Design for the User, Not the Staff

The Challenges of Library Web Design

There will always be obstacles and challenges that stand in your way. Building mental strength will help you develop resilience to those potential hazards so you can continue on your journey to success.

—Amy Morin

I was once asked to talk to a library science class at a large university about what I do and what real-world advice I might care to impart to a group of potential web librarians. One of the things I shared was the major challenges that I typically face in my job.

Being in a tech position means that keeping up is a must, and "keeping up" is a moving target. It's a huge undertaking, and I don't always feel like I'm conquering it. However, that's not one of the things that raises my blood pressure. In every job, there are obstacles that one enjoys working around, and then there are those that make one want to pull one's hair out.

For myself, I've narrowed the latter down to three things:

1. **Design by committee hell:** Whenever I teach a web-related course, it's amazing to me how many times I can ask the question "How many of you have had to deal with design by committee?" and nearly always get depressing stories in reply. Virtually no one has anything good to say about it. And, truth be told, they shouldn't. It's a horrible way to work on a website. Where I work, we even make it clear up front that we can't work with this model. In our experience, it has pretty much always meant additional costs for the client library, because timelines and prototypes go on and on. Nobody's happy. I once spoke to a library director, explaining to her why we don't work with this model, and she laughed and said, "Oh don't worry! I plan to do design by dictatorship." I've used that line often, now. That's not to say that library staff can't give input, but there needs to be someone at the library's end who can draw a line in the sand and say, "Nope, that's not happening." Despite our clear warnings, some of this is, sadly, unavoidable, as some libraries still must deal with the demands of other forces, such as library boards or what I've come to term the "Terrible Territorial Librarian."*

2. **Kitchen sink syndrome:** This is what I call the tendency of libraries to want to stuff everything onto the home page (everything but the kitchen sink . . .). Whether it's databases, the navigation, programs . . . it doesn't matter. There is an unrealistic belief that everything libraries offer is equally important to visitors. Which, of course, is not only patently false (and results in cluttered sites with poor usability) but lends truth to the phrases "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" and "You can please some of the people some of the time. . . ." More specifically, decisions about what goes up front and what options users really care about are not made with any kind of data but are generally shoved aside in favor of anecdotal evidence or the demands of the "Terrible Territorial Librarian." I spend a fair amount of time working

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* This could be an actual librarian, a staff member, an administrator, or the board member who thinks they run the library. The gist being that it's someone who thinks they know better and/or favors keeping their personal control over whatever part of the website they've traditionally ruled over making things easier for users.

with libraries to avoid this particular (and pernicious) issue, but the political barriers can be hefty, even for a motivated client.

3. **Special snowflake syndrome:** This is an ongoing battle. I still have library staff who say to me things like, "Oh, our patrons are used to finding the catalog button over here. They'll all go crazy if you move it!" Or the staff will try to convince me that their search function should go in the footer, because they don't think their patrons will use it. As if, somehow, the only site that visitors ever use on the internet is that of the library, and they don't carry any other experiences or expectations with them when they come. I'm guessing that at least part of this mentality comes from how libraries develop collections: collections are created and curated for a specific community. However, that argument can rarely be made for a library's website. There are conventions now; the internet has rules, such as search bars should be located in the header for easy user navigability. Your patrons are great, but they aren't unique enough to break those rules. Sorry.

Three Truths about Your Library's Website

All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.

—Arthur Schopenhauer

I create websites for libraries. I've been doing that for more than twenty years. In that time, I've learned a few things, especially in my current job, where I work on sites for multiple libraries. I've discovered some hard truths about these sites, and sometimes I've shared those with the clients I've worked with. Here are three of those truths.

1. **How it looks can be very subjective.** There is absolutely no consistency in what one library likes compared to another. When I talk to a client library about our current design portfolio, I ask them which sites they like and which they don't, and why. It helps me to get a feel for the style they're after and which elements they find attractive. I can't count the number of times one library has told me they love Library XYZ's site, only to have another library tell me, even the very next day, that they don't like Library XYZ's site and can't imagine why Library XYZ would have done it that way. This is true even within the same library system. There have been times when the library's staff liaison likes a design draft a lot, only to have that design shot down by the library's director. Or there's a committee and the members can't agree on what they like. It's the nature of the beast: design is subjective (although functionality and usability are not). Chances are, *no* design is ever going to make everyone entirely happy. And that's in addition to the fact that some patrons will hate the new site design, no matter how carefully planned, simply because it's not the old one.

2. **Nobody uses most of it.** As library staff, sometimes we can get mighty attached to those pathfinders, booklists, and lists of links. After all, we put a lot of work into those, right? So lots of people must be using them, of course . . . not. Look at the metrics. Chances are, you're going to be unpleasantly surprised. You know what people come to the library's website for, in general?
   ◦ access to their account
   ◦ search the catalog
   ◦ phone number and address
   ◦ program information

Anything else is pure frosting. There are always exceptions. For example, genealogy resources on a library's site may be heavily used. Maybe your library is one of the lucky ones that has a niche audience for a specialized content section. But there aren't many. Don't believe me? Go look at your website analytics. See how many page views there are for that list of homework help links, especially from outside of the library. Figure out how much it cost, in staff time, to put that list together. (You may need a stiff drink at this point.) Does that mean it's not worth doing these? Maybe. But that's what the math is for. Everything that happens in a library has a cost.

3. **You'll hate it later.** I'm old enough to remember when orange shag carpeting was all the rage, and avocado green appliances were in kitchens everywhere. Now, nobody would probably choose these to decorate their home. Design trends change, and on the web, they change *fast*. Remember textured, tiled backgrounds? Animated, cartoony GIFs? Flash animations? 3D buttons? Glass reflections? None of these trends were all that long ago but are all very much outdated now. I regularly tell clients that, in anywhere from two to five years, they'll likely come to hate whatever they love now. Even if the site design wasn't all that trendy to begin with, there isn't anything like the "little black dress" of the web that always looks good and is a classic, regardless of era (at least, not yet). I've learned not to get emotionally attached to much of anything that I do, because even *I* will despise it at some point down the road. Just like that orange shag carpeting.

Thinking Differently about Library Websites: Beyond Your Preconceptions   **Laura Solomon**

What If Your Website Solved Problems?

Don't confuse me with the facts.

—Earl Landgrebe, Watergate hearings

Go look at your library's website. Now, go look at the website of the library nearest yours. Now go look at some big city's website. Heck, go look at most websites *I've* done. And, while you're looking, pretend that you're a patron with any of the following questions or needs:

- "I'm a sixth-grader, and I have a report on zebras, and I'm not going to check out any books."
- "I want to renew my books."
- "Does the library have any story times for kids with special needs?"
- "How do I get divorce forms?"
- "How do I get a library card?"
- "Do you have a fax machine?"
- "Can I reserve a study room during finals?"

How easy is it to find answers to these questions? If your library's site is like most others, it's not that simple.

Even though web designers and usability experts have known for years that people's behavior on websites is task-driven, our sites are rarely created for that. Instead, we bombard visitors with huge, rotating carousels full of self-promotion, navigation full of jargon and meaningless terms (I'm looking at you, "Resources"), and other elements that primarily focus on either making the site look "cool" or making things easy for in-house staff to find.

In late 2015, my agency completely shifted how it thinks about its website and redesigned based on that shift. Many people complimented us on the change, and some even asked how their libraries could do something similar. However, even the most enthusiastic of these inquiries quickly died off when they realized the cultural shift it would require for their institution.

What did we change? We stopped promoting ourselves on our website—*completely*. The website is purely designed for the needs of our users and the most common tasks they come to accomplish. It doesn't mean we don't promote at all; rather, we changed *where* we promote. Now we use social media and e-mail discussion lists (which are often seen much more, anyway). This change in how we think about promotion and the channels we use allowed us to create a website that focuses more on the people who use it. And those people? They're *not* my agency's staff.

I'm not making any claims that this kind of shift would be uncomplicated for a library. I recognize that there a lot of stakeholders, internally, that can derail such an effort or just don't understand the need for this kind of change. After all, if you browse other library sites, you'll see they haven't made this shift. So why should yours?

- Such a change doesn't mean that you must go as far as we did. I think that some promotion is still going to be necessary for a library. However, look long and hard at your current website. Does it scream "PROMOTIONS" or "WE HELP SOLVE YOUR PROBLEMS"?
- Now that so many people use mobile technology to see the web, the chances that they're just browsing through your library's website to pass the time are almost nil. If someone is coming to your library's site at all, especially on a mobile device, it's to do something specific. Why would you essentially do nothing but throw ads in their way?
- While I, among so many others, have talked about putting users first for a long time, there are too many libraries that choose to ignore basic user experience (UX) principles in favor of what they *think* is the right way to go. Remember: anecdotes are not data. I can't begin to count the number of times I've had to build something that is completely contrary to best practices and current study data.

Why Your Website Should Not Be a Special Snowflake

You're not going to reinvent the wheel every time you go out, because that would disappoint the audience.

—Lindsey Buckingham

Let me tell you about what happened to me a few summers ago.

Our family went to Cedar Point, a massive amusement park in Ohio. I'm getting thirsty. Hot day in August and, of course, soft drinks at the amusement park have an approximate 1,000 percent markup.[*] I want a bottle that I can reclose and store so I can take it on rides, so I'm not interested in the usual containers provided by the food vendors. I approach one of the many vending machines at the park.

Much to my delight, the machine takes credit cards. Since my husband is currently off on one of the major coasters designed by crazy people, and he has all the cash, I figure I'd just scrounge in my purse for sufficient change. But look! I have the convenience of a vending machine that will take my Visa card. Or so I thought.

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[*] Granted, math is not my strong suit. But nearly four bucks for a Coke is ludicrous.

I see the glowing slot, just like so many ATMs. I stick my card in and note that the card does not come out. I figure I have to push the button for my drink of choice. Nothing. I look more closely at the machine. I discover, much to my alarm, that there is a VERTICAL slot right *next* to the one I put my card in, where you're supposed to SWIPE the card. The machine has effectively eaten my credit card.

I gather my son from his ride, and we trudge back to the front of the park where the park operations office is, to see if my card can be retrieved. I informed the polite gentleman at the service desk that I was an idiot and then continued on with "I was trying to use my credit card in the Coke machine, and put it in the—." He finished my sentence for me: "You put it in the wrong slot, right?"

I think, at this point, it's safe to assume I was not the first "idiot" to have done this.[*] My mistake, obviously, was to assume that the Coke machine, even though it looked much like many ATMs, operated the same way. I assumed how the credit card slot operated based on my previous experiences with something similar.

Like so many things in life, I did what most of us do—I attempted to apply previous experiences to a current one. While that may not excuse my assumption, it does say a lot about (arguably poor) user interface design. If I wasn't the first person to have this problem at the park, then I'm also not the only one making assumptions based on prior experience with machines that take cards. The two slots are not clearly indicated, they're too close together, and, in light of repeated user error, the interface needs to be rethought. I couldn't help but wonder: How many cards per week are lost in those machines?

So, what does my story have to do with websites?

More people are likely familiar with the interface on an ATM than the credit card processor on a vending machine. ATMs have been around a lot longer. Not only that, many of us have also learned to put credit cards in horizontally from machines at the airport, parking garages, gas stations, and ticket vendors.

When people come to your website, they bring the entire rest of the web with them. Their experiences on Amazon, Facebook, eBay, etc.—each of those factors into their expectations and experiences. For example, if someone clicks "About Us" on your website, they expect to get information that is considered standard in most places—hours of operation, location, staff directory, history, mission, services, policies, and so forth. These kinds of things have become conventions across the web—so why should your site be any different? Why frustrate people who come with expectations based on how literally everything else works?

People don't get weird library jargon, or non-informational names like "Hot Zone." Just the basics, please. Don't make us think. Give it to us straight, and don't make us figure out which search field (or vending machine slot!) to use. No matter how "cool" you think your stuff is, don't flout convention.

Don't be special. Be USEFUL.

Why Do Web Myths Live On in Libraries?

We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas. Like mass hysteria. Or a tune that gets into your head that you keep humming all day until you spread it to someone else. Jokes. Urban legends. Crackpot religions. Marxism. No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information.

—Neal Stephenson

A while back, I received an e-mail from some library staff who were concerned about the amount of scrolling needed to see all the different databases. There are at least two major problems inherent in that (misplaced) concern: let's break them down quickly.

1. **Believing that scrolling is bad dates to the late 90s/early 00s, before the advent of mobile devices** (not to mention actual data on user behaviors and best usability practices). Back then, lots of scrolling was believed to be inconvenient, and there was a great battle to get as much as possible "above the fold." We now live in a time where mobile access may well be the primary way patrons view a library's site. And, believe me, if patrons didn't consider scrolling a normal behavior, they'd already have given up their smartphones and tablets by now.

2. **Notice that the e-mail focused on the needs of staff.** It's probable that the staff uses desktops to access the database list. So I can understand that they may not want to scroll through something long. The problem is that the public website is for the (often mobile-using) PUBLIC. If library staff want something different, that's fine, but put it on an intranet. It's virtually impossible to balance staff needs and user needs on the same website: they're two very different audiences, with different mental models.

So, putting aside the idea of scrolling for a moment, this is not the only web usability myth I've heard from library staff. Staff also have fallen under the spell of

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[*] Cedar Point seems to even have a procedure for this. Unfortunately, the Coke rep was gone for the day and it was too late for me. I had to cancel the card.

the four user behavior myths noted in chapter 1 (the three-clicks rule, the greatness of carousels, knowing what users think/how they behave online, needing to jazz up the website). And I'm sure there would be many more if I were to comb back through the years.

I spend a fair amount of time educating library staff about how user behavior has changed and sharing current data. And that's actually OK, I *love* talking about this stuff (though some are surely sick of it by now). Many libraries I work with are surprised that there are now actual, concrete practices that websites need to follow.

Why do these myths continue to be perpetuated in libraries? Again, for many, likely because so many of us grew up alongside the web. We were initiated in the very early days when it was much more a trial-and-error (ooh, look—shiny things!) environment. Those days are largely behind us.

Another reason may simply be that some truths are hard. The fact that carousels actively turn off users doesn't jibe with the love affair and narratives many libraries still have with them. The fact that users *do* scroll doesn't always harmonize with the perspective of a librarian at the reference desk. Mythology persists, even in an industry devoted to the dissemination of information, because it's hard to give up what's comfortable.

Three Things You Can Learn from Other Websites

The capacity to learn is a gift; the ability to learn is a skill; the willingness to learn is a choice.

—Brian Herbert

Let's start with defining "other" here: I mean sites that aren't library websites. If you do nothing else, I want you to get out of the habit at looking at other *library* sites for inspiration. Why?

- **As a profession, libraries are too insular.** Please stop looking at your peers; often, they're struggling as much as you are. I think there's something to be learned from every kind of organization and business. At least start looking at big nonprofit websites. They, too, often have great examples to learn from.
- **It's all about expectations.** Those big websites (e.g., Amazon) have already invested thousands, often millions, of dollars into figuring out what works. No, libraries are not Amazon or big companies, and, yes, I get that libraries don't do what they do. But keep in mind that, like it or not, those big companies do set the standard: your website's visitors use those standards (probably a lot), and that sets expectations for how the rest of the web

works. If Amazon suddenly had data to prove that the search field should go in the footer to be the most effective, it'd do it in a heartbeat . . . and so would everyone else. Visitors would then wonder why *your* website's search box was in the header.
- **Other sites have more to lose.** Whether it's a business or a nonprofit that takes donations, those sites *must* work and need to convert visitors to either a financial transaction or to a concrete action of some kind. A lot more typically rides on a website being successful for these kinds of organizations. They can't afford to just guess or work purely with anecdotes. Frankly, libraries really can't, either . . . sadly, they do, often.

So, what *can* you learn from other websites?

1. **Benefits are clear.** Have you ever had a patron ask, "How much does it cost to rent a book?" I've asked this question to presentation audiences often and, nearly always, more than half the group (sometimes all) will affirm that they've been asked this question or some variant. To me, this is a massive marketing problem. The best part of libraries? THEY'RE FREE. Yet, that purpose and benefit isn't spelled out on any library website I've ever seen. I constantly hear librarians moaning about competition from Netflix, Barnes & Noble, etc. . . . yet the biggest, best, and most obvious thing that could conceivably put libraries at the top of the heap isn't promoted anywhere on library websites. Why? Look at websites of nearly any other kind of business or organization. The best ones don't hide what their benefits are. Why do we? Just because we think it's obvious? Judging by the anecdotal data (and, yes, the plural of anecdote is *not* data, I know) . . . it's not.
2. **Logos matter.** Library logos are often problematic. Is your library's website logo the same as on the sign in front of the library, library cards, the bookmobile, the delivery vans, the pencils, the stationery . . . you get the idea? The point of a logo is to provide a visual cue (or, better yet, evoke a theme) when people see it. If your library is using completely different logos in different places, that defeats the main purpose of a logo. (For those of you who can't believe this kind of thing happens, let me assure you that it does. Way more often than you'd think.) Then there's the problem of really awful logos. It doesn't matter how great the rest of your website looks (and looks aren't everything anyway, granted) if the logo is a scan of a hand-drawn rendering of the library building. Look at sites with clean, simple logos and compare those to what your library currently has. This isn't a matter of trends; it's a matter of making the visual cue easy for the user. If

your library's logo is on the delivery van, could people readily identify it, without reading any text, at 60 mph?

3. **Other websites are often good at removing obstacles.** When many websites want you to do something (buy, donate, do), they typically have very strong CTAs (calls to action). Often, a brightly colored button will take the visitor directly to the desired action, with text such as "Register Now." They don't make you search around their website to take this action. They want the user to go directly there and will make it as simple as possible for the visitor. If you're promoting new items, don't just list them. Link them directly to where they can be reserved, and make it clear that the desired action is "Reserve your copy now." Effective websites also don't waste visitors' time with silly, useless text like "Click Here." Get to the point; ain't nobody got time for that.

You Are Not a Patron. So Act Like It

The false-consensus effect refers to people's tendency to assume that others share their beliefs and will behave similarly in a given context. Only people who are very different from them would make different choices.

—*You Are Not the User: The False-Consensus Effect*

Do you know who probably spends the most time on your library's website?

You do. The library's staff.

I don't simply mean that the staff might be gazing at it all day long while they are on their work computers. Even if that were true (of course it isn't), library patrons still wouldn't likely be the primary viewers. Why? I would say it's because patrons are not engaging in any of the following activities:

- creating content for the library's website
- editing the library's website
- having meetings about the library's website

You get the general idea. Outside users aren't responsible for any of it. They're purely content consumers. Visitors don't have an emotional investment in the site like a library's staff might. They're not looking at the site with an eye toward improvement or engagement. They're simply there to find some piece of information or accomplish a specific thing. In other words, they're task-driven. They've arrived at the library's site to do something, not evaluate something.

While this may seem self-evident, it often isn't, especially to those planning for a library's website. The viewpoint of library staff makes for a very different mental model. You may inherently get the architecture and the nuances of the decisions that went into a given hierarchy. You natively understand any library jargon used. You know the difference between the website and the online catalog. Now, consider the casual visitor who invariably knows none of this; they simply want to know what time the library opens tomorrow or how to access an audiobook.

A famous saying in user experience testing is "You are not your user." As a staff person, your view (mental model) of the library's website is incredibly different from that of a patron. It's so very different that you can't even pretend to be a patron user.

It's vital that this be acknowledged. How?

Never claim that you somehow know how patrons will behave on your library's website, unless you can back it up with metrics or testing. There's no other way to know for sure, and, even then, results can often only be generalized.

You are an apple, and your patron is an orange.