What's Next

Abstract

Chapter 7 of Library Technology Reports *(vol. 48, no. 6) "Running the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Operating the Library Website" by David Lee King describes what's next for library websites, including the difficulty of predicting the future of the Web, as well as some emerging website trends.*

Everything discussed so far has concerned the planning and implementation of the digital branch. This final chapter deals with the future. What's coming up next for savvy web gurus? What should we be looking at, doing, and thinking about?

Who Knows?

First, this must be said—it's really hard to predict what's going to occur five years down the road for websites and web design. In the short history of the Web, there have been waves of change as something new gets built or discovered. Right now, it seems we're in a visual discovery era, when multimedia sites like YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest are gaining in popularity, which means that your website needs to be visual, too.

All I can really guarantee is this: in five years, the Web will already have shifted. It will undoubtedly look different from today's Web. By then, something else will be getting popular—either the next Facebook, or a new way to do Web. So the following discussion of what's on our horizon is more what we're looking at doing next, and not a prediction of long-term Web behaviors.

With that in mind, let's examine three areas: website innovation, mobile innovation, and community innovation.

Website Innovation

Let's look at innovation on websites first, since design and usability are vital to a digital branch. What's going to be important for libraries to look at in the next three years as far as web design is concerned?

Responsive Design

Wikipedia says that responsive design "essentially indicates that a web site is crafted to use W3C CSS3 media queries with fluid proportion-based grids, to adapt the layout to the viewing environment, and probably also flexible images. As a result, users across a broad range of devices and browsers will have access to a single source of content, laid out so as to be easy to read and navigate with a minimum of resizing, panning and scrolling."[1]

So a website built using responsive design is able to automatically adjust to different screen sizes and devices. Instead of having to create separate websites for a desktop, a tablet, and a smartphone, one site will automatically adjust to each device and screen size.

A word of warning here: this technology can be put to great use, or it can cause problems. You'll want to give some deep thought to how you incorporate this into your site design. My gut feeling right now is that responsive design will work well for all types of desktop screens and tablet screens. However, when you get down to smartphone size, you'll probably want to rethink what's important on the site or page. In my experience, customers don't generally want a full-fledged, all-access experience when standing in line at a store. They want to do one or two quick things, interacting with the library in the process.

So if you use responsive design or create a mobile

site, make sure your content is content that customers want when using their mobile devices. It's important. You don't want to simply squish down your normal full website onto a smartphone. You might have cool coding, but still provide a poor experience for your customers.

HTML5 and CSS3

HTML5 and CSS3 are new coding standards. What is HTML5? According to the website HTML5 Rocks, "HTML5 introduces many cutting-edge features that enable developers to create apps and websites with the functionality, speed, performance, and experience of desktop applications. But unlike desktop applications, apps built on the web platform can reach a much broader audience using a wider array of devices. HTML5 accelerates the pace of your innovation and enables you to seamlessly roll out your latest work to all your users simultaneously."[2]

According to *Wikipedia,* these elements are included in HTML5: "New elements: article, aside, audio, bdi, canvas, command, data, datalist, details, embed, figcaption, figure, footer, header, hgroup, keygen, mark, meter, nav, output, progress, rp, rt, ruby, section, source, summary, time, track, video, wbr."[3]

CSS3 is much the same. It takes what used to be done via extensive coding and simply incorporates it into the content that our community is already using.

Adapting as Needed

Just a reminder that the Web is still shifting, changing, and growing, and you will need to adapt as it shifts—maybe even this year. You might add a service or a new digital tool that makes customers' lives easier.

Progressive Enhancements Rather Than Big Redesigns

You may need to constantly tweak the website, rather than wait for two or three years to make design changes. So your design schedule might resemble this: Do a redesign, wait a couple of months, then start combing through the site, chunk by chunk, and find ways to improve those chunks of the website for your customers. Constantly work on making their lives easier by making your website easier to use.

Adding Blogs

At TSCPL, we'll be adding blogs to our digital branch as we create more genre neighborhoods in our physical space—or as we add a new service to the library that could use a blog component.

The flip side is removing irrelevant blogs. If a blog isn't needed, or isn't getting the views we hope to get, we figure out why. It might be that we're writing about things our customers aren't interested in. Or we might be writing in a way that is uninteresting to read. A third option is that perhaps a blog isn't needed for this part of our digital branch. If so, we will sunset that blog and work on other ways to connect our customers to that part of the library.

Working on Content

Make your content on the digital branch better, more readable, more social. Work on some of those "writing for the Web" and "writing for a response" tips that are out there. Make your social media content something people want to respond to when they see it.

Making videos or podcasts? Get better microphones, better lights, and better software. Make your video presentations shorter.

There are many ways you can make any content better.

Simplicity

Simple is in. I'll list some resources on web design trends for 2012 at the end of this chapter. Know this: many trends have something about simplicity. Clean lines, clear structure, better fonts—all point to simplicity.

Simplicity in web design means uncluttered pages, judicious use of graphics that support the content of the page, designing the content first, then working out to the rest of the page, having simple web structure and web navigation.

Keep your websites as simple as you can, and they will be easier for your customers to use.

Mobile Innovation

Mobile is huge. In fact, many web designers are currently suggesting that designers design for two screens: desktop and mobile. Why is mobile so important? In July 2011, Pew Internet said that 35 percent of American adults owned a smartphone.[4] But by March 2012, here's what Pew said: "Nearly half (46%) of American adults are smartphone owners as of February 2012, an increase of 11 percentage points over the 35% of Americans who owned a smartphone last May. . . . Two in five adults (41%) own a cell phone that is not a smartphone, meaning that smartphone owners are now more prevalent within the overall population than owners of more basic mobile phones."[5]

By 2013 (in fact, probably by later this year), a majority of American adults—your customers—will own a smartphone. Sure, some of them will still install a ringtone that sounds like an old rotary dial phone and mainly use the device as a phone. But we are

quickly turning into a mobile-based society. People carry the Web in their pockets for more hours than they're sitting in front of a screen. You need to respond accordingly.

Your mobile website is growing in importance! Design your mobile site first. Focus on the things that people really need in a mobile setting and design those for a smartphone. Then work out from that point, adding the bells and whistles that a full desktop-based web experience can provide.

Focusing on mobile-first web design will help you focus on content, on your customers who own smartphones, and on making and keeping things simple.

Community Innovation

The final thing I suggest that you focus on is interacting with your community. We are designing a branch library; we want people to come visit our digital branch. So we need to figure out how to provide the experience and services they want.

If you were designing a physical branch, what might you do? You would talk to the community as you were designing the building and the services. You'd set up focus groups, send out surveys, and ask people—your customers—what they wanted at your branch. You would find out what they liked and what services they wanted that weren't currently available. Then you'd try to incorporate their input into the design of the branch. You might even hire staff to be in charge of specific services or areas.

You need to do the same thing for your digital branch. Ask people what they want. Find your online customers (perhaps via Facebook and Twitter friends) and ask for input. Ask how they want to interact with the library on their phones, on desktops, and on tablets. What services do they want? What's missing? Then build with your community in mind.

Another aspect of community innovation is simply to invite people to the party. Use a call to action on your website and in your content. A call to action is simply a message—in this case, a Tweet, a video, or a Facebook status update—that asks or invites the reader or viewer to do something after reading, like click a link, sign up for a program, or share the message with friends. Your call to action invites your reader to take an action. In fact, you shouldn't build anything, be it a page, a blog post, or a video, without a call to action as part of the content. Otherwise, it's a waste of time.

When you are building a new page or writing a new blog post, think about these types of questions: Why should I click? What's in it for me? What do I do next? Incorporate those answers into the content, the graphics, and the design of the digital branch.

Remember to ask for a response. Invite people to click, to fill out, to read, to comment, to like, to respond. If you ask, they most likely will.

Work on constantly improving: incorporate popular tools, increase interaction, make your customers happy. In the process, you will achieve engagement and interaction.

On with the building, interaction, and innovation!

Resources on Web Design Trends for 2012

- Jake Rocheleau, "Web Design Trends in 2012," Web Design Ledger, December 13, 2011, http://webdesignledger.com/tips/web-design-trends-in-2012.
- Jake Rocheleau, "15 Web Design Trends to Watch Out For in 2012," *Hongkiat.com* (blog), undated, www.hongkiat.com/blog/web-design-trend-2012.
- Nicole Capelo, "Top Website Design Trends for 2012," Marqui Solutions website, March 15, 2012, www.marqui.com/blog/top-website-design-trends-for-2012.aspx.
- Craig Grannell, "15 Top Web Design and Development Trends for 2012," *.net Magazine* website, January 9, 2012, www.netmagazine.com/features/15-top-web-design-and-development-trends-2012.
- Ian Yates, "The State of Web Design Trends: 2012 Annual Edition," *Webdesigntuts+* (blog), January 12, 2012, http://webdesign.tutsplus.com/articles/industry-trends/the-state-of-web-design-trends-2012-annual-edition.

Notes

1. "Responsive Web Design," *Wikipedia*, accessed April 28, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responsive_Web_Design.
2. "Why HTML5 Rocks," HTML5 Rocks website, accessed July 15, 2012, www.html5rocks.com/en/why.
3. "Differences from HTML 4.01 and XHTML 1.x," in "HTML5," *Wikipedia*, last modified June 30, 2012, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Html5.
4. Aaron Smith, "Smartphone Adoption and Usage," Pew Internet and American Life Project, July 11, 2011, http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Smartphones.aspx.
5. Aaron Smith, *46% of American Adults Are Smartphone Owners* (Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 1, 2012), 2, http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Smartphone-Update-2012.aspx.