

# Tweaks We've Made to the Digital Branch

## Abstract

*Chapter 2 of Library Technology Reports (vol. 48, no. 6) "Running the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Operating the Library Website" by David Lee King describes adjustments that were made to the front and back ends of the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library digital branch to improve functionality for customers and staff. Changes included migrating to WordPress, a better separation of static and ephemeral content, a shortened main page for the website, and reworked blogs. The chapter also discusses cleanup work and other small tweaks that were made after the redesign.*

In the years since we launched our digital branch (first iteration launched in 2007), we have made quite a few adjustments to the front and back ends of the site to make it work better for both customers and staff. We also made some important changes to the newest version of our digital branch, launched in March 2011. In this chapter, I will explain those tweaks.

## WordPress

The previous version of our digital branch used ExpressionEngine as a CMS (content management system). It worked great for us and got us thinking about how to handle custom coding and also how to have multiple authors with different permission levels in a large system-wide website.

*ExpressionEngine*  
www.expressionengine.com

When it was time to redesign our website, we took the opportunity to reassess our CMS. We looked at the newest versions of ExpressionEngine, Drupal, and WordPress. We chose WordPress, and after a year of operation, I can say it was definitely the right choice for us. Why?

Development is easy. Our primary web developer was already familiar with WordPress back-end development. This allowed us to move faster than we would have with either ExpressionEngine (which had a newer version that was very different from the version we were using) or Drupal.

We also took TSCPL staff into consideration. Many staff members write blog posts or update static pages on the digital branch. So the admin side of the CMS needed to be robust, but also easy to use. WordPress took the prize in this regard. The admin side of WordPress is known for its ease of use, especially if your primary interaction with the CMS is in writing content. It's a box and a button. What could be simpler?

Training ease proved WordPress was a good choice for us. Training staff to use ExpressionEngine took about one hour per session. When we switched to WordPress, training time dropped to approximately fifteen minutes until staff members were confident users.

## Other Big Fixes

Besides the CMS, we needed to address two other big issues. One was having the ability to tell the difference between static and ephemeral content. Both versions of our digital branch have two types of content:

- **Ephemeral content.** These are blog-based pages of content. They appear briefly. For example, blog

posts appear on the main page of our website and then disappear as newer posts are published. Older posts are pushed down to Past Posts and appear on second pages of content. The same thing happens to our job ads.

- **Static content.** We also have a lot of static content pages. This content needs to stay in one place and doesn't change frequently, if at all. Directions and hours, our library policy pages, and descriptions of a library service are examples. Even our list of library article databases would be considered static because it doesn't change very often and lives in the same place on the digital branch.

On the older version of our digital branch, customers and staff had a hard time telling the two types of content apart. In a user survey, we kept hearing, "There's too much content on the main page. I can't tell the difference between a blog post and other types of content." We were told more than once that all the content seemed to run together.

That sounded like a pretty serious problem—one we think we have fixed with our newest redesign (see figure 2.1). We went through each section of our digital branch and listed content that we needed, what purpose it served, and what functionality it needed, if any. Once we had that road map in place, we were able to make sure the static and ephemeral content were placed in appropriate sections of those pages. Our end result? We have been told that our current design makes a lot more sense to both customers and staff.

The other big problem we needed to address was page length. We were told many times that our website was too long. The problem was partly the lack of visual and logical separation of content so that people didn't really know what to look for on the main page. But the main page was definitely long, too. We were presenting web visitors with A LOT of content.

We shortened the main page by displaying less blog content and by visually rearranging and grouping the material into sections. Since the redesign, we have received only praise from our customers about the digital branch—and, as yet, no complaints about not being able to find something!

We also needed to rework our blogs, both in the way subscriptions are handled and in the blog topics themselves. For subscriptions, we made sure to provide both RSS and e-mail subscription options (see figure 2.2). RSS is great, and I wish more people used it. But



**Figure 2.1**  
The original main page of the TSCPL website (left) and the redesigned version (right).

unlike geeky me, most "normal" people don't really understand or use RSS. If they do understand the concept, many people don't subscribe to enough blogs and feeds that a separate RSS reader is warranted.

So with the digital branch redesign, we made sure to create e-mail subscription options for each of our RSS feeds via FeedBurner. This allows customers to enter an e-mail address and receive a daily e-mail of updated content. They can either subscribe to our main feed and get a daily e-mail with all updated content, or they can subscribe to one of about twenty separate topic-related blogs (like our crafts neighborhood blog).

We have also reworked our blog topics and the number of blogs that we offer. Before this redesign, we created blogs on topics we thought might be of interest to our customers. For this redesign, most blogs are tied directly to part of our physical collection. Much of our library's collection is separated into what we call neighborhoods. For example, we have a travel neighborhood. All the travel-related books are placed together

physically. This makes that part of our collection much easier to browse. When we group a collection, circulation statistics for that collection go up 15 to 20 percent.

Each neighborhood has a blog. We keep the content focused on the collection, on services surrounding the collection, and on things happening in the community that are related to the topic. For example, our health neighborhood blog might include articles highlighting the collection. We might enhance a post with photos of our health bags (bags of books grouped together by topic, like a bag on diabetes) or a video showing our blood pressure machine.

This reworking of blog topics has helped our library connect our physical and digital branches in a unique way. It has also helped us forge partnerships in the community for some of our topic neighborhoods.

## Redesign Cleanup

After we went live, we realized we had some cleanup work to do involving links and content. Though we were able to catch many internal link changes before we went live, we still had some broken links on our site. We went through each page, updating links as needed. We used Dreamweaver to update many of the links, but Dreamweaver didn't catch all of them. We still had to revisit many pages manually in order to fix problems.

We didn't move every page from the old site to the new site. Our website is blog-based, and we write articles about anything from book reviews to events happening at the library. Our web team examined each page on our old site and decided what we needed to keep. We then asked the staff in charge of sections that were not being kept in their entirety to double-check the content to see if we were leaving out anything important. Those staff members were able to manually move over any content that they deemed vital to the updated site.

## Our First Tweak: The My Account Link

Go visit the TSCPL website, and look at the very top of our main page (see figure 2.3). You'll see the library's logo on the left, and on the right, you'll see a Site Search box. Underneath the Site Search box are three buttons: My Account, Get a Library Card, and Donate Now. These buttons lead to the My Account area, a library card sign-up form, and TSCPL's Library Foundation.

*TSCPL website: Main page*  
www.tscpl.org



**Figure 2.2**  
Blog page with buttons for subscribing by RSS and e-mail.



**Figure 2.3**  
The top of the TSCPL website's main page.

The My Account button was the first website tweak we made after going live with the redesign. In the original design, here's what we had planned: to get to the My Account page, users would click Find Stuff in the drop-down menu, then choose Your Account on the right-hand side of the menu (see figure 2.4). That's still there. We were confident that would work, and we knew that many library catalog users would access My Account from the catalog, thus bypassing our website navigation entirely. Since we were providing two ways to find My Account, we thought that was adequate.

We were wrong.

In the first two weeks after our redesigned digital branch launch, we were contacted by twenty to thirty people—both staff and customers—telling us that they couldn't find the My Account link. After listening to the complaints and watching actual navigation via our analytics, we added a My Account button to the website's header.

And the complaints went away! In fact, since that one simple tweak to the header, we haven't really received any complaints about our website.

Moral of the story? Listen to complaints when they come in, and watch what your customers actually do on the site. Then make sure to fix those problems!



**Figure 2.4**  
Original way of navigating to the My Account page.

## Cleanup Work

We did one other thing that was a bit different for us. We paid an outside contractor to do a walk-through of some of our major pages and to make suggestions for improvements.

We used Influx, a user experience group comprised of librarians. They performed what they call a UX Shakedown for our website. Influx describes the service this way: “We’ll review your site, evaluating it against a big list of best practices. In the end you’ll receive a report that you can use to plan improvements.”<sup>1</sup> It was an affordable, usable service for us!

*Influx*  
<http://influx.us>

Here are a couple of things Influx suggested we improve:

- **Passive versus active voice.** Some of the writing on the website was library-focused and used a passive voice (e.g., “A minimum of one week notice is required before any test will be proctored.”). Influx suggested using active voice instead (e.g., “We need a minimum of one week’s notice before we can proctor any test.”). Why? Writing in the active voice is generally easier to understand.
- **White space.** We had too much white space on some of our pages. Influx suggested that we tighten that up (which we did).

## Other Small Tweaks

We have made some other small tweaks over the year as we noticed things that could be improved. One big feature was enabling e-mail subscription options for each of our RSS feeds. We did this through FeedBurner. Many people either don’t really understand what an RSS feed is, or they don’t want to go to both an e-mail inbox and a feed reader inbox to check for updated content. Our solution was to provide both RSS

and e-mail subscriptions. This allows our customers to choose their favorite subscription-delivery method.

*FeedBurner*  
<http://feedburner.google.com>

FeedBurner’s e-mail subscription service makes this extremely easy to do. FeedBurner describes the process: “From within the Publicize tab of the application, publishers activate the service with a simple click, then paste code into their blogging template or website. . . . A daily digest containing new content from the feeds is delivered to subscribers who have opted in to receive this content.”<sup>2</sup>

We also adjusted our RSS and e-mail subscription graphic buttons to be viewable at the top of each page that has a feed (for example, on our blog pages). This helps customers see that we have something they can subscribe to. I have also written a few blog posts on the library’s website about RSS and e-mail subscriptions to help our customers know about our feeds and to help them understand how to subscribe to one of the feeds.

Another addition to our original release can also be found on our blogs. Since much of our website is blog-based, we thought it would be a great idea to create author pages for our staff (see figure 2.5).

Author pages can be simple, or they can be a detailed list of what you do on our website and on the Web in general. Here’s what can be found on my own author page:

- my photo and a brief bio
- a list of my recent digital branch articles
- links to my personal Facebook, Twitter, Goodreads, LinkedIn, and YouTube accounts
- my work e-mail
- my most recent Tweets (as a widget)
- a Goodreads widget that shows what I’ve recently read and includes links to my most recent blog posts at my personal blog

*David Lee King’s TSCPL author page*  
<http://tscl.org/author/dking>

*David Lee King’s personal blog*  
[www.davidleeking.com](http://www.davidleeking.com)

## Small Design Changes

Since launching our updated digital branch, we have made some small visual design tweaks, including these:





**Figure 2.5**  
David Lee King's author page on the TSCPL website.

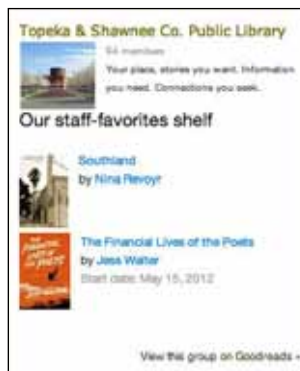


**Figure 2.6**  
On the Shelf listing of books on grilling.

- **Blog headings on main page.** On the main page of our website, we list the six newest blog posts from our neighborhood blogs. When we first released our redesign, each listing included an image, the title of the blog post, and a summary or partial first paragraph of the article. We tweaked that to also include the blog title (e.g., Health Information, Travel, etc.) along with each listing. This helps provide context for each new post that appears on the site.
- **On the Shelf.** It's a visual listing of books in our library, frequently related to a theme (see figure 2.6). Right now, we have a grilling theme. These change frequently, so there will be another theme by the time you read this. Once that was running smoothly, we started to add bells and whistles like On the Shelf. This list of books is pulled automatically from our ILS system (Polaris).
- **Design details.** We have also gone through each of our blogs and service pages and reworked design details as needed.

## Social Media Changes

Although chapter 6 is devoted to social media use on the digital branch, here I will mention a few points



**Figure 2.7**  
Goodreads widget.

that relate to updating. We are continually experimenting with and evaluating emerging social media tools, and we incorporate new tools and services when it seems appropriate.

Usually an emerging service is added to the digital branch as a pilot project. For example, we have added Goodreads as a pilot project and have incorporated a Goodreads widget (see figure 2.7) on the sidebar of our Books Movies and Music blog.

Our Goodreads pilot project has a team of staff members who have signed up for Goodreads and are adding content to the site, such as books they've read or want to read. The library has also created a library group, and we sometimes post book group-style reading suggestions there.

*Goodreads*  
[www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)

*TSCPL Goodreads group*  
[www.goodreads.com/group/show/50549.Topeka\\_Shawnee\\_Co\\_Public\\_Library](http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/50549.Topeka_Shawnee_Co_Public_Library)

We have also experimented with Google Plus. At the moment, this page is mainly a placeholder. Not too many people in Topeka, Kansas, are using Google Plus at the moment. The ones that do also heavily use Twitter. This, of course, might change, so our library Google Plus space is reserved, just in case.

*TSCPL Google Plus page*  
<https://plus.google.com/u/0/116796381288217914948/posts>

## Notes

1. "UX Shakedown," Influx website, accessed July 15, 2012, <http://influx.us/shakedown>.
2. "FeedBurner Email Overview and FAQ," Google FeedBurner support page, accessed July 15, 2012, <http://support.google.com/feedburner/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=78982>.