Strategize Like a Boss with Mia Major:

Episode 1 with Ty D’amore (Transcript)

 00:00 [MUSIC]

Mia Major: 00:07 You are unstoppable, you are great, you are talented, and you are a boss. I am Mia Major, the Content Marketing Manager at Finalsite, and welcome to Strategize Like a Boss, the podcast for school professionals who want to learn how to thrive in their roles. Featuring strategies, tips, inspiration, and real life advice from professionals who already strategized like a boss.

 00:34 Hey everyone. Mia here. I'm really excited to be kicking off my first podcast for Finalsite. Well, I've worked in marketing for almost five years now. I have a background in TV and radio production, so I really feel like I'm getting back to my roots here. I've always used these platforms, radio in particular, to share stories and content that I'm passionate about, so it makes sense that on my first Strategize Like a Boss podcast, I take the time to talk about something I genuinely care about as a marketer. Web accessibility and--wait, don't hit the pause button--I know that marketers have used, "WCAG" and "ADA" and "accessibility" as scare tactics. Well, listen up. I've been working with our team on accessibility for just over a year now, and the one point that I continue to hit home with is that accessibility is not just about the laws and regulations, it's about providing equal access to content and providing an online experience that anyone can use.

 01:36 In five years, or maybe even sooner, we'll look back on the chaos that surrounded this topic and wonder how did we ever have inaccessible websites? How did we ever accidentally neglect a rather large portion of our population? How did we ever decide that adding alt text was too time consuming and that our time was somehow more valuable than someone's ability to have a meaningful experience with our website? So to help clear the air and help me take a little bit more of a holistic view of this topic, I have Ty D'amore more here with me today. A true boss when it comes to website accessibility. I first started working with Ty last spring when Finalsite teamed up with AudioEye, the industry leader in web accessibility. Ty has been a member of the AudioEye team since 2013 and is a leader in the accessibility space, and a vocal advocate for digital inclusivity. Ty also possesses an in depth understanding of the legal and technical demands of ADA related digital accessibility requirements, and participates on the member committee of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals. Thank you so much for joining me today, Ty!

Ty D'Amore: 02:46 Awesome. Thank you so much, Mia. We're, uh, excited to be here and congrats on starting this podcast. We're super excited. I love the title and uh hope that everyone can walk away today learning a little bit about accessibility, but then understanding to your point earlier that accessibility is about people, y'know, there's a lot of guidelines, there's a lot of laws, and y'know regulations, that I think we get hidden behind sometimes. But accessibility is about people and giving individuals access to this world that we live in now, which is, y'know, all digital. So excited to answer a few questions today, and kind of clear up the air, um, and understanding, y'know, accessibility is the right thing to do.

Mia Major: 03:28 Absolutely. Thank you so, so much. I do want to just start out in this conversation because I feel when I found this conversation with clients or with a partner, y'know, you say the word "accessibility," you say the word "compliance" and people either y'know, run in the opposite direction or they're very engaged with the topic and I think that because those two terms are often used interchangeably, it can actually be somewhat confusing from both a legal standpoint and a people standpoint. So I do want to take the time, Ty, can you kind of explain the difference between accessibility and compliance, and yet why they're both so important together and important on their own kind of separate platform?

Ty D'Amore: 04:08 Absolutely. So I'm gonna kind of switch it up a little bit, Mia, and when we use what at AudioEye--compliance and conformance, right? So accessibility can really can really fall two ways and we we often get stuck into this notion of am I compliant, is my website compliant? Well, compliance is all about doing something, right? Compliance is all about taking the step forward to providing access to individuals with disabilities. The moment that I can show that I am doing something, that I'm moving the needle and progressing and being more accessible today than I was yesterday, I'm really coming into this compliance standard right of moving forward and moving the needle, and that no longer is just getting a report and sitting on the report. We need to move that needle every single day. Like I said, we have a saying at AudioEye, "we're going to make our clients more accessible today than they were yesterday and we're going to continuously do that until they conform."

 05:07 And now when we start talking about conformance, conformance has to do with conforming to the AA criteria for W-C-A-G. Earlier in the podcast you said "wuh-cag," and y'know that sometimes can be the terminology. So compliance is y'know, doing something and moving that needle every single day with the end goal of conforming to those guidelines. So I think often people get misconstrued on, 'Hey, can we do, y'know, I gotta be compliant. I gotta get this all done now,' when really the goal is to start your journey, which is really gonna move that needle forward on compliance, but then also with that end goal of conforming to the guideline of WCAG--and now when we say the guideline of W-C-A-G or "wuh-cag," I want us to think in the notion of a blueprint, right?

 06:01 WCAG has taken into consideration every single type of disability and the way that they engage digital content. Often a misinterpretation is that web accessibility is only for individuals that have low vision or individuals that are blind. But really web accessibility is about all different disabilities in different use cases and how we can provide access. So when we conform all of our digital content to those WCAG guidelines, we're really opening the playing field and providing access to individuals that maybe have low vision or are blind, but also individuals that maybe have dyslexia, or maybe have epilepsy, or another form of disability where digital content can affect their ability to consume. So if we kind of break it down, Mia, and I want to make sure that that makes sense to our listeners today, is that compliance is about doing something: have a plan, make commitments, and y'know, hold yourself accountable to those commitments, and conformance is moving towards that WCAG and conforming your technology or your digital infrastructure to those WCAG guidelines.

Mia Major: 07:21 Absolutely. And I think a couple points that I want to talk about today is often a misconception around a disability and the fact that, y'know, a school or a company might say, 'well we have no one that works here or attends here that has this disability.' But I think that there are a lot of those that kind of slip under the radar that we don't consider, y'know, a pretty substantial portion of the population, in my opinion, has some of these. I know that you are a wealth of knowledge when it comes to statistics on these things, if you have anything in your back pocket that you want to just share, kind of in relation to that and those disabilities that do slip under the radar that we might not be thinking about.

Ty D'Amore: 07:59 Yeah, absolutely. I think, y'know, here at AudioEye and just through the, y'know, both knowledge of being able to listen to subject matter experts in web accessibility and being able to engage with individuals that have been affected by digital content not being accessible. One of the ones that always comes to mind for me is individuals that have epilepsy and flashing content. I think we live in a world now today where UX and the design of a website is all about, y'know, 'how can we make this engaging?' But one of the things I found out was for flashing content or content that's constantly moving, it can affect someone that has epilepsy. So there's a lot of different things too, there's a lot of of different disabilities that are affected and we could go into specific details. How is someone that is an individual that's autistic, when they simplify the interface, are they going to have a better user experience?

 08:58 So here AudioEye, we're not only looking at, y'know, 'hey, what about those individuals that are following WCAG,' y'know, that is going to help their ability to consume. But what else can we do? Can we go above and beyond just the guidelines, can we add personalization tools? Can we change the color contrast? Can we simplify the interface? All sorts of, y'know, giving individuals the ability to customize and to personalize their settings because maybe it's a hidden disability and there's a certain functionality, maybe a black on white help, someone that has migraine. There's a lot of little things that can be affected by digital content.

Mia Major: 09:36 Absolutely. And I think when we talk about the structure of a website from the ground up, there's so many little pieces that we need to take into consideration from adding tags to making sure our navigation can be tab through, and ensuring that all of these individuals, whether they're in our community or they want to join our community, can access the content in the same way that someone can who doesn't have a disability. So, y'know, we get the question a lot at Finalsite like, 'Hey, well I'm not a public school. We don't receive any federal funding, we don't have the time or the budget to really invest in web accessibility.' So from your standpoint, y'know, kind of excuses aside why should schools, even if they don't receive federal funding, implement website accessibility and compliance and conformance best practices?

Ty D'Amore: 10:28 Yeah. I'm very close to this. Right? And at AudioEye, here we never want someone to move the needle or accessibility because they view it as a compliance requirement, or y'know, the individual, 'I complied with section 508 or the 508 Refresh.' First and foremost, accessibility is about people, and y'know, if you're building your school, you're not going to exclude individuals that have, y'know, wheelchairs and not build ramps and rails. So first and foremost is it's a best business practice. It is a human right to have accessibility for individuals and that's just, that's just the nature of what we do. And making your digital infrastructure accessible, I say it all the time, is that we no longer go to Target to get our, y'know, our supplies. We just go online at target.com and order them.

 11:22 For schools, I'm sure that Mia, you guys are probably seeing a transformation in the way that teachers connect with their students and to connect with the parents, and it all being through, y'know, a platform like Finalsite or their websites or their LMS. Right? So everything is going digital and are we gonna have another movement like we did with the Americans with Disabilities Act where we left individuals with disabilities behind on brick and mortar? And that's exactly what we're seeing right now. So first and foremost, we need to look at this not as a compliance issue, y'know, not as something that is around the requirements, because they're all there, right? At the end of the day, if you look at ADA and you look at Title I, Title II, and Title III, they're all pointing to the notion of make sure that individuals with disabilities have equal opportunity, not only to work and to do their job, but also that your constituents have access to your buildings and now that your buildings is, y'know, a direct connection to your online environment.

 12:21 We all need to, y'know, quote-unquote "comply." But if we view that as, y'know, 'this is a compliance requirement, check the box,' we're always going to move the needle a lot slower than we need to, I think. We need to view this as, 'hey, we need to advance our offering and make sure that everybody has equal access to our digital content.' So, y'know, if you don't receive federal funding, this doesn't exclude you out. Look at ADA, um, but really try to create the notion in your school and say, y'know, we're going to take and be leaders and make sure that individuals, not only our students but our students, parents and grandparents, have access to the digital content because nowadays it's just so important that they have that access.

Mia Major: 13:15 Yeah, Ty, I love the point you made about Target because your website is your first impression, your website is your front door, that 90 percent of online experiences beginning search and if we can just get them to the website, we can get them to our campus. Of course, that there's campuses or day schools where, y'know, a student can drive down the street and visit that campus. But for boarding schools, for international schools, we have numerous schools that are intended for students with learning differences that are boarding schools that have inaccessible content. So from a branding perspective, from a leadership perspective, y'know, whether or not you're just trying to, y'know, adhere to a law, it really sets you apart. If you're a school that's raising your hand and saying, 'Hey, y'know, we care about our community. We care about accessibility as a human, right. We're taking an initiative and we're taking action right now.' So there are schools who need to take action, right? Schools who have been mandated by the federal government, and maybe a district who's got an OCR complaint, but what can schools do right now to start taking action maybe if they don't have a ton of time or a huge budget to kind of start moving on that accessibility initiative?

Ty D'Amore: 14:25 We always have this saying, Mia, which is 'give a darn.' Right? You need to do something and you need to care. And it comes down to saying, 'Hey, this is an important issue. I want to make sure that not only my students, but we have to look at it beyond just the students. Look at the parents, the grandparents,' y'know, 'the uncles and family members that are coming and visiting the site.' The site traffic is going up every year of how many users are coming in and actually accessing digital content. So you need to really take action now and say, 'Hey, we're going to do something.' Whether that is, y'know, calling Final and saying, 'Hey, how can we make sure that our website is accessible to individuals with disabilities,' y'know. Or saying, 'Hey, we're gonna put in our budget going forward, we're going to put a line item in there to make sure that our content is accessible,' and research and study, and read articles and grow your knowledge base, right?

 15:27 But really it all just comes down to giving a darn and saying, 'I'm going to do something and it might take me 12 months to procure the funds to make sure that my site is accessible. But in that meantime I'm going to find an outlet for my students that,' y'know, 'need this type of service, and need to have access.' Or it could say, 'I'm going to call my Finalsite rep tomorrow and I'm going to talk with them around how can I address this now?' But really know that, that it needs to be on the radar. It needs to be on the agenda and we can't just have it become one of those items on the agenda that always moves down and is third or fourth. It really needs to move up and you need to move the needle with accessibility so that, that's kinda y'know, that's coming from me, Mia, it is always the first thing that I'll say is, 'I want every single piece of digital content to be accessible, whether it's our HR systems or our marketing websites, our LMS, but y'know, we got to start somewhere. Don't get overwhelmed by how big this this project might look, y'know, especially if you're working with Finalsite, they've done a great job with developing a plan for each and every one of their schools to help move the needle on accessibility.'

Mia Major: 16:43 Yeah. y'know, it's funny because accessibility is this looming project, this huge undertaking, and I think when people see it, they see another expense. They see another project, they see something that they don't have time for. We're actually in the process of redesigning our website right now at Finalsite. But y'know, it was wonderful going through that redesign process because we have onsite accessibility specialists, we have a QA process that involves the WCAG requirements. So when we were given our site it was functional, it was accessible, and then all we have to do on our end was make sure that our content was. And of course, y'know, it's those few extra steps. It's adding the alt text, it's making sure we have an H1 and H2, it's making sure that all of our links don't say 'click here,' but when you actually kind of get in the groove and you start doing it, you realize that what accessibility isn't, y'know, a huge project. You're actually making your website better overall for everyone, disability or not.

 17:41 And that's kind of what I've learned in this process and I've been very fascinated by it. I'm very intrigued at accessibility cannot only do our community who needs equal access to our site, but what it can actually do to the user experience we build for everyone. It's actually very incredible when you, when you start putting all the pieces together, what can happen. So that being said, we're talking about what's happening right now with accessibility. Um, I know this is, this is a podcast. This is supposed to be easy listening, so we're not going to dive too much into the laws and regulations we have. We've had tons of webinars and written a lot of blogs about that topic already, but I do want to take a moment to talk about what do you see as the future of accessibility? I had the opportunity to speak with Dan from AudioEye, he mentioned that, y'know, WCAG 2.1 is coming out soon, so we're already kind of moving from a legal standpoint, but where, where else are we moving tie in terms of legality and the future of this in general?

Ty D'Amore: 18:41 Yeah, I think from the legality side of things, y'know, there's been a lot of lawsuits. There's been a lot of activity. I think we're going to continue to see an increase in that. Then we really have here in 2018 I think WCAG 2.1 is coming out, anticipating that in the next 8-12 months we should see WCAG 2.1. Y'know, I think that there's somewhere around 15 proposed changes to WCAG 2.1 and that's going to move the needle into mobile. Um, and a few changes coming in. I think as we talk about the future, and me, I'm going to take a step back and look at this holistically. I think that the future of accessibility is going to become usability. And you kind of stated this a little bit ago of saying, y'know, 'when you make your site accessible, it's also just helping the overall design, the overall SEO, the overall look and feel of the website.'

 19:36 I think that we're going to catch on, and hopefully it's within the next few years where accessibility is becoming usability from the aspect of, y'know, voice control or voice navigation, right? So I think that that is the future of accessibility, that we're going to find that this is going to become something that's going to bring into the UX world. It already is part of UX of a website, but we're going to continue to see this increase, um, on the usability aspect. In personalizing the ability that we, y'know, we engage in consumed content, and if anyone was to say, 'what is the biggest thing about accessibility in the next 10 years?' I would say personalization and the ability to personalize my settings. Maybe I don't have, y'know, a disability that alters the way I can consume content, but just my personal settings, I like to have a black background and I like to simplify down the interface. I think that that's the future, y'know, we do have WCAG 2.1 coming out, just added proposed changes, um, to the guidelines. But if we look holistically, that's where my mind's going with this. Um, I think that that's just what makes this industry so fun and exciting and why, y'know, I love doing what I do.

Mia Major: 21:01 I don't think in the history in a Finalsite marketing piece have 'accessibility' and 'fun and exciting' have been used in a sentence together. But there is a first time for everything. Accessibility needs some positivity around it. Just for the mere fact that there's this like negative kind of aura, people don't want to touch it, they don't want to deal with it. No, but in some situations they have to, and in ALL situations we should, right? We should ALL focus on accessibility, inclusivity, usability. It's all so, so, so important.

Ty D'Amore: 21:33 I was just going to jump on in and I think that, y'know, I watch the show Silicon Valley, I'm guilty. Um, I don't know if anyone else watches that, that's listening today, and they always make a little joke in there that every tech company, and technology in general is, y'know, making the world a better place. And I think that, y'know, the work that we're doing with accessibility and just the advancement in technology in general. Some of the technology I go and I see at these conferences, I mean there's a company out there called Aria that is developing a Google Glass-type product that can click a button and have access, instant access to someone that is visually impaired to have someone over the microphone give you navigation directions or can say, 'hey, this is a $20 bill instead of a $5 bill.'

 22:27 So technology is just advancing to really make the world a better place. And I think that that's what, y'know, drives the fuel behind AudioEye, and I've seen it from Finalsite too. I mean working with your team, Cara and everyone at your team, Mia. I think, y'know, when we start to see those changes, and you actually see someone with, y'know, that is blind or you engage with someone that is utilizing an assistive technology and there they're having a better use case because you've made that content accessible. It's really, I mean, that's what technology is meant to do.

Mia Major: 22:59 Absolutely. And, y'know, we have the AudioEye toolbar on our website so that we can offer that personalized, that unique experience to everyone who does does visit Finalsite.com, which y'know, especially with our new website rolling out is something that we're very excited about. I do want to end our podcast with one final question and I do think on this Strategize Like a Boss podcast series, I will be asking everyone who joins me the same question because I think it's important. My goal here is to bring on experts and people who I perceive in the community and the industry as a kind of thought leaders. Uh, and for lack of a better term, a quote-unquote 'boss.' So Ty, what is the one thing that has helped you strategize like a boss, whether it be in accessibility or just at work every day, um, that you would like to pass on to our listeners today?

Ty D'Amore: 23:48 Awesome. No, I love this title to this podcast first and foremost, Mia. I think I love it. But what, uh, what's really helped us at AudioEye strategize like a boss is listening to the market, listening to the end users, and then developing the technology around around what we are hearing in the marketplace. And I think that's for all of us is understand and listen to your coworkers, your customers, um y'know, your students, your faculty, your staff, and then being able to make adjustments from there. Y'know, one of the things from us that we've listened to and been able to really capitalize on is that accessibility is hard to do on your own and making digital content accessible, um y'know, trying to code it or trying to constantly maintain and monitor via reporting, um, can be a daunting task, and can really scare people away. And and that's why we've developed our technology in the way that we had and been successful. So I would always say in any industry and any type of business and so forth, if you just listen to what your coworkers and everyone around you is saying, it's really going to help you strategize what's going to be the best plan forward for your organization and maybe for you personally as well.

Mia Major: 25:12 Excellent advice, Ty. Thank you so much for joining me today! I know that you are very busy, um, especially in these times of change and I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to be here on strategize Like a Boss. If anyone would like to learn more about Finalsite and AudioEye's partnership and how we work together to provide accessible websites to our clients, you can visit finalsite.com/accessibility. Thank you, Ty.

Ty D'Amore: 25:39 Thank you so much Mia, and uh y'know, I appreciate you having me on today and in, y'know, representing for AudioEye here. If there's ever any questions, feel free to, uh, to reach out to us. But thank you so much.

Mia Major: 26:00 Be sure to check out my friends' shows on the Finalsite FM network of podcasts. You can find them at finalsite.com/finalsitefm, on iTunes, Spotify, or Soundcloud. Strategize Like a Boss is recorded over GoToMeeting and is produced by Stephanie Griffin and Hadley Rosen, our theme music is "Summer Party Night" by Twisterium. If you have any questions or would like to be a guest on my show, email us @ finalsitefm@finalsite.com. Thanks for listening!