

# America's Grocers Take the Lead in Ensuring Virtual Access for The Blind

By: **VIRGINIA JACKO**



**A**t the beginning of primary election season last fall, Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired reviewed the websites of the presidential candidates and un-

covered something surprising; none of the Democrat or Republican contenders' sites were fully accessible to the blind and visually impaired. This lack of accessibility effectively shut out some 12 million voters living with visual impairment from the information they needed to learn more about the candidates vying to be our next president.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis and in our new world of social distancing, Miami Lighthouse – the organization which I'm privileged to serve as its first blind CEO, wanted to understand just how well the millions of blind and visually impaired Americans like me could access grocery-company websites in order to access now-vital food deliveries. What we found shows the forward-thinking

nature of the grocery industry and just what needs to happen in other industries less focused on doing what's right, both for customers and the bottom line.

The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) is the law that helped the wheelchair-bound gain access to public buildings, but that isn't all there is to it. It also guarantees people with all disabilities, including the blind and visually impaired, the right to equal access - not only to physical spaces but also to digital and online media.

Not only were your groceries available to us despite social isolation, your virtual checkout personnel became our "front-line" heroes. I am pleased to say that your industry was ahead of many in the retail sector and even the presidential candidates' campaigns. We determined this through our ADA Compliance Meter.

The ADA Compliance Meter uses the World-Wide Consortium's Website Accessibility Content Guidelines and measures 10 criteria, including navigation; structure; adjustability of font, colors and contrast; accessible forms and error messages; and more. We rate on a scale of one (not accessible) to four (totally accessible).

We found that the majority of grocery-industry websites scored in the mid-

to high threes, and were mostly compliant with ADA guidelines. In contrast, the Presidential campaign websites scored much lower (low twos to three) in our initial report on their accessibility.

We did, however, find some room for improvement.

The majority of the websites were missing an accessibility statement that provides a method of contact including a live email address and phone number that users can call for assistance. Seniors - one-in-four of whom has uncorrectable vision loss or low vision) need to be able to switch their website views for higher contrast and larger fonts.

Some images and graphics were missing alternative text descriptions so the blind and visually impaired users employing a screen reader know what is on the images you choose to display and whether or not they are essential to site navigation.

These fixes are straightforward, simple, and well within the demonstrated capability of most companies' existing IT operations.

We are sharing what we have found not only to thank you, but to provide a teachable moment for other sectors. It is an opportunity to call attention to the fact that the blind and visually impaired are often forgotten and it takes indus-

tries such as yours to show leadership in this area to serve all customers, regardless of ability.

I applaud you for your commitment to enabling access for the blind, and we hope you are inspired to make a few small changes that will make a huge difference in the lives of your customers. We are always available as a resource to those who seek to improve access and who keep in mind that inclusion is not just a good thing, it's the right thing.

*VIRGINIA JACKO was named President and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in 2005. Not only was Virginia the first blind CEO of Miami Lighthouse in its history, she was also a graduate of the Lighthouse's Vocational Rehabilitation Training Program. Prior to gradually losing her eyesight leading to total blindness, she was the Senior Financial Executive for the President and Provost of Purdue University. Since becoming President and CEO, Virginia has achieved an outstanding record of accomplishments. She has received numerous local, national and international awards and has also been recognized as a Distinguished Alumni by the College of Health and Human Sciences of Purdue University.*