Chapter 3

Make Your Website Relevant and Useful

New Might Be Shiny . . . but Is It Useful?

A company shouldn't get addicted to being shiny, because shiny doesn't last.

—Jeff Bezos

I don't get to play with cutting-edge tech. Don't register that as a complaint: that's simply a condition of working in libraries. Libraries *aren't* research and development companies. However, when a newish-to-libraries technology comes creeping close enough to the mainstream (and a library's minimal budget), there are bound to be administrators who will be ready to pounce, for the alleged honor of being the first to use it.

There is an element of bravery in being ahead of the pack: after all, being among the first to implement something new means having to contend with addressing all the new concerns, policies, and logistics that come along with it. Sometimes, these efforts are successful and other times not. But is it worth the work? This is a question that is rarely asked in libraries because libraries don't often examine their efforts through the lens of return on investment (ROI).

Libraries are constantly trying to demonstrate their relevance to their communities and there are good reasons for that. Irrelevant institutions don't get used by their patrons, and irrelevant institutions don't get funded. The problems happen, however, when libraries just start grabbing at anything new and shiny and throwing it at the proverbial wall to see if it sticks. Yes, for-profit organizations also constantly try new things. But you can be reasonably assured few to none of those campaigns got out the door without someone making (and someone else approving) a business case for that new idea.

What differentiates a business case from simply showcasing how cool something is? The shortest answer is that a business case shows how a particular new thing is a *solution* to an existing problem. If you can't identify what problems this proposed technology will solve, why bring it to the table? While some library administrators will, admittedly, leap onto anything that looks remotely nifty, the majority are more responsible and will need to be able to justify to both patrons and board members why this technology is needed and why precious resources should be devoted to it.

"But, Laura," you point out, "this book is about websites. Does this really apply?"

Absolutely.

Every time you get excited by a new type of bell or whistle on another website, this cycle begins. "It looks cool! We need this!" And it's off to the races. You show it to others, who also think it's cool and want to implement it. Creating web stuff still takes money, staff time, or both, yet rarely does anyone stop to ask: "Do we really need this? What problem does this (cool) thing actually solve?"

Professional designers have to manage this kind of thing often because clients may want things that aren't really suited for the mission of the site or have usability or accessibility issues. What looks "cool" may simply be inappropriate or even a net negative for a particular site. Designers are frequently in the position of explaining why something is a bad idea to clients simply because the client is enchanted with the look of something and hasn't thought to ask how the new and shiny element might improve existing problems.

Take a moment to ask the critical question: "What problem does this thing solve?"

Your Building Is Not Your Product

Wherever smart people work, doors are unlocked.

—Steve Wozniak

We spend a lot of time in our buildings. We sweat the smallest detail when they are renovated. Their quirks and unique features are likely familiar parts of our workdays. The elevators that creak, that door you have to push extra hard to latch, the amazing mural that was painted by a local artist. We can easily fall in love with our buildings. After all, they're an integral part of a library's work and our own experiences. I'm not writing this to dismiss the library building.

However, I want to talk to you about when you try to make that building the biggest feature on your library's website. It's not unusual for me to work with a library, and they want to use a major piece of prime home page real estate for a photo of the building. I often have to talk them down from the idea, and here's why.

The Building Isn't the Library, but It Is Part of the Library's Identity

This is a concept that many other businesses and organizations have already grasped. They know that they need to feature what they're selling or people happy with what they're selling—not the front door of the business. This idea is harder for libraries because we often don't perceive ourselves as "selling" anything. Make no mistake—your library is promoting services, programs, and collections. That's selling, even when no money is involved. Your product isn't the front door.

Of course, your building is essential to most of the things a library does. But chew on this: What happens if your library's building has to go through a heavy-duty renovation? Oftentimes, the library moves to another location. And here's the important part: it's *still* the library. We like our buildings, but it's not as if we're totally incapacitated when they're not there. Library buildings are merely shells for the reality of what a library is.

Even Very Cool Buildings Aren't the Product

There are a lot of fantastic library buildings. Curbed's 2018 list of the twenty most beautiful libraries in the US will provide a look at some of the best the country has to offer.[1] Yet, if you look at the websites of most of these libraries, they don't usually feature a huge picture of the building on the home page. Many will include a picture on an "About" page or in conjunction with their hours or locations. That makes total sense. If someone wants to visit the building, it's logical to include a photo of it as a visual reference.

Think about this: The New York Public Library has one of the most iconic library buildings in the world. The Seattle Central Library building has won awards. It could be argued that people might go to these places just to see the buildings. But the websites of these libraries quietly acknowledge that's not the main reason that their institutions exist or why people might want to come. If libraries like these don't feature their buildings as a big part of their home pages, why would less awe-inspiring buildings be OK?

So . . . What *Is* the Product?

Everything that your library does as an institution is the product. The programs, the services, the collections, the staff, the outreach . . . absolutely everything. All (or almost all) of those things can usually happen without the benefit of a specific physical building.

I know, your library might be the best-looking building in town or on its campus. But there's a lot to learn from how more recognizable institutions handle their web presence. They get it: it's not about the building.

It's about what's inside it.

Your Home Page Isn't Nearly as Important as You Think It Is

Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.

—William Morris

If you were to ask me which page of a website library staff spend the most mental energy on, the answer would be easy: the home page. Why?

- The library website is often the default home page for many staff members and even on many public computers.
- When it comes to designing or redesigning a library website, the most emphasis is usually placed on the question "What goes on the home page?"
- For years, usability experts have extolled the value of the home page as a site's most valuable real estate.

Yes, the website's home page is important. But it's not nearly as mission-critical as many staff think it is. Why? Two immediate reasons spring to mind:

- The reality is that most of our libraries' patrons don't spend the time constantly staring at it that we do.
- Visitors don't have the emotional investment that many staff do in the library's website.

But even more importantly: the bulk of a site's visitors don't actually enter your library's website via the home page anymore. User behavior has changed significantly over time. Years ago, people might have started at the home page and then figured out where to go on the site. Now they will often use search or external links to get closer to the place they want. Users may be more likely to type "local public library story time" into Google than simply the name of the library. Visitors are task-driven: they're usually looking for something specific. Check your referral traffic; chances are you'll be able to see this truth in action. Many of your users (especially those external to the library building) will not be seeing the website's home page as the first stop.

If you want to see your site the way your users do, look at the most common landing pages in your library's site. What do you see? If a page is the first (or maybe even only) page someone sees, are you happy with how it looks and what content is there?

Are You Designing for Something That Isn't There Anymore?

It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.

—Charles Darwin

When I started doing web work in the 1990s, I remember it being very much a "Wild West" kind of realm, with few hard-and-fast guidelines or rules (which is why sites made with GeoCities could get away with looking incredibly awful and still be "cool"). Everyone was experimenting with creating for the World Wide Web, and nobody really knew where the boundaries were.

Despite that, there was one rule everybody knew. You were supposed to put the most important stuff "above the fold," meaning at the top of the computer screen (no mobile devices in the day), so people would see it before they were forced to scroll. We all knew that scrolling was bad, something nobody liked to do, so we avoided it like the plague.

Except . . . the web, of course, changed. More importantly, the devices on which people viewed the web changed. Now, a designer has no idea how a particular website will be viewed. Sure, you can break it down into broad categories: smartphone, tablet, desktop. But even within those groups are subsets and mutations and different browsers and . . . let's be honest, nobody can know exactly what kind of environment a website might end up in. Responsive design is now the norm (and it's not easy), and what happened to that "Don't put important stuff below the fold" rule?

Because now? There's no more fold. Not really. Not that you can pin down. Want a concrete example? Look at iamthefold.com. If you're a web designer, it's the kind of thing that might make you cry a little.

What does this mean to me, Laura?

- **People scroll.** On mobile devices especially, they expect to scroll. Even on the desktop, scrolling is hardly the evil it was once purported to be.
- **You still need to put the most important stuff at the top.** But now, you need to consider what the "top" is, based on device. Logo, main navigation, search should still be at the top, even on the smallest device. After that, it will depend on your site's particular content and what you prioritize.
- **Rules change.** The web continues to evolve at a pace that virtually no one can keep up with. We have to change too or get frustrated trying to apply rules that no longer are relevant.

Widgets Are Cute. Get Rid of Them

There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.

—Peter Drucker

From a usability perspective, layout has always been important. If the tasks people come to do the most often are hidden, people leave the site, frustrated. With the advent of mobile devices of all kinds, layout has also taken on a different facet: it now has to *not* put up barriers to those using such gadgets and, ideally, present them with something better suited for them.

However, there's an ongoing design trend that many libraries have embraced: that of adding all kinds of widgets, icons, logos, and graphics to the perimeters of their sites. Many of these come from library vendors and services, and often they represent a more professional level of graphics than may occur in the rest of the website's design, making them an appealing addition for library staff. Aside from the fact that this usually makes for a very cluttered interface, there are some other reasons to reconsider this practice.

1. **Banner blindness.** Banner blindness means that users never look at any item that looks anything like an advertisement, due to either its shape or position on the page. This applies to logos and icons positioned on the sides of websites—which is typical placement for many banner ads on the web. Guess what many of those logos and widgets look like to your library's end users? This concept has been around for some time. As far back as 1999, usability researcher Jakob Nielsen studied it.[2] He found that placement is only part of the problem; if something just *looks* like an ad, it gets

ignored. "Selective attention is very powerful, and Web users have learned to stop paying attention to any ads that get in the way of their goal-driven navigation."[3]

2. **Google penalizes you.** Google actually has a ranking system (algorithm) that will lower your Google ranking in search results if your site is too ad-heavy. The algorithm, called the Google Page Layout algorithm, was introduced (albeit somewhat quietly) in January 2012. From the official announcement:

> Rather than scrolling down the page past a slew of ads, users want to see content right away. So, sites that don't have much content "above-the-fold" can be affected by this change. If you click on a website and the part of the website you see first either doesn't have a lot of visible content above-the-fold or dedicates a large fraction of the site's initial screen real estate to ads, that's not a very good user experience. Such sites may not rank as highly going forward.[4]

3. **They often slow down the site.** In the case of nearly all embeddable widgets, they pull their data from a third-party source. In other words, in order to work, the widget has to run back to the mothership (usually the vendor providing the widget) every time it needs something. The more times it has to go to the external source, the slower a site will become.
4. **They may not be accessible.** In my own experience, a good number of vendor widgets may be only partially accessible or not accessible at all to people with disabilities. If you're not sure how to test this, I recommend asking the vendor directly . . . and ask them to put it in writing.

What should you do now? Check your analytics. (You have them, right?) Chances are very good that those cute widgets are not getting used as much as you'd hope. In many cases, they don't get *any use* or get a number so low you might feel like you've been duped into using them. Rethink the ROI on those icons and widgets. Are they worth it?

Stop Putting Out the Welcome Mat

Be interesting, be enthusiastic . . . and don't talk too much.

—Norman Vincent Peale

The temptation is overwhelming. After all, libraries are friendly places. We wouldn't want our patrons to think they weren't welcome. It's so nice and friendly to put a big "Welcome to our library website!" heading at the top of the front page, right?

Sorry . . . no.

Remember, every square inch of your library's website is extremely valuable. Your library has to pay for it. It costs staff time (still resulting in spent funds) to maintain it. In many cases, a patron will see the website before they ever see (and, sometimes, instead of seeing) the building. Because that front page area is so critical, it's essential that your library use it wisely.

That space on the front page is your library's equivalent to "Boardwalk" in the game of Monopoly. It's often the single most valuable space on your website. This is where the most important announcements made by your library should go. Typically, when I see "Welcome to our library's website," I know I'm looking at a library that doesn't know how to best utilize its front space. I recommend using that space for promoting library programs and collections that you really want to rustle up an audience for. Levy information. Weather closings. The big summer reading finale. Etcetera. That space is intended for things the library wants to promote that are truly noteworthy.

Here's the thing: if people weren't welcome on your library's website, you would have password-protected it, right? People are inherently welcome to your library's site. They don't need a literal, text-based welcome mat.

The "Three-Click Rule" Has Been Hogwash Since Its Inception

Mr. Owl, how many licks does it take to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?

—Classic Tootsie Roll Pop commercial (1970)

I'm old. I've been doing web work since 1997—the very early days of the graphic web. Back in those olden days, there was virtually no actual research on usability or user behavior. However, there was a glut of allegedly educated opinions about how things should be done. I could go on for a while about how the "rules" of web design have changed in twenty-odd years, but one "rule" that has somehow persisted, despite real data now being available, is that "users won't go more than three clicks past your home page to get to anything." Otherwise known as the "Three-Click Rule," it haunts me still . . . I've heard it from library clients repeatedly.

There are two problems with the "Three-Click Rule." Let's take them one at a time:

1. **It assumes everyone comes in through your site's home page.** Using Google Analytics, look at how people travel through your site, and it will quickly become apparent how wrong this

assumption is. If you look at the pages people come into your site on, yes, the home page will rank highly, or even at number one . . . but it won't be the only place people enter your website. If they searched Google for "story time at [LIBRARY NAME HERE]," chances are good they clicked a link directly to a story time event page. How far is that from the site's home page? Do you even know? Your users don't care, and, mostly, neither should you—as long as the user got what they were looking for.

2. **Users haven't ever cared, even historically, how far something is from the home page.** Are you old enough to remember when Yahoo! was a big deal? (Pre-Google days, of course.) In the late 1990s, it was more of a search index than a search engine and was making a belated attempt to catalog the internet. It did this with categories, subcategories, sub-sub-categories, sub-sub-sub-categories . . . you get the idea. Yahoo! did not necessarily assume that people could handle only three levels of a navigational hierarchy. The thing that Yahoo! did right that made that possible? It used breadcrumb navigation, now a standard usability component. If people knew where they were in the context of the site, they were fine. Yahoo! certainly had more than three levels to many parts of its index, and users were able to still quickly browse or navigate without difficulty.

There are still a fair number of historical artifacts remaining from the early days of the web. However, this is one that should be buried and never brought to light again. Navigational design doesn't depend on magic numbers of any kind: it depends on the content of the site and the needs of the user.

Notes

1. Megan Barber, "The 20 Most Beautiful Libraries in the U.S.," Curbed, March 14, 2018, https://archive.curbed.com/2017/2/9/14551106/best-libraries-architecture-united-states.
2. Jakob Nielsen, "The Top 10 Web Design Mistakes of 1999," Nielsen Norman Group, May 29, 1999, https://www.nngroup.com/articles/the-top-ten-web-design-mistakes-of-1999/.
3. Nielsen, "Top 10 Web Design Mistakes."
4. Matt Cutts, "Page Layout Algorithm Improvement," *Google Search Central Blog*, January 19, 2012, https://developers.google.com/search/blog/2012/01/page-layout-algorithm-improvement.