digital echidna

Digital U for a Digital You

AN ECHIDNA GUIDE TO AODA COMPLIANCE

WHY AODA?

To paraphrase Wilford Brimley, the best reason to ensure your Web site is accessible is simple: "It's the right thing to do."

But if you're a stickler for legality, as of January 1st, 2014, the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act (http://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/) will be extended to include Web sites for public-sector and non-profit organizations with 50 or more employees.

Beyond the penalties and fines that can be levied upon companies for non-compliance, the best reason to ensure your Web site is AODA compliant can be summed up in Brimley's folksy charm: it is the right thing to do for a significant proportion of our society.

Over the next few pages, we'll get into the hows and whats of AODA compliance and we'll talk about the business benefits that accessibility can bring to your business. But first let's start by sharing the two most important Ws: the Who and the Why.

"Have you ever been doing research on the Web and, upon finding the perfect resource , are crushed to discover the Web site is in a different language than you speak and, ultimately, is rendered useless to you?" explained Jeffrey Preston, a disability advocate and Western University PhD candidate in media studies with a focus on disability policy. "That is the experience of many individuals with visual impairments when surfing the Web. Although popular Web site design programs, like Dreamweaver and common content management software like WordPress encourage Web accessibility compliance, far too many Web sites remain inaccessible to screen-readers like Jaws.

"There is nothing more frustrating than knowing there is a wealth of information available, but is simply inaccessible in the format you need. By taking a bit of time to ensure your Web site is compliant, you can help to make the Web an accessible experience for all."

The provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services (http://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/index.aspx) states one in seven people in Ontario has a disability. That number is expected to increase with our aging population. The AODA guidelines, as they relate to information and communications, are designed to give "people with disabilities access to more of the information that we all depend on."

"All Web sites should be universally accessible to as many different people as possible," said Glenn Barnes, the Tetra Society of North America's Ontario co-ordinator. Tetra is a non-profit organization that recruits skilled volunteers to create customized assistive devices for people with physical disabilities. "When designing specifically for people disabilities, the biggest area lacking for many websites is the fact that they do not translate well onto screen readers for people who are blind.

"I think it is the often smaller and more universal considerations available that make websites better for people of any ability. In my experience, it is best that a Web site -- or any public area -- be designed for as many individuals as possible."

And there are quick and easy (and often free) steps that are often overlooked, which would provide tremendous value to those accessing a Web site with assistive devices, Barnes explained.

"Including small things like the ability to increase the size of the font or

having tags over top of a PDF or a picture are small little fixes that can help individuals navigate the Web site much more easily," Barnes added.

Our society's view of accessibility has traditionally been fixated on physical disabilities. While the community as a whole is familiar with physical accessibility standards and measures, the development of the AODA principles revealed to many the wide range of issues that must be addressed to ensure accessibility for all.

"Too often when we think 'accessibility' we think or ramps and elevators," Preston explained. "Early development of the AODA revealed Ontarians with disabilities were facing far more barriers than just architectural. One barrier often overlooked is that of information and communication.

"Rarely do we consider the large amount of individuals who communicate differently, whether it be individuals who depend on sign language or people who cannot see a computer screen. One objective of the AODA is to help organizations to begin providing information in multiple formats to accommodate those who communicate differently."

As we'll explore shortly, the benefits aren't all ephemeral – they can translate into dollars and cents. In any business, attracting and retaining customers are key goals. And in an increasingly diverse and global marketplace, where viable competitors are only a click away, overlooking your Web site's accessibility standards can unnecessarily turn away potential customers.
"If your Web site is one that has not been optimized for screen readers, you are immediately cutting out a group of potential clients who will not be able to access your goods and services," Preston explained. "By taking the time to make your Web products accessible to everyone you are able to

target a niche market that is all too often overlooked, giving you a competitive advantage in your field."

And one of the goals of AODA is to ensure that our society doesn't get any worse before it gets better. "The mandate of the AODA is simple: make Ontario accessible for all citizens by 2025," Preston explained. "An important first step to achieving this goal is to stop creating *new* barriers.

"This is tackled by the AODA through accessibility standards that aim to provide organizations with guidelines to ensure that they aren't creating new barriers and ensure that service is provided the same to everyone, regardless of their level of ability."

In the next section, we'll talk about key dates and requirements for your site. And we'll look at some hard and fast numbers about why an investment in accessibility can not only improve your Web site's functionality – it can also boost your business' bottom line.

Summary
- All new content and new Websites must be compliant starting Jan. 1, 2014*   *Applies only to businesses and non-profits with 50+ employees*
- Many existing sites remain inaccessible to screen readers
- Small changes can make huge differences in terms of accessiblity
- AODA's goal is to make the province of Ontario to all by 2025
http://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/

WHAT IS ACCESSIBILITY?
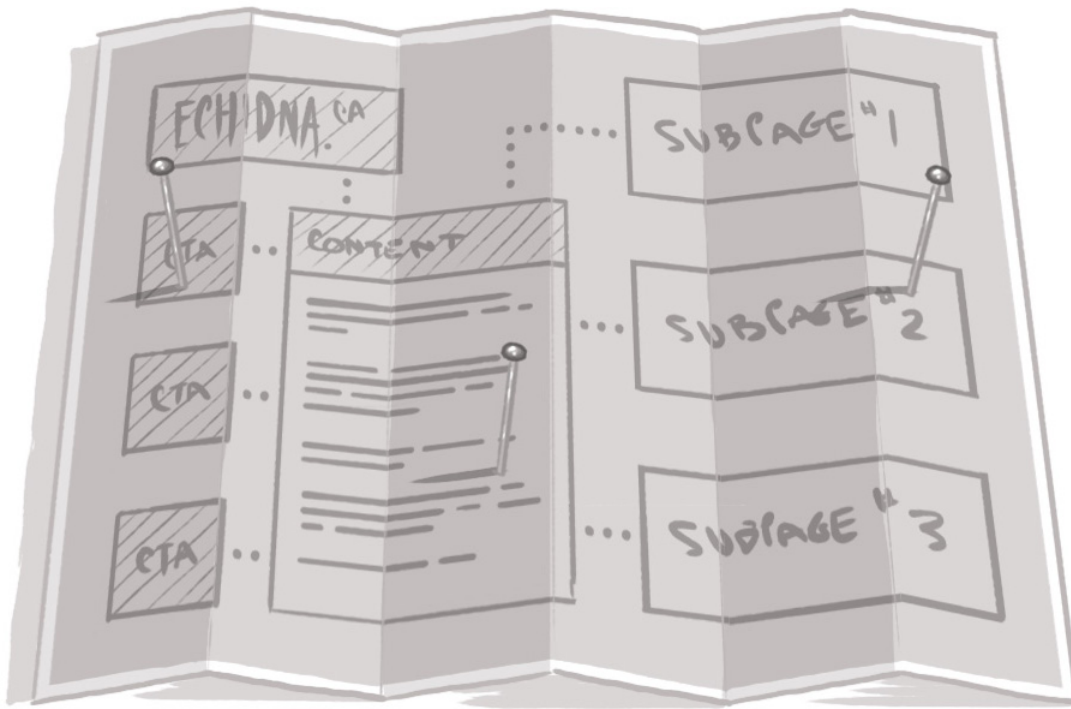
Deadlines and fines for lack of compliance can be scary things, especially when we're hanging around in Acronym Land. In this post we hope to show that AODA compliance isn't all that scary – and provide you with more context so you can plan your Web site activities going forward.

The Act became enforceable against public-sector Web sites on Jan. 1, 2010. The next key date is fast approaching as enforcement of this act will extend to Web sites for public-sector and non-profit organizations with 50 or more employees, effective Jan. 1, 2014.

On that date all 'new' sites must conform to the World Wide Web Consortium Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, Level A standard. As of Jan. 1, 2021, all public sites must conform to WCAG 2.0 Level AA standards (other than providing captions on live videos, or audio recordings for pre-recorded videos).

There are a whole lot of acronyms and terms in there, so let's look at them in detail:

•   **AODA:** The Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act (http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_05a11_e.htm) was enacted in 2005. It was a new piece of legislation designed to address accessibility issues and support the existing Ontarians with Disabilities Act (Ontario government Bill 125) which came into force Feb. 7, 2002. Essentially, the AODA enactment gave the ODA a little more teeth – ODA was strictly voluntary with no enforcement, penalties, or deadlines attached to it.

•   **WCAG:** These are the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, a standard of Web content accessibility developed by a global consortium of people and corporations. Essentially, it's the guidelines for Web content developers and the people who build Web tools to ensure that Web content is more accessible to people with disabilities.

•   **WCAG 2.0:** This is the technical standard to which accessible sites must aspire. There are 12 guidelines, categorized under four principles: perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. While the initial WCAG 1.0 offered checkpoints, 2.0 outlines success criteria that must be achieved in order to conform to the standard.

- **A, AA, AAA?:** These are the established conformance levels for your accessibility efforts, with AAA being the highest. All new public sites and new content must confirm to WCAG 2.0 Level A as of Jan. 1, 2014. However, by 2021, all public sites and Web content must conform (with a couple of exceptions) to WCAG 2.0 Level AA… so it makes sense to build to that level now with all new content.

You'll find a quick reference guide to Web content accessibility guidelines at the following URL (http://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG20/quickref/), along with the success criteria for the conformance levels.

It can feel overwhelming, but compliance will be phased in. The 2014 requirements are only for content posted in 2012 and after – so you don't have to revisit all your archives (nor does AODA apply to your internal Web site). However, just because you don't have to be compliant doesn't mean you shouldn't. If there's older content that's of value to your customers, then bringing it up to standard may be worthwhile to you.

But what is WCAG? So I'm assuming you didn't read through that document linked above yet. That's OK. Essentially these guidelines are designed to maximize the opportunity for people from all walks of life to navigate your Web site. They promote:
- Using clear language to write Web content;
- Providing alternate text for images or captioning for pre-recorded videos;
- Ensuring users can navigate your site with a keyboard;
- Offering high-contrast colouring and readily resizable text that allows those with compromised vision to access your content without compromising the site.

And while WCAG compliance was designed with those with disabilities in

mind, it can also make your Web site more accessible to an aging populace, as well as those with slow Internet connections and/or older computers.

In an increasingly multi-platform digital environment, the move to accessible content marches hand in hand with best design practices. As Johns Hopkins University states on its Web Accessibility site (http://webaccessibility.jhu.edu/what-is-accessibility/important.html), "Other benefits of making Web sites accessible relate to reduced maintenance costs... Well-designed site structure reduces the amount of coding necessary and allows manipulation of site content to suit different presentation styles... The use of text alternatives for images, objects, and multimedia aids editing by identifying non-text content more easily."

Those are the basics. Next up we look at what's in it for you – an examination of the customer base and potential financial benefits of making your Web site accessible. And then we explore how you get there.

Summary
• AODA enacted in 2005
• All sites must initially comply to WCAG 2.0 A status in 2014
• As all sites must comply to WCAG 2.0 AA status by 2021, easier to strive for that level now
• Well-designed, accessible site structure will result in less maintenance costs

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

There is no one right answer as to why you should make your Web site accessible. So far, we've tried to give you a broad perspective of the standard and why it should matter to you. Now we get to the stuff that makes the accounting department's collective hearts flutter.

The dollars and cents. Or, more accurately, the 'What's in it for me?' of AODA.

Before we get into the fun and exciting, "How AODA compliance can make you money" let's talk about the less happy "giving it away" aspect. Failure to comply with the standards can result in fines up to **$100,000 PER DAY** – dun, dun, dun!

Sorry, that's an old journalistic trick of focusing on the sensational. While it is true that corporations that violate AODA requirements can be fined up to $100K per day (individuals and unincorporated organizations, and directors and officers of a corporation with fiduciary responsibility who are

guilty can be fined up to $50K per day) those only apply to repeated major violations.

The Act actually offers a reasoned and scaled approach to enforcement (you can find a full description at the following URL -- http://www.aoda.ca/aoda-administrative-monetary-penalties-scheme-%E2%80%93-three-strikes-you%E2%80%99re-out/). After all, the goal of the Act isn't to punish those companies who are not compliant, but rather to encourage companies to ensure their content is accessible to all Ontarians.

Companies will receive notice and have opportunities to explain their lack of compliance and outline efforts to rectify it. Basically, to get hit with the big numbers you have to willfully contravene the key priority requirements of the act – and do so repeatedly.

But more than the threat of fines, the promise of increasing your business' appeal to a promising market should be all the motivation most business owners need.

How much of a market? The 2010 AODA annual report, referencing the Martin Prosperity Institute's study on economic impacts of increased accessibility, suggested that the retail sector could increase sales between $3.8 billion and $9.6 billion over the next five years; tourism expenditures could increase between $400 million and $1.6 billion.

For those with disabilities, increased access to higher education through improved accessibility standards could result in a potential increase of $618 million to $1.5 billion in employment income.

Canada-wise, the numbers are staggering. According to Statistics Canada's

Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2,397,960 Canadians needed help with everyday activities in 2001. By 2006, that number had increased to 2,652,890.

We've all heard the adage about how Canada's population is aging. So Statistics Canada numbers that show 18.3 per cent of all Canadians 45-64; 33 per cent those 65-74; and 56.3 per cent of those 75 and older have a disability should serve to underline the importance of accessibility.

And that's not all. The benefits of making your site more accessible can extend well beyond those officially designated as having a disability. CNIB (formerly known as the Canadian National Institute for the Blind) states that at least 4.25 million Canadians live with some form of vision loss.

Accessibility can also support the needs of people beyond your initial target market. As Google states in its approach to accessibility (http://www.google.ca/accessibility/approach/), providing alternative access modes (keyboard shortcuts, high-contrast views, speech-to-text capabilities) may also make your site more attractive to power users. And accessible Web sites are favoured by major search engines, in part because best practices for Web accessibility often align with best practices for search engine optimization.

So in the end, making your Web site accessible doesn't just make sense -- it can make cents!

WHAT TO DO NOW?

We've discussed the who and why, we've discussed the what and when, and we've discussed the almighty dollar aspect of what's in it for you. Now, let's conclude with some quick-and-easy tips to help you understand how you can integrate AODA compliance into your Web site design.

Remember, effective Jan. 1, 2014, any new Web site or Web content must conform to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 Level A. By Jan. 1, 2021, all content and sites must conform to WCAG 2.0 Level AA -- and a good recommendation to follow is to plan for Level AA compliance right away.

After all, is you're a believer in the ol' measure twice/build once philosophy, then there's no point in redoing your content again. However, this is

---

important to note, the January 2014 deadline only applies to new content and new sites – you don't have to make your content retroactively accessible. But just because you don't have to doesn't mean it's not a good idea to do it.

Here are some key compliance measures to consider as you're building your Web site (or adding new content).

• **Subtlety is Not Your Friend** – Use a strong contrast between your text and backgrounds so that it's easy for all to read and differentiate the content;

• **Make your Images, Videos 'Readable'** – Ensure that you're creating alternate text for your site's non-text assets. This covers not only the obvious (photos and videos), but also the more subtle (symbols and icons);

• **Get 'Textual'** – For pre-recorded video and audio assets, make sure you've provided text transcriptions for the visually and/or aurally impaired (or for those who would rather read your info than chew up bandwidth!);

• **Be Flexible** – Try to make your site adaptable to different presentations. More simple layouts, responsiveness – all the while providing every reader access to the same information;

• **Let Fingers do the Walking** – The Yellow Pages may be all but dead, but their mantra still holds value. Make sure your site is keyboard accessible for those with motor skills restrictions;

• **Slow Down** – Yes, your rotating images or timed access points may look cool and flashy, but they're also terribly restrictive to people with dyslexia, other reading disabilities, or mobility challenges. Make it easy for users to turn off or extend the time (such as hitting the enter key);

• **Restrain Your Inner Flasher** – Many of us take for granted the warnings that pop up on video games warning of the potential for seizures. But for those afflicted with the condition, your 'flashy' design element can be

debilitating. Ensure no component flashes more than three times per second and make sure no element exceeds general flash or red-flash thresholds;

• **Simplicity in Navigation** – Make your links clear – describe the link and its content and use higher-contrast indications to ensure that your site visitors can easily identify links; and

• **Make it Portable** – By ensuring your code is up to W3C standards, it will help your site's content be 'read' by a variety of screen readers and other assistive tools and software.

These are just a handful of suggestions. Digital Echidna would be more than happy to help you meet your business' Web site accessibility needs. But the intention behind AODA and WCAG 2.0 compliance is so much bigger than just any one company – it's about making the world more accessible to all Ontarians.

The first thing you need to do is get informed: whether that means doing your own research or talking to your Web development company. The Ontario provincial government has prepared a document (http://www.mcss. gov.on.ca/documents/en/mcss/accessibility/iasr_info/website.pdf), which can help you get started.

 But, in the end, it's up to you to insist upon accessible design today. There are so many sound business reasons for making our environment more accessible, but it all goes back to the quote we used at the beginning of this document.

As Wilford Brimley once said, *"It's the right thing to do."*

STAYING COMPLIANT; MAINTAINING COMPLIANCE

S o... now what?

Earlier this year, we did a four-part series on how to ensure your Website meets the standards set by the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act – commonly known as AODA. But even if you had the best intentions and launched your site to be fully compliant with the WCAG 2.0 standards (http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/) it doesn't take much for your site to fall out of compliance.

Falling into non-compliance isn't done by malicious intent, nor is it incompetence... sometimes it's just oversight and the rush of day-to-day business that can lead to honest mistakes.

So what are some common errors that people make when updating their Websites that can impair your site's accessibility rating.

Here are some common errors:

Uploading images without a text option

Accessibility doesn't mean that you have to have a site bereft of images. And it's more than just ensuring that the image has Alt Text. Graphics can have an incredible influence on the ability for all readers – including those with reading, learning, or cognitive disabilities, and attention deficit disorders.

It's important to keep in mind the intent of your image within in the framework of your site and make sure that your alt text reflects that as well. Sometimes it's not enough to say, "An image of X" but rather it's important to say, "This is an image of X, which shows the relationship between Y and Z." If you're using an image to supplement your text, then a more simple alt text may be fine; if you're using it to replace text, then you'll need to be more expansive.

Don't forget – sometimes nothing is better than something. For decorative images, an empty alt attribute (alt="") will prompt screen readers to simply skip that image (and avoid the occasional scenario when a screen reader will try to read the name of the file – which can be awkward and confusing.)

For video and other multimedia, providing a text transcript and captions can enhance all of your visitors' comprehension ability.

And sometimes when the image is text-based, it can still cause problems. Graphics bearing text can become pixilated when enlarged, making it more

difficult to read than had a real-text alternative been used initially. Don't forget contrast when using text – different shades of a colour may be visually appealing, but for those with visual impediments, they can be visually daunting.

Improper nesting of heading elements

Simply put, accessible designs mean providing ways for all users to quickly and easily find and understand content classifications and determine where they are on a site. To facilitate that, heading elements that follow the last H1 element must be properly nested.

You also want to ensure that those headings and labels are descriptive enough so as to still have meaning when taken out of context. You can use header elements to help define your site's structure – and that means ensuring that all similar subheadings must contain unique (and valuable) content.

And, in even more plain terms, don't start throwing H1s and H2s willy-nilly all over the place, just because you like the way they "look." Use your heading elements to define the natural progression of a site, specific pages, and information.

Copying and pasting from other sites (or Word) and inheriting styles that impact the HTML structurally

In many cases, a company's Web presence is managed by people in the communications or marketing departments. Often, the content you see on the site has to pass through a serpentine approval systems, filled with

checks, balances, and revisions.

Now, programs like Word have some pretty cool features that can make the humble document stand out. They can be manipulated to present content in a way that shows what it will "look like" on the site.

And there's often the temptation to cut-and-paste content from a Word doc into your site's content management system.

Unfortunately, doing so can cause your Web content to inherit style conventions that can have a detrimental impact on your site's HTML structure. Titles that should be identified with an h-tag are merely bolded, font sizes are inconsistent, and visual elements are inserted that aren't cohesive to your accessibility efforts.

The fact is, however, that many people are accustomed to using Word. It's a convenient way to structure content, get approvals, and make sure errors are caught. Taking the time to cut and paste Word content into Notepad to strip away any preformatting will help. And being diligent with inputting content into your CMS to ensure that there is no lingering formatting will also ensure your site's compliance efforts are maintained.

Using "here" as a link that's instantly out of context for users and assistive devices –

Some visually impaired users will browse a page link-by-link, tabbing along the way. All too often, we fall into the trap of linking the terms "click here" or "more info." While this may work intuitively to someone who can experience all of the content on a site, these terms can be restrictive when taken

out of context.

When embedding a link into your text, the easiest rule of thumb to follow is to ensure that the text that's linked is actually referencing the content to which it's linking. "Here" or "more" on their own don't mean anything, but linking "an analysis of market trends," or "a schedule of upcoming events" will be much more descriptive and provide your readers with better context as to the nature of the link.

Accessibility for all!

In the end, accessibility isn't just about focusing on making your content more available to those with visual or aural impairments – it's about putting in practices that ensure that your content is available to as wide as audience as possible.

Slow Internet connections, small screens, people for whom the language of your site is not their native language, people with cognitive or learning disabilities… the list of audiences that accessible design benefits goes on and on.

With a little knowledge, a little attention to detail, and a focus on the end user, keeping your site accessible can become part of your Web culture for the betterment of all.
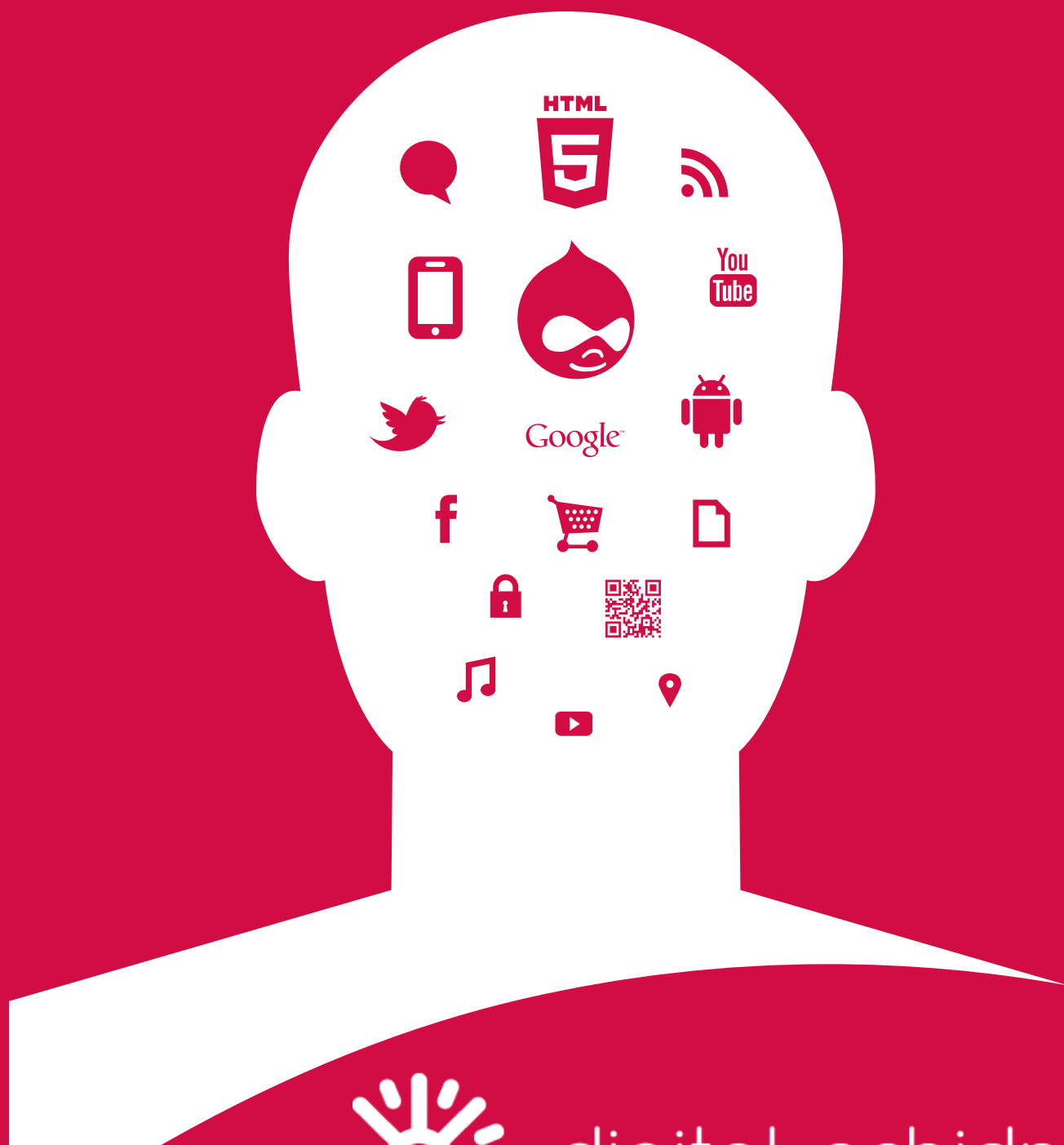
digital echidna

Digital Echidna
200-365 Talbot St.
London, Ontario
N6A 2R5

Phone: **519.858.9604**
Toll Free: **1.877.858.9604**
Fax: **888.740.2958**
Email: **connect@echidna.ca**