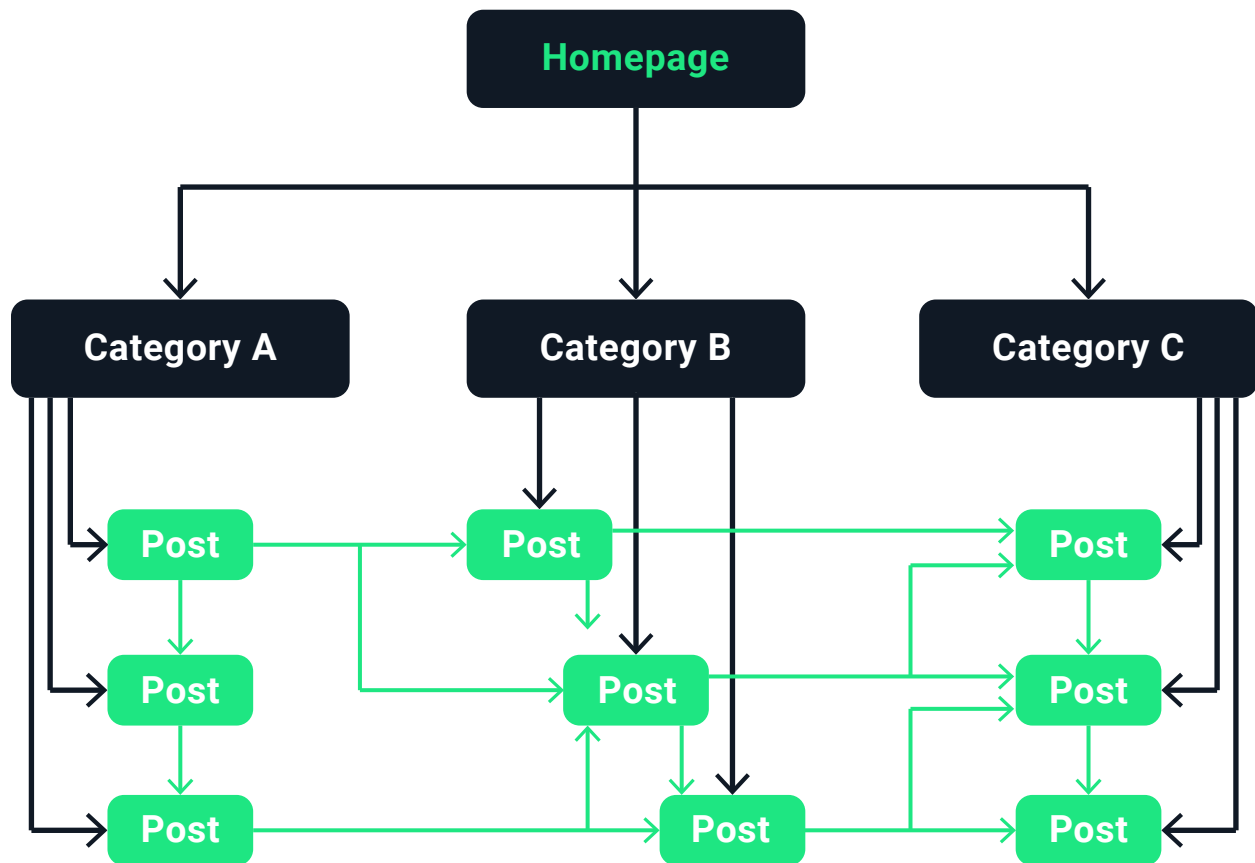
Using descriptive anchor text gives context — screen reader users tabbing through links will know what each link contains. And for SEO, providing context for the destination page helps that page rank for a relevant keyword. Win-win.

11. Site Speed

It's crucial that all visitors to your website, humans and bots, can access your content quickly. Removing old CSS, HTML, unused JavaScript, eliminating render-blocking resources, serving static assets, and improving your cache policy are some of the ways to optimize website speed. Site speed is a factor in SEO rankings.
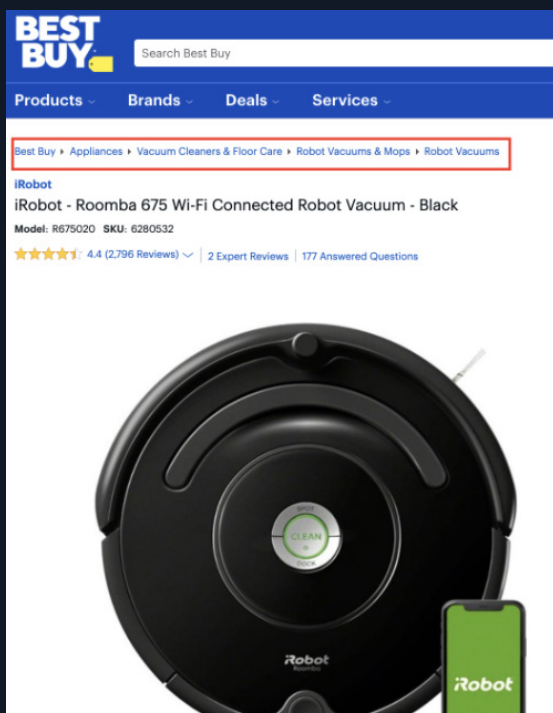

Long gone are the days of SEO practices like keyword stuffing and back-link buying. Today, search engine optimization is a synonym to search experience optimization, accounting for all site users' needs.

12. Sitemaps & Breadcrumbs

A sitemap is a list of a website's pages within a domain. For this article's purpose, the type of sitemap we're referencing is a structured listing intended for web crawlers such as search engines.

Search engine crawler bots use sitemaps to navigate and access your website the same way a traveler uses GPS to get around.

Similarly, breadcrumbs (or bread-crumb trail) is a navigation system that signals website hierarchy. This secondary navigation widget is known to significantly improve usability for larger websites, especially in the e-commerce or publishing space.

In the screenshot above, you can see a breadcrumb trail from Best Buy. A complete sitemap and breadcrumb trail automatically improves bots' ability to crawl your site (and the likelihood of higher organic rankings).

SECTION 6

Additional Non-SEO ADA Compliance Tools

While there's a significant overlap between SEO and ADA, we recommended that you turn to ADA-specific tools to review your website's compliance.

ADA Compliance Software
Use a tool like Accessibe to improve your ADA compliance.

ARIA
SEO professionals only cover a portion of what's needed to qualify as ADA compliant. Look into using ARIA code for total interactions with screen readers.

List of Additional ADA Compliance Tools

- Wave (Chrome Plugin)
- Wave's Accessibility Test
- Accessibe
- Chrome Braille Screen Reader Extension
- ARIA Validator
- Deque Systems Axe Plug-In

- Silktide
- DubBot
- Level Access
- MaxAccess
- Accessible360
- Equalweb

Wave
Chrome Plugin

Wave's Chrome plugin is the easiest way to evaluate content's accessibility with only a few clicks within your Chrome browser. While this is not a fully automated tool, it helps educate webmasters in assessing their website. It's great for locally stored or highly dynamic pages.

Wave's
Accessibility Test

Wave's free accessibility in-browser test is the online web version of the Wave Chrome plugin test. Similarly, it's great for locally stored or highly dynamic pages though it doesn't provide a fully automated ADA audit.

accessiBe

One of the best in class ADA tools on the market and our go-to recommendation. Accessibe is a fully automated web accessibility solution for ADA and WCAG compliance. It's affordable, though not free, and it comes with a 7-day trial period.

Chrome Screen
Reader Extension

Another super handy plugin to help you recreate the experience a visually impared visitor has on your website. Use this web-powered screen reader in addition to other ADA testing tools like Accessibe.

ARIA Validator

A great beta-stage online software on the more technical side. Great for QA testing accessibility & implementation, rather than running a full test.

silktide®

Silktide reports on WCAG 2.1, Section 508, AODA, and ADA compliance to determine potential issues on every level of a web page. The testing platform also scans mobile devices to ensure that each page is compliant; it checks PDF pages, form labels, and color contrast.

deque

This chrome plug-in provides a toolkit for websites to test accessibility across multiple browsers and platforms. With automated and intelligent guided testing, axe audits for ADA compliance to offer scalable recommendations. The tools continuously scan, report on, and monitor your website for usability improvements.

DUBBOT

DubBot offers a feature to scan for web accessibility, determining if each web page passes the WCAG 2.1 tiers of accessibility and ADA compliance. Through their web accessibility feature, DubBot provides analysis on whether or not web pages support all standard assistive devices.

LEVEL access

Level Access provides multiple solutions to uncover ADA accessibility concerns within a web page. It includes analytics, learning resources, and easy integration through a management platform to offer robust solutions for web accessibility.

ACCESSIBLE 360

Accessible360 offers a roadmap strategy to manage your website for ADA accessibility compliance. Live-users audit the site for potential issues of concern and report to relevant development teams to process improvement. While an experienced project management team leads the accessibility audit, they also offer training and resources to help with future concerns.

MAX ACCESS
BY ONLINE ADA

This fully automated ADA and WCAG compliance downloadable software is easy to install and implement. It works by scanning each web page, analyzing potential sources of concerns, and automatically updating the code for user accessibility. MaxAccess will also examine all images to produce alt tags and captions by leveraging its artificial intelligence capability.

EQUALWEB
DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

With over one million remediation rules integrated into its software, Equalweb has developed an algorithm to identify accessibility issues to provide ADA compliance recommendations. It audits usability from multiple angles, including navigation adjustment, color adjustment, and content adjustment, to provide optimal accessibility support.

Recommended Next Steps

1. **Be an ADA advocate:** Take action — share or link to this page and ebook. Your CEO, CMO, CIO, and CTO should read this guide if they're not already informed. If you convince decision-makers, you'll change your organization for the better.

2. **Optimize for SEO and ADA:** Optimize for search and accessibility at the same time. Since SEO and accessibility optimization overlap, it's advantageous to work through the above elements with both SEO and ADA in mind.

   It's also important to understand where SEO and accessibility overlap to optimize correctly for both. Note: optimizing for one is not necessarily akin to optimizing for the other.

3. **Contact us** if you need help convincing your internal team that ADA compliance is essential; Growth Skills is here to help.