

Gathering Information

Abstract

Once you've decided to build a digital branch, the first step in the process is to gather information. You'll need to document who the websites will be serving, what services those people desire and what you are capable of providing, budgetary concerns, design concerns and much more. This chapter of "Building the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Transforming Your Library Website" provides guidelines on what initial information you'll need and how to collect it.

So you have decided to transform your library's website into a digital branch. Great! The first thing you need to do is to gather information. It is crucial to understand what your library staff and your customers want in a digital branch. You must gather information from these groups in order to figure out what you should build.

Why gather all of this information? After all, you could build things you think are popular, or build things that everyone else is building, and use all the cool tools everyone else is using . . . but that doesn't always work. To build a digital branch that serves the library's community, you must try to gauge as accurately as possible how you can build a branch that will fulfill the wants and needs of the community.

For example, take podcasting. A library that opts to create a podcast (either audio or video) has a choice. Should the audio or video file be downloadable so that patrons can copy it onto their MP3 or video player? Or should the file be delivered via a Flash-based service like YouTube so that patrons can listen to it or view it but not download it? In a big city like New York or Chicago, or in suburban or rural areas where most people travel to jobs in nearby cities, many of your patrons might have

a one- to two-hour commute every day. In such areas, a downloadable service makes a lot of sense. In Topeka, Kansas, however, I have a whopping ten-minute commute, and I live on the edge of town. So, a Flash-based service might make more sense to serve the patrons of Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

That is just one example of details that need to be examined and decisions that need to be made. Figuring out up front what your customers and staff want to do at a digital branch is a great way to start.

Gathering this information will also help you understand the technological comfort level of your customers and your staff. Ask them what types of websites they like, where they go when they're on the Web, and other questions about the types of technology that they use, enjoy, or desire in their day-to-day lives. Examine their answers thoroughly. This will give you some good insight into what types of services and functionality your patrons and staff are used to and may expect from your digital branch.

Hold Discussions

One great way to start gathering information is to hold discussions with different groups of people, including staff, administration, and patrons. Do this to find out what your library wants to build and what types of services each group might be interested in using.

Start with the Leaders

I suggest that you start by finding out what the library leaders want in a digital branch. I'm not referring only to formal library leadership. There are usually two types of leadership in a library—formal leadership and informal leadership.

Formal leadership would be the library director, deputy directors, and managers or supervisors—the administration and management arm of your organization (see figure 7). When you meet with these groups, find out these types of things: what they think a digital branch means, what new services they want to provide with it, and what they have heard from the staff. Use their comments to help you better understand the needs of the community.

Find out what the library’s goals or strategic plans are and how the digital branch might fit into those plans and help to meet those goals. For example, if the library wants to attract more teens, there might be some potential for the digital branch to explore blogs, content created by and for teens, and social networks.

It is also important to seek out and meet with the informal leaders of the library. Informal leaders are members of the library community who may not be as prominent in title as administrators, but could be equally influential. Informal leaders include nonmanagers who are natural leaders in your organization. This group might include some of your library staff who tend to always get things done—the “can-do” people. It might include influential board members, community leaders, and even extremely active patrons. Ask them the same types of questions. Find out what type of services they’d like to offer in a digital branch setting, then incorporate some of those ideas into your digital branch plans.

Ask the Public Services Staff

Next, you should make sure to talk to the public services staff. They’re the ones who work the desk, who go out and interact with your patrons. They interact with your customers every day, so they may understand patrons’ needs in a way that other staff members do not. This group has an understanding of what patrons do when they use the Web, how they interact with a Web browser, and what questions they typically ask about using websites.



Figure 7
Library management council in a strategic planning session.

Ask your public services staff the same types of questions you asked the library leaders. They should have ideas of how they want to connect with patrons. For example, when I started working at Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, I met with every public service department and asked what they thought a digital branch was, what they wanted to do in a digital branch, and how they thought their department could be represented on a digital branch. I also asked what their patrons needed in a digital branch. I definitely got an earful of great ideas.

Don’t Forget the Patrons—Your Customers

Let’s not forget the reason why we’re here in the first place—the customers! When building a digital branch—a place on the Web where your customers can visit the library to interact and accomplish tasks—you’ll want to consult with your customers to find out what they expect to find at a digital branch library. You need to find out what types of services they would like to use on your digital branch.

There are many ways to do this. At Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, our Web team experimented with a variety of ways to connect with our patrons. For example, we held face-to-face focus groups. Our marketing director gathered enough people to hold a number of meetings of five to ten people each. At those meetings (complete with cookies and coffee), I introduced attendees to our current website and showed them what could be done with it. Then I explained the digital branch concept and gave them a tour of the rough draft of our own fledgling digital branch. I showed them what it would look like and described what types of things they would be able to do at the digital branch.

Then I asked what they thought and wrote everything down. Thankfully, the great majority of the focus groups loved the concept we had created. They also had some ideas for improvements, and some had questions about parts of the new site that we hadn’t thought about and needed to improve.

We also set up a Web survey, linking from the main page of our website, that asked a series of questions about what our online customers would want in a digital branch. We received a variety of responses from that, as well.

Here’s a snippet of what our customers said during our focus groups on their first impressions of the main page of the new website:¹

- “It’s simpler—but miss seeing the contact info at the top of the page.”
- “Questions about how the top tabs differ from the side.”
- “Blogs: What are we going to do to keep the inappropriate comments controlled?”

- “My account: What will happen when you click on it?”
- “Kids: What will the new site have for them?”
- “This site looks very similar to Barnes & Noble’s Web site.”
- “Catalog search—Like that we don’t have to click two times and that it is coupled with My Account information.”
- “Like the rotation of the features section so I can see it fast.”
- “What makes this my unique branch? I would like something that is unique to me—like something on where I live, like a map of Lake Shawnee or North Topeka.”
- “It’s pleasing to look at—pleasing colors.”
- “Well organized—can look across the tabs instead of boxes.”
- “Less cluttered.”
- “Like dark background.”
- “Visually you don’t have to read everything.”
- “RSS button—What will that do for you?”
- “Will RSS features be incorporated into the catalog?”
- “Request material? Does that mean ILL or library-owned or we will order it?”
- “Today’s events need to be higher up on the page because we need to verify what time the event is we are planning to attend.”
- “It’s a little big—extended for a home page.”
- “I like the accessibility to staff—we can recognize and contact them.”
- “It does look easier to use.”
- “I like it.”
- “It’s more intuitive.”
- “Would like to create a ‘my library page’ similar to My Yahoo.”
- “Easy to read quickly.”
- “I like it, but the research tab—does that mean online access to what?”

Observing

OK—it isn’t really espionage with Sherlock Holmes hats and a big magnifying glass, but watching what your patrons actually DO when they use the Web can be very eye-opening to libraries and Web teams.

How do you do this? Simply walk around your library sometime and look. Observe what websites library patrons are visiting. I make sure to walk around in the public areas of the library every day or so. When I do, I make sure to actually look at what patrons are doing on our public PCs. Yes, this might sound a bit voyeuristic, or a bit like invasion of privacy, but let me clarify exactly what I mean. I am not advocating going up to a patron’s PC, glaring at the monitor, and taking notes on their browsing history. Rather, I’m urging simple observation—taking a quick glance at your computer lab or public workstation or noting when a patron asks you a question about a certain website. This is a fantastic way to see what websites your patrons actually visit when they’re online.

What have I discovered? Our Topeka customers do LOTS of online things. They play games (some amazingly cool ones, too). They send e-mail, primarily in Gmail and Yahoo. They IM using Meebo. They have Facebook and MySpace pages, and they send messages and status updates through these services. They watch YouTube videos and play *Runescape*.

Are those patrons ready for an interactive digital branch? Yes, most definitely. Those patrons are already interacting with each other digitally—sending messages, leaving comments, holding conversations, using digital content, and watching videos.

What happens if the library makes those same types of content and services available to patrons? My guess, which so far has proved accurate, is that our patrons would interact with us in those new media, just as they interact with nonlibrary online services.

Note

1. Quotes taken from focus groups conducted by the author at Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library during the summer of 2007.