

Accessibility isn't enough—for some it's a four letter word

by Craig and Marc Kielburger



Chris Pratt knew he'd made a mistake.

The *Guardians of the Galaxy* star shared a video on social media, asking his followers to ignore the subtitles and turn up the volume.

He didn't realize how insulting that was for the nearly 400 million people around the world who have hearing loss and rely on those subtitles—until some of them lambasted him on Twitter.

To his credit, Pratt **immediately apologized** (using sign language) and thanked his fans for the learning opportunity. Then, he challenged Instagram to make its app more inclusive with automatic captioning for all videos.

"I wish we could bottle that learning moment, and share it a million times," says Rich Donovan, CEO of Return on Disability. The consulting firm helps companies prioritize inclusion to attract customers and employees, advancing innovative tactics on an issue that's usually seen narrowly as ramps and braille.

Donovan wants to change that, calling this tacked-on type of accessibility a "four letter word."

"It's the bare minimum, the very least we can do to meet basic accommodations and legal mandates," he says.

While infrastructure is important (and **frustratingly absent** in some cases), barriers can be more than just physical, and we're seeing a new wave of designers and innovators expand the very meaning of accessibility.

Deaf concert goers are enjoying music like never before as interpreters **reinvent** American Sign Language, using enhanced body movements to translate the sonic experience into visual art.

People with visual impairments can touch museum **artifacts** and **immerse** themselves in verbal descriptions as they pose like a sculpture or draw priceless treasures.

And by pairing sighted patrons with visually impaired partners, **specialty** travel agencies create unique experiences that alter perspectives for both groups as they walk amongst the terracotta warriors in China and through the Parthenon in Rome.

Accessibility is more than an afterthought. When it's a part of the process from the beginning, it leads to enhanced experiences for everyone.

It's even a catalyst for innovation.

"[Google] used someone who is blind as their muse," says Donovan. The result is a self-driving car. "If we design with accessibility in mind, we create better products."

Voice control, smart phone screens that adapt to changes in light, autocomplete texts—these are all innovations inspired by questions of accessibility.

A first step is proving there's a demand. Products and services geared toward people with disabilities make a strong business case for mainstream companies to follow suit.

And if the market leads, innovative accessibility will follow.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are the co-founders of the WE movement, which includes WE Charity, ME to WE Social Enterprise and WE Day. For more dispatches from WE, check out WE Stories.