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The Digital Access Show - Season 3 Episode 37: Nikki Fiedler Transcript

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Narelle: Hello. Welcome to another episode of The Digital Access Show. We've been talking about a few things such as cyber security, the effects… the different technologies have. We talk about websites and the construction of the websites, and how the underlying HTML must be correct. The next month or so, I'm really focusing on principle three… of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, which is all about understandability. There's a few things we can think about for who is listening. You have to listen… to make sure you're understanding what the other person's saying. It's a very important tool. And to do that, I'm going to have Dr. Stephanie Burns, hopefully in a couple of weeks, to come and talk about that. She has an amazing knowledge… of listening and everything else. We've got Sandra Muller, is going to be on next week from True North, and she's going to be talking about that overwhelming feeling, and the anxiety, I think it's the best way to describe it. Our guest today will probably have a more knowledge about this, when you can't read and understand things. Today's guest is Nikki Fiedler, sorry Nikki, from Content Design Hub. Now, Nikki is a content design specialist. What's that about? Let's ask Nikki. Thanks Nikki for coming on.

Nikki: Hi Narelle. Thank you for having me. It's wonderful to be on the show, and I'm so excited to… share some of my information and insights with you, and learn from you as well. And yes.

Narelle: Content, what does a content design person do, Nikki? And why is it so important?

Nikki: Absolutely. So, content design in a nutshell is, kind of like you just touched upon in your intro, It's really all about listening to your user, keeping things simple,

and just getting to the core of what actually can help them… achieve what they set out to do. That could be within a digital product or a digital service. It could be on an app, or it could be within a website. And like you touched on, it's that listening component of, it could be different for different groups of people… with different products and services.

Narelle: So, what's your background in it then, Nikki?

Nikki: Yeah, absolutely. So, my personal background, it's pretty nonlinear, but I've always had an undercurrent of content… running throughout my experience, whether it was in… PR, events, publishing, and then into the digital product and startup land. So, working with those digital ad agencies, educational startups, and then moving into more regulated industries, like corporate communications. For me personally, I've always had a passion for content. And then working with a wide range of people… really found my… passion helping people accomplish what they set out to do. And that started in UX, user experience across websites, both internally and externally facing.

Narelle: So, you're looking at the appearance of it, the wording, all of that side of it. You don't necessarily look at the structure of it, do you?

Nikki: Yeah, so that's a really good question. We look at everything, content designers. It's very holistic. So, it's a full end-to-end journey, the full user journey from start to finish. Every touch point, digitally speaking, that a user could encounter along their path to achieve what… that goal might be. It might be completing a form, it might be renewing some sort of identification. It could be just finding information online on the web or… signing up to an app. So, that whole process for the user, making it as easy as possible for them to get it done.

Narelle: Does that include things like search engine optimisation, colloquially known as SEO, or artificial intelligence optimisation, all of those things as well? Artificial, I think AI optimisation is a newie for us. But is that included in it?

Nikki: Yeah, absolutely. Great question. It is. So, there are SEO specialists and AIO and… GEO specialists as well that get really… very deep into the structured…

frameworks of… the nuances of each one of those expertise levels. But as a content designer, you do need a base level understanding for both… search engine optimisation and AI now as well. So, how is your content valuable and being surfaced by search engines, and now AI agents as well? And that's where it really goes back to understanding your user. So, your user will be asking specific questions, wanting to find certain information. And if your content is relevant and valuable to them, your content will be surfaced in search. It will also be surfaced when AI agents search as well. So, both the human and the machine-led search… processes.

Narelle: One of the acronyms you use, the abbreviations, was GEO. What's that?

Nikki: Yeah, so generative, and geographical engine optimisation.

Narelle: Of course. [in unison] Yeah.

Nikki: There's so many now. There's AEO, AIO, GEO. But basically, the crux of it is you're answering the relevant… content information that your user is looking for, cross-platform.

Narelle: One of the things… as a person with a severe vision impairment that frustrates me… is the lack of inaccessibility of… websites for a person that's a screen reader user, braille devices, speech only, keyboard access only. There's so many different variants. Do those people get considered in the content? Or should they be considered in the content design process? And if they aren't, why aren't they?

Nikki: That is another great question. One of the reasons I specifically love content design is… the usability and research component of working very closely with your users. And you're exactly right. Everyone for inclusive… content, there needs to be co-design. And that starts at the very, very start. And so, with content designers, there's a really big lean into inclusivity, because we want to make sure the content is relevant, specific, and… makes sense to our users. And so, we place a huge and important… component in the user research and testing phase, where we work with all different types of users, with all different abilities, capabilities, and with disabilities, and different language backgrounds as well. So, yes, co-design is so

important to make sure that the content remains inclusive, and accessible for all your users. And interestingly, what some people may not know is that when you open up… the inclusivity of your content, you usually are able to reach more people. So, you may have thought something was specific to a screen reader. Well, that actually helps… other users as well. Or… specific to like logical reading order or heading hierarchy. That's helpful for machines to surface your content in search, and with AI agents as well.

Narelle: With that in mind, why isn't it happening? Do you see any… Can you pinpoint any reasons why it's not happening? Is it just… not enough… focus on it? What do you think is why it doesn't happen?

Nikki: Yeah, I think what I've seen in the past… years, recent years, is it's definitely improving. So, it might not be all the way where we'd like it to be, but… with people's awareness, and the growing use of the web and digital applications, and even with search now as well, the awareness is growing. So, the legislative components like compliance that we… have available, that's good, but it's also understanding people's lived experience. And I think now… there has definitely been more awareness, education. There has been… There have been some mandatory standards that have come in, for example, in government. And of course, there's, you know, legislation… in different locations that help. But I guess it's the awareness of people really… speaking to one another, understanding what their experience is, having access. I definitely have been hearing it spoken about more often. There's a lot of storytelling and understanding, hearing from people about their experience and including them. Like we mentioned in that user research and testing, so that they can be included to help inform design.

Narelle: I often wonder, actually, it'd be interesting to get your point of view on this. I lost my sight about 20 years ago. It was diagnosed. I've been probably losing it all my life. We just didn't know. It was not, growing up in the 70s, 80s, you never often saw a person with disability out and about. However, now we're everywhere. We're just, it's just common. Do you think that's part of it? The fact that we are more visible?

Nikki: It could be. I probably couldn't comment on, you know, 20 years ago, but definitely in where I live in Queensland, definitely, you know, you do see… people with all different abilities, and disabilities, throughout your daily life. And… I think in some sense, the… education around… empathy, listening and tolerance, and understanding is really helpful for people… to start becoming aware of what's happening around them. What do you think about from your experience?

Narelle: I think it's a mix. As I said, I grew up in the 70s, and the small town I grew up near, we never saw, the ones that were there, I'm trying to think of them. We never saw them as disabled. They were just people. And we didn't recognise, it's probably a good word, the barriers that they were experiencing. Like, one bloke I grew up with is dyslexic. I had no idea. We were in the same class for 10 years. Didn't know. It was just, oh, that's so-and-so. Another bloke, well, he finished, I think, midway through grade nine, because he had learning difficulties. But we didn't know that it was, oh, just… Ross has gone to work on the place. We never thought about it that way. When I went to Rocky in the 80s to work, you still didn't see many people with disability around. However, now when I'm out and around, I come with a guide dog, but it's just a common thing. I just had a morning tea with a group of… what we call blindies. I think out of us, there was one, two, three, four, I think there were five blindies. And some of us had support, some didn't. Those that had no sight had some support. And we just… We're out there, we're doing things now, but I think that's partly what the NDIS has done, is it's given us… the ability to get out, so the community is exposed to seeing that we're normal people. But it's also a mix, I think, of the empathy that you're talking about, of because they're seeing us and we're out there doing things, that empathy that, oh, look, they can't do it. I can do that bit, but they can do… that bit, whatever it is. I think it's a mix.

Nikki: Yeah. You know what? I was thinking about when you were talking about that was… allowing more… service dogs in many areas. So, one example I can think of… is growing up in the US, before I moved to Australia, is you hardly ever saw a dog on the plane. Or in potentially a restaurant. And yes, so they can go lots more places, and that opens up a lot more places to go, which is great.

Narelle: Can you take us through the process of content design? From when you start, how do you bring in… the different people? How do you consider… What do you do? I'm a bit fascinated with this because… we're actually on the other end as well, where we can't access the information. So, what should be being done and when should it be doing it? And how should it be done?

Nikki: Oh, this is a good question. How much time do you got?

Narelle: Oh, not that long.

Nikki: Oh, right.

Narelle: Just a quick summary. I'm really curious.

Nikki: Yeah, I'll… I'll consolidate it and I would probably preface it… with saying that… your scope of work as a content designer really depends on… the size of your organisation and your team. So, if you're working in a team where you're the lone wolf … content designer, you might be doing the full end-to-end discovery through to execution to optimisation. So, you might be running, designing, developing, and integrating everything that you learn… of user research, and testing with real users. Or you might have a team that helps you do that. And then… you will also be using all available research that you have if you're low on that research from outside teams or resources, to gather as much information as you can from your users to make informed content decisions. So, for example, if you didn't have a research team or the capability to run… usability testing, you might be able to pull in available… metrics from Google Analytics from your website, or through call centre data. So you might know, "Oh, people are really having a hard time completing this form. We need to look at this form, and make sure people can complete it."

Narelle: Yep.

Nikki: You're doing a large discovery research gathering… period to understand what exactly… is the issue and how can you help your user… complete that task or… journey that they're trying to set out to achieve. And that is usually… Oh, sorry.

Narelle: So, basically, it's an investigation at the start, is it?

Nikki: It is. It is. It's a bit of a deep dive into the data and analytics because… the beauty of content design is everything is based on user… data, analytics and research. So, it's not opinions based. It's not, I want to do this, which is wonderful, because it all comes back to your user at the heart of it. And if you've got… some challenging… stakeholders, you can always go back to that data where the user's, you know, they might have a really… steep drop off of being able to complete this form. So, you can take that data to your stakeholders and say, hey, this form is not working. Our users are not able to complete it. They're abandoning this form. We've got to look at what's happening with it.

Narelle: Okay.

Nikki: And then you'd do, yeah, you'd be looking at, in IT terms, it'd be the analysis. What is the actual problem?

Nikki: Exactly. So, identifying what that problem is, you might come into… the… project or space, thinking it might be one thing. But when you got the user research data analytics, you can understand what it actually is, which will then help… you… design the appropriate content response. So, in content design, it could be a website, it could be app, it could be a form, it could be… an infographic, a video, a chart. It's whatever serves the user best.

Narelle: Interesting. How do you then, so you do your analysis, you come out with a solution. How do you test that solution, say for a screen reader user or… a puff and switch tool user, or someone that can only use voice control? How do you go about doing that?

Nikki: Yeah, it's a really great question. So, depending again on the maturity of the organisation, you would set up a usability lab. So, there would be an in-person opportunity for your users to come in and test. So, and it would be a prototype, which is a minimal viable working, whatever the thing is you're designing, that your users can interact with and provide feedback for you. And that could be either done in person or online. So, there's a range of different tools available for online, but it's always great to have an in-person session where… the person can walk you through with the tools they use. For example, are they on iOS using VoiceOver? Are they on

Android using TalkBack? Do they use eye-tracking software? And see how they would interact with… potentially your service tool or product, whatever that is you're looking to design or improve, and they can give you real-time feedback about what's working, where they're confused, what's… improving their… expediency, and speed to work through things. Yeah. And just making sure a diverse group of users are involved to ensure the solutions are really well considered to meet people's needs.

Narelle: That's what I was going to ask. I mean, there's so many different disabilities and different… levels of disability. Like, okay, I keep talking about the vision impairment, but that's the one I live with, and there's all different levels of vision impairment. So, we all have different experiences, and you think how would you do that for the different levels of… autism, vision impairment, hearing impairment. You answered, it's just being very diverse.

Nikki: Yeah, and that's actually a good point, Narelle. So, one thing I love about content design is how inclusive it is. So, if you think about cognitive disabilities, plain language is really helpful for people… with cognitive disabilities, but it's also really helpful… for people that have English as a second language, because English has some funky terms and phrases, and sometimes they don't really translate very well. So, that helps different types of users understand your content. And if they can understand it, then they can use it and do something with it. And another example I really love is… a busy working mum. She might have, you know, a baby in one hand, or recently a colleague broke his wrist. He doesn't have the use of his wrist. So, there's all sorts of temporary situational… We all are a little bit stressed at times, where you're not computing everything as you might. You might be reading really fast or even scanning. You're in a hurry. You're on the train. You're stressed. You need to get something paid or a bill done. So, those types of situational… circumstances… could also meet the needs. Like, if you've got cognitive disabilities, well, where plain language is going to be really… helpful for you, and simple, jargon-free, technical-free language, you can just get things done. Same with the working mum, or the colleague with a broken wrist.

Narelle: We answered a few more now. Thank you. I had some more questions because… one of the things that used to amuse me a bit, my mother-in-law was

French, and she never used the joining words, the and, the, of. So, you would get, if she wrote a letter, a series of nouns, and then your job was to sit there and put in… the other words. And… I was sitting there and thinking, she would have really struggled, because… the French, and the construction of the French language, is very different to the English. There's some stuff that's similar, and you can work it out. Italian's the same. All these other languages, their construction suits them. They might not necessarily… use the same sentence patterns that we do. So, yeah.

Nikki: Exactly. My mother is also, she's a first-generation immigrant as well, so English was her second language, and… we find it endearing, but she, basically she just mixes up the… colloquial… terminology phrases. Basically puts them back to front. So, she'll say one of those sayings like, what is it, calling the kettle black, but she'll mix it up in a different way, because of the sentence construction that she's used to.

Narelle: Yeah.

Nikki: So, English is challenging, and even English is my first language. There… When you're working in a complex, highly regulated… legislative environment, there are a lot of terms that… everyday people may not use or just things that might be unnecessarily complicated to understand what you need to get done. You might not care about the full background of that term. You just want to be able to… complete the form, or pay the bill, or find some information.

Narelle: See, we're going down rabbit holes now. I'm fascinated. I really find all this really… interesting, because just the effects on people… when something is hard to read, and I get just as frustrated as, probably more and sometimes, than some people, just because I used to be able to read once and now I can't. And so, I've got to use different tools, and access the information in different ways. It's not that my brain's bad. It's not. It's… my eyes just don't work properly. Well, I hope my brain's not bad, but what I'm saying is everyone's different, and so the work you're doing… is considering the differences.

Nikki: Yeah. Exactly. And… There's some really powerful statistics I'd like to share. They're… to date, like 2026. But currently about one in five Australians, that's about… nearly 21 percent, are digitally excluded or highly excluded.

Narelle: Wow.

Nikki: And today as well, we were just talking about reading and coming from… coming to English from another language, first language speaking background. Not only that, but 44 percent of Australian adults have a literacy level… below what is actually needed for everyday life. And that's a high number.

Narelle: That is huge.

Nikki: It's staggeringly huge, but it's also why as a content designer, reading grade level is super important. And there's a bunch of free… readability checkers, Word's got them now, that you can run a check through your document. But understanding if someone is at a reading grade level of… five, and your words that you use are at a reading grade level of 11, it's going to be very difficult for them to understand, quickly, what they need to get done and what needs doing. So, aiming for a reading grade level of six and under is really helpful for the everyday Australian just to understand your content and make sure they know exactly what they need to do, and can get on doing it, and get on with their life.

Narelle: Yeah. Okay, I could sit here and talk about this all day. I need some tips from you. What are some tips that you could give?

Nikki: Yeah, absolutely.

Narelle: Useful, practical. Three.

Nikki: Okay, all right. Let's… see. So, okay, so we talked about this earlier, but I think it's really important. We just touched on it now, is make sure you understand your users, and write to the reading grade level of your audience, not the industry. So for example, if you're… providing insurance products. Most, most Australians need some sort of insurance product, but they're not in necessarily the industry. Make sure you use plain language that everyone can understand, follow along for

the first time that they're reading it, and make sure they understand either what they're signing up to or getting out of your product. Luckily, we have some regulatory standards in effect for this. But… A few, for banking regulation, but the plain language could be a lot better.

Narelle: Okay.

Nikki: Yeah. And then another quick takeaway would be… lead with the answer. What does the reader want to do? So, we call this kind of like a funnel approach.

Narelle: Yeah.

Nikki: You start with the first thing that the… reader or the user absolutely needs to do, rather than explain and build up to it. So, they're reading your whole… web page or scanning your whole… app screen to understand, you know, how do they even submit this form? They wanna know, can I use this page or screen to submit the form? Okay, great. Then I know I'm on the right page.

Narelle: Okay. Yeah.

Nikki: And, oh, I've got, I could go on and on with tips all day, but… maybe because we've been talking about this earlier as well. Can I do two more?

Narelle: Yes. Yes. Go ahead.

Nikki: Okay. I would also suggest one idea per sentence, one action per step. So, make sure you're breaking up content, so it's digestible. Right? So, let's not do paragraphs of… twenty sentences. Let's try to create one idea per sentence, one action per step. Make sure it's easy to follow along. Then like we touched on earlier, testing with real people. Right? People, all types of people, people with all types of abilities, capabilities, languages, disabilities. This is really important because… the content, whatever you're designing, is for people. So, if you don't stay connected with your users, people, you don't know if it's working for them. And I think this is really important because, and you've worked in digital for a while, just like me, is user needs change. It's not static. It's dynamic. And what worked six months ago… may not be working now. So, it's really good to stay connected with your users.

Make sure you test, and make sure you're not assuming, assuming things. What do your users say?

Narelle: Yeah. Nikki, we've opened up a few more rabbit holes, and I love that, because it's all about learning, and I really do thank you for coming on today. Just a few things I'd never thought of. And I really, particularly with the sentence structures. You know, I knew no more than, I think I do about four lines in a paragraph, but I never really think about it. I just do it. And I think I need to think more. And also, what I really liked is your approach. How can people get in contact with you?

Nikki: Yeah, absolutely. So, thanks so much again for having me, Narelle. It's been wonderful talking to you. So, if people do want to get in contact, my website for my company is called Content Design Hub. So, that's contentdesignhub.com.au. And if people are on LinkedIn, we also have a company page, where we share a lot of information about content design. So, best practice in content design, how to create digitally accessible content. Articles that are really helpful, free resources, and that's on LinkedIn company pages called… Content Design Hub as well.

Narelle: Thank you so much, Nikki. We'll see you all next time. If you like what we do on The Digital Access Show, please like, subscribe, and please share. We really want to get the message out there that… digital accessibility opens up, not just… communication for people with disability. It opens up communication for everyone, makes information much more accessible. And without… accessible information, we can't make good decisions. We just can't. So, we'll see you next week on The Digital Access Show, and have a good week. Thank you. [music playing]