Give your customers the ultimate shopping experience
Creating a competitive edge with accessibility
Executive overview
In today’s competitive, multichannel retail marketplace, how can you offer a superior customer experience that distinguishes your business from your competitors? Technology is the tool that has forever changed customer shopping habits, expectations, and experiences. For the last 10 years, the Internet has significantly changed consumer shopping habits. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year—everything and anything you want is available online. The Internet has transformed the world into an online retail showplace offering an array of choices, price comparisons, and, in some cases, a shopping experience customized to the individual.

How can you offer a customized shopping experience?
Use technology to your business advantage. The Internet is a time-saving tool that has transformed shoppers’ habits. You can use the Internet to provide your customers with a unique, enjoyable, and easy-to-use shopping experience.

IBM has several technologies, services, and solution offerings that can help you take your retail operation to the next level of customer service. Let IBM help you implement solutions that can increase your competitive advantage by helping you:

- Reach new target markets.
- Improve the customer experience.
- Build customer loyalty.

accessibility, n.
At some point in your life, you may become disabled. As we age, the odds of developing an “acquired” disability, such as a vision or motor skills impairment, increase. Accessibility is about inclusion—enabling human capabilities through innovative information technology. It is critical for retailers to ensure everyone has access to the information on Web sites and on in-store kiosks.
Customers demand more... so should you

It's all about having options. But customers have so many options they can become overwhelmed. One way to help your customers with their choices is by offering a shopping experience customized to individual needs and preferences. Tailor shopping experiences to individual desires and values. Using multiple entry points such as the Web and in-store kiosks, customers want to educate themselves about products or services before they buy. Retailers must respond with innovative methods for supplying information, enriching the complete shopping experience.

Price search engines and other tools have made it easier and more affordable for consumers looking for the best deals to make purchases from any number of retailers. As a result, retailers must find creative ways to connect with new markets to cultivate long-term, profitable relationships. One way to differentiate your business from the competition is to understand that all customers have different needs and demand consistent, personalized service at every touch point no matter how or where they choose to shop—online, at the store, or through catalogs.

Incorporating accessibility into your IT infrastructure provides you with the tools and technology to reach out and deliver a consistently rewarding customer experience to a broader base of the population, including emerging demographic groups such as aging consumers, multicultural populations, and people with disabilities.

Approximately 420 million people worldwide are age 65 or older, and this number is expected to increase dramatically over the next two decades. Baby boomers have significant disposable income, are brand-loyal shoppers, and often have IT needs that are similar to those of people with disabilities. By offering innovative accessibility options, you can help mature baby boomers to more easily access and use retail services, foster long-term consumer loyalty, and open sustainable new revenue channels.

For example, larger screen fonts can make it easier for consumers with low vision to navigate online stores. And text-to-speech technology that reads Web pages aloud can help customers with more significant visual loss, language comprehension issues, or motor difficulties learn about new products online. Accessible options can help maturing consumers have a better experience with online services by allowing them to customize Web pages to their preferences.

Accessibility also offers retailers the opportunity to connect with another significant market segment: people with disabilities. The addition of even a small set of accessibility options can help you reach out and connect with more of the almost 500 million people worldwide who have some type of disability. In the United States alone, this portion of the population was reported in 2000 to have $195 billion in disposable income, making them a powerful market for your business.
Accessibility is becoming a hot button in the retail industry. Although companies in many industries, including retail, have traditionally underinvested in accessibility technology, there’s evidence that if you offer accessible options, people of all ages, abilities, and aptitudes will use them. It only stands to reason that:

• Most computer users are likely to benefit from some form of an accessible technology.
• Many people without any impairment or physical disability already use accessibility technology to make computers easier or more comfortable for them to use. For example, baby boomers and aging consumers may use an enlarged font size option in their Web browser to make text easy to read.
• Most people with disabilities use some form of assistive or accessibility technology but could also benefit from additional or new accessibility products and solutions. Retailers may need to make small changes to their Web pages to make sure that accessibility tools work properly.

**Improve the shopping experience and increase customer satisfaction**

Finding new ways to foster growth in today’s competitive retail industry is important. But keeping the customers you already have satisfied is paramount. Customers today are “super-shoppers,” accessing information whenever and wherever they want. They use technology as an integral component of the shopping experience and they seek tailored, in-store experiences from traditional retail outlets. This can be particularly challenging when innovative new service channels quickly become the market standard for increasingly tech-savvy consumers.

To boost top-line revenues and differentiate yourself from competitors, you need to redefine the customer experience at every level of your enterprise—transitioning from a product-focused to a customer-focused enterprise. Accessibility should be a critical part of the redesign process because it provides a direct opportunity to support the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery to current and future customers.

**In-store and online accessibility with IBM**

As a leading supplier of self-service kiosk solutions, IBM is working to help clients meet the growing need for accessible self-service kiosks. IBM’s Human Ability and Accessibility Center and Global Business Services’ eAccess Solutions Practice recently developed two innovative accessible self-service kiosk solutions that leverage IBM accessibility expertise.

The solutions incorporate hardware and software accessibility features including a standard audio connector (i.e., headset jack), accessible hardware controls, and text-to-speech output. These features can help IBM multichannel retail industry clients provide a better customer experience with accessible self-service kiosks that support a diverse group of customers, including people with disabilities, non-native language speakers, and the maturing population.
In reality, accessibility is about more than providing access for maturing consumers and people with disabilities. Accessibility can help make technology easier to use for everyone. Innovative technologies designed for the maturing demographic and individuals with disabilities can benefit a broader audience and therefore provide a higher return on your technology investment. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, some usability tests have found that when Web design changes were made to accommodate older users, the changes also improved performance for younger adults.¹

For example, many accessibility tools can help users navigate the Internet more easily by reading Web pages aloud and by allowing them to resize panes, enlarge font sizes, and change background colors for better contrast. Retailers have introduced these technologies on their Web sites to assist low-vision users as a way to be more customer-oriented to an aging society. While most of these inventions were initially designed with disabled users in mind, they also further the cause for usability by designing products to be usable by more people.

Legislation and litigation are driving accessibility compliance in the retail industry
Accessibility means enabling IT hardware, software, and services to be used by more people, either directly or in combination with assistive-technology products. In many countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany, new or pending legislation—such as Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, Web accessibility laws, Guidelines for Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities, and the Barrier Free Decree—require or suggest that businesses or government institutions follow certain accessibility standards.

A leader in accessibility, IBM sits on many of the committees—including the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)—that develop these standards. We understand the changes you may need to implement to make your products and services more accessible, and can help you formulate a cost-effective action plan for accessibility. While legislative action is driving accessibility compliance, IBM sees pursuit of business transformation as the principal driver of accessibility innovation. As more retailers make additional services available online and on demand, the need to make IT accessible to more customers rises.

In the United States, the need for accessible IT is also being driven by litigation. Several industry-leading retailers have found themselves in court due to inaccessible Web sites or inaccessible online human resources recruitment tools. People who are blind need a computer screen reading tool to read text aloud from Web pages. In some cases, the tool cannot recognize the format of the retailer’s Web site thus rendering the site inaccessible to blind users. These unsatisfied users often approach disability industry associations to help them legally pursue the retailer to initiate change.
IBM has the skills and resources to help you create a Web experience that is more accessible. Through a combination of specialized services offerings and tools, IBM can help you build accessibility into your IT infrastructure.

**Humanizing the enterprise for consumers and employees alike**

**A complex environment for consumers**

The emergence of the multigenerational economy represents a huge demographic shift. Sometimes called the “Age Wave,” it is driving our 21st century world. As the world’s population ages, consumer needs continue to evolve. Retailers should optimize the buying experience for the maturing consumer both online and in stores.

Another addition to the complex retail environment is the need for multilingual options for online and in-store shopping experiences. In the United States, 11 percent or some 31 million people are foreign-born, with nearly 18 million people speaking a language other than English in the home.\(^5\,6\) Retailers need to reach this market by offering native language support options and alternatives to help comprehension.

Offering a great shopping experience for everyone is what it takes to succeed in today’s highly competitive marketplace. How do you meet the changing needs of the maturing consumer? How do you optimize and humanize the buying experience?

**And what about your employees?**

Each day we’re all a little older. For the global workforce this translates into a skills shortage and knowledge gaps between the most experienced workers and the people being hired to replace them. Many of the baby boomers are set to retire within the next five years or have started to retire early due to age-related disabilities. This is an issue that is affecting many industries in the developed world. Employers are searching for ways to enable their maturing workers to extend their careers while accommodating their changing ability levels. As we age, we have a greater likelihood of developing vision, hearing, or motor skill impairments. A maturing workforce has specialized needs that must be addressed for employers to retain that knowledge and skill set.

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*The number of visually impaired Americans age 40 and over—including the blind—is expected to jump two-thirds in the next two decades, from about 2.2 million to 5.5 million people.*

*Source: National Eye Institute, 2006*
How do you attract and retain the best talent? How can you empower the maturing workforce? How do you optimize and humanize their work experience? Accessibility technologies, services, and solution offerings from IBM can help.

**Accessible IT: Catapulting ahead of your competitors**

Implementing a comprehensive accessibility strategy in your organization can help you achieve enterprise-wide objectives by providing mature consumers and people with disabilities many of the same opportunities as everyone else and by allowing you to serve a broader range of consumers, improve customer satisfaction, and extract new value from your technology investments.

IBM has the creative and technical knowledge, ease-of-use expertise, research innovation, and business insight essential to addressing the end-to-end accessibility requirements facing retailers. Whether you are concerned about the accessibility of customer processes, employee development and management processes, accessible self-service kiosks, or your overall operations, IBM can help you integrate accessibility into your offerings to gain measurable business advantages.

IBM accessibility services include Web site assessment, strategy and standards development, Web or application testing and remediation, governance and policy preparation, and more. Our service offerings can help you formulate a strategy to make the most of your IT investments, including ease-of-use testing and personalization. Whether you require a single solution or need accessibility integrated across your existing architecture, IBM offers the technology, skills, and range of products designed to help you realize your business objectives.

Retailers that define themselves by their strong commitment to customer relationships and employee satisfaction will see the value in integrating accessibility into their business initiatives and strategy. After all, it’s about offering the best possible shopping experience to your customers.

**For more information**

For more information about IBM Human Ability & Accessibility solutions, please contact your IBM representative or visit: [ibm.com/able](http://ibm.com/able)