Chapter 5

Website Design Tips

Why I (Sort of) Hate Carousels and You Probably Should Too

The user's target was at the top of the page in 98-point font. But she failed to find it because the panel auto-rotated instead of staying still.

—Jakob Nielsen, "Auto-Forwarding Carousels and Accordions Annoy Users and Reduce Visibility"[1]

Before I dive into the many reasons for which one should hate these things, let's be sure everyone knows what a carousel *is*.

Does your library's site have any widgets with rotating images? Especially big ones, that take up a big chunk of the site's home page space? Technically, just about any widget that rotates images, automatically or not, is a carousel. But in my own experience, libraries are overly fond of the ginormous kind that is front and center and screams "I'M A COOL ANIMATION!" at the user.

Yes, these things can look amazing. However, for something that takes up so much real estate, do you know how many problems a carousel solves?

Just one.

They solve one internal administrative problem. Brad Frost, a well-known web designer and speaker, calls them "organizational crutches" and uses this scenario to illustrate:

> ***INT. MEETING ROOM***
>
> "I'm very important! I need to be on the homepage!"
>
> "I'm also very important! I need to be on the homepage too!"
>
> "I'm very very important, I need to be on the homepage three!"
>
> "Let's make a carousel! Everybody wins!"
>
> THE GROUP HIGH FIVES AND CELEBRATES OVER A BLOOMIN' ONION AT OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE.
>
> **END SCENE**[2]

I think you probably get the idea. Promotions don't have to be prioritized and nobody's feelings have to be hurt if items can simply shuffle through a single space on a timer.

This solution to just one staff problem seems to override, in the minds of those staff, all the other issues created for the site's users. And the problems are not minor:

- **Carousels look like advertisements.** Well, because they pretty much are! The vast majority of images in these widgets are promoting a service, collection, or program. Add animation, and there you have it—a really big ad. Guess what people do with ads they see online? They ignore them. Which, of course, defeats the entire purpose of the pretty widget.
- **They can be problematic for those users with a disability or low literacy.** It takes special effort and knowledge to make carousels available for keyboards or assistive technologies. Library staff rarely have the know-how or may be constrained by the limits of their content management system. Those users who are considered to have low literacy may not have enough time to read the content before it moves off the screen.
- **They often showcase very bad graphic design skills.** These things are front and center and BIG. If you don't have someone creating the images who has high-level skills in graphic design, it's

going to be very obvious, very fast. Do you really want your organization represented by someone who consistently creates cluttered, pixelated, stretched images and then uses black text on a royal blue background?
- **They can slow down the site.** Between very large images and lots of back-end scripts to make it go, these widgets can get significantly bandwidth-heavy. Is it worth it? The answer is nearly always no.
- **They take away control from the user.** One of the basic tenets of creating a good user experience is to never take control away from the site visitor. When a carousel autorotates, that's exactly what's happening.

In short: many readers either don't or can't see or don't care to see your carousel and fail to interact with it. It annoys people simply by existing. Are all these problems worth the high-fives and the Bloomin' Onion at Outback?

Let's be clear: I build a significant number of websites with carousels. "Hypocritical much, Laura?" one might ask. You wouldn't necessarily be wrong. Let me explain how this happens, in nearly 100 percent of cases:

1. Library client sees carousel on another website. Client says, "Oh, that looks so cool! We need one of those!"
2. Laura sighs and launches into her spiel. "I'm going to tell you all of the reasons why these are a bad idea and won't really help your library."
3. Library ignores Laura's advice and insists on carousel being built anyway.
4. Laura's head hurts from banging it against the proverbial wall so frequently, and she builds the #$%! carousel. Library is happy.
5. Cycle begins anew.

Does Your Content Stink?

Maintenance is terribly important.

—Manolo Blahnik

Many libraries give a lot of thought to how their website looks, and some even spend a significant time thinking about how people use their sites. However, one aspect that often gets overlooked is the content. Content especially gets ignored once it's *up* on a site; how many times have you run across a web page where it's sadly obvious that no updating has been done in weeks, months, or even years?

Gerry McGovern, who runs a web content management company and is the author of several books on content management, refers to this outdated material as "smelly" content. He makes the analogy that it's much like leaving a basket of rotting fruit out for your visitors:

> We would never leave rotting fruit on a reception desk, yet we leave masses of putrefaction on our websites. It may not smell but it sure does stink, and it is damaging your reputation and your brand. The credibility of your content is vital because, if the impatient, skeptical scan-reader gets the slightest sense that the content is not accurate or up to date, they will hit the "Back" button.[3]

- **When's the last time you *really* went back through your website content?** Not just dusted, but vacuumed and scrubbed? Be honest. It probably wasn't last week, or even last month.
- **Old content isn't just old; as McGovern so aptly points out, it's literally damaging.** How can your library say that it is a relevant institution when it doesn't even maintain the information on its own website?
- **If your library doesn't have a schedule for reviewing content, it's time to get one.** Even twice (once?) a year is better than nothing.

Stop Disenfranchising 25 Percent of Your Website's Users

Not making your website accessible carries real risk, and the more users you alienate, the larger that risk. The current trend is toward more legislative sticks to enforce accessibility, not less. It pays to be ahead of the curve.

—Matt Robinson, *Lullabot*

Chances are that when you think about "web accessibility," you've got your library's website in mind. However, the definition of web accessibility is much broader than just websites. In fact, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), which provides the most comprehensive standards for web accessibility, defines it this way: "Web accessibility means that websites, tools, and technologies are designed and developed so that people with disabilities can use them."[4]

This often comes as a surprise: that the definition of web accessibility is significantly broader than websites. It is important to know because this means that it also applies to nearly any internet-abled technology your library uses or provides.

More than one in four adults live with a disability in the United States.[5] Keep in mind that that statistic doesn't even include people under eighteen and includes only those adults who have self-identified. A library should think long and hard about why it's not offering equal access to its website to people

with disabilities. If your library provides a resource, physical or digital, it should be provided to everyone equitably. Or to quote Aristotle, "There is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals."

It should also be noted that libraries are exposing themselves to significant litigation risks when they do not consider how to implement web accessibility. In the first half of 2021 alone, such lawsuits saw a 64 percent increase from 2020 in the US.[6] As the importance of connectivity and web use has risen across all aspects of life, more people with disabilities are discovering that they are literally locked out of opportunities and resources.

Libraries are about providing access to information. A lack of web accessibility is in direct opposition to that goal. For libraries to truly serve all patrons equitably, a focus on web accessibility is critical. Libraries need to understand that accessibility isn't an optional feature.

You're Not in Control, and That's a Good Thing

If you want real control, drop the illusion of control.

—Unknown

I'm not a usability expert, and I'm not sure I'll ever have the time to truly become one. But I've embraced one of the axioms of the user experience (UX) community: "Don't take away control from your user."

How might a library take away control from its users? Here are some examples:

- auto-playing audio or video
- opening links in new tabs or windows automatically
- forcing users to provide more information to perform an action than is actually needed
- autorotating the images in a carousel
- disabling the browser's Back button in any way

It's not unusual to wish that our site visitors would experience the website in a specific way, follow specific paths, or take specific actions. While it's possible to guide users in a certain direction, they should never be locked into a journey or action. Yes, it's your website. But this isn't like your childhood treehouse, where what you said goes absolutely. "Good UIs [user interfaces] instill a sense of control in their users. Keeping users in control makes them comfortable; they will learn quickly and gain a fast sense of mastery."[7]

That's the crux of this principle: we want users to feel comfortable with the website, which means they have to feel empowered. When actions happen on the website without being initiated by the user, that's the direct opposite of what we should be trying to achieve. Would you feel powerful or comfortable in a house where a poltergeist reigned? Where furniture or objects moved by their own volition? Almost certainly not.

In short, don't make decisions for your user. Give them control whenever possible, and watch the usability of your library's site improve dramatically.

Does Anybody Actually Work Here?

People and their behaviors are what deliver results to your organization. Not systems, not processes, not computers, not machines.

—Mark Hortsman

Let's start this discussion with a question: Are library staff important?

Your first response may be along the lines of, "Of course they're important! Staff are the most important resource a library has to offer its community. Much of the value of a library is lost without its trained staff to assist patrons!"

Don't worry; I'm not arguing with you. I'd agree with that assessment completely. To be honest, it's sort of a rhetorical question for the purposes of this conversation. I'd expect no less from anyone who knows anything about libraries. Without staff, libraries would be a chaotic collection of oft-meaningless materials, and services would be nonexistent. Library staff do an amazing number of things to make collections, services, and programs happen . . . often with limited budgets.

Speaking of those budgets, what is usually the largest part of those budgets? Where does the most money typically go? If you answered staff, right again! In most organizations, personnel is often the biggest budget item. Clearly, library budgets confirm economically what we already know: that library staff are, indeed, very important. So . . . why am I even asking this question?

Here's why: because your library's website probably doesn't convey how important these people are.

On the one hand, our budgets and our convictions unquestionably tell the world that library staff are invaluable. On the other, many library websites fail to uphold that viewpoint. Does your library's site have a staff directory? Are administrators at least listed, with contact information? Many sites don't have any of this. Staff are hidden away as individuals.

I do get it to some extent. It's likely the same reason that some staff don't like to wear name tags that display their names . . . and, to be fair, I'm not sure if I'd be as comfortable these days with that particular idea as I might have been when I first started working in libraries. However, if you're any kind of

administrator, you have to be at least somewhat comfortable with public exposure. When I walk into any CVS drugstore, there is a sign right at the front door that tells me who is in charge of that store—sometimes, there is even a photograph. When I check into a hotel, there is often a sign telling me immediately who the manager on duty is. These businesses recognize that the people in charge exist as an interface between the business and the customer and don't try to hide that.

Ideally, I'd love to see every library website have a full staff directory with contact information. But I recognize that may not be a comfortable idea for every person. But what about the department heads? The branch managers? I think libraries need to get a little more comfortable with promoting the idea that staff are important (and available) and not only the services and collections they provide have value.

A Picture Says 1,000 Words. Sometimes, That's Too Many

A picture might be worth a thousand words but a good sentence is worth a thousand windows.

—Mati Klarwein

Many moons ago, I was a children's librarian. I enjoyed putting together themed displays, print materials, and craft kits. I loved (and still do love) picture books. My world was especially centered around the visual, and I loved to jazz things up with cute graphics and designs.

Then, I entered the world of creating for the web. At first, the potentiality for graphic enhancement was a large part of my enjoyment. But I soon discovered the satisfaction of writing code, which was somewhat less ephemeral. More importantly, I began to learn that online pictures can create hurdles for users. As I was drawn to the development side of web work, I soon discovered that graphics and design were not only secondary but could cause problems that might outweigh any benefit they might provide.

What is not often spoken of, during any planning process, is that online graphics have associated costs. Not so much in money, but in other areas that can affect users:

- **Attention.** For every visual element that is added, this means that less user attention is likely to be available for the main content. If an image has no real contextual value (it serves only a decorative purpose), it could be stealing attention from other elements that might require more examination or convey important information.
- **Bandwidth.** Every image has a cost in bandwidth, which means it's going to take time to download. The bigger the graphics, the slower the load time. The greater the file size of the graphics, the slower the load time. The greater the number of graphics, the slower the load time. If a site is too slow to load? Users leave. Every single image can add weight to that fine balance between a user's willingness to wait and their inherent impatience. Is that photograph or illustration worth it?
- **Accessibility.** Images need to be properly marked up in order to be accessible to those with disabilities or using assistive technology. Even if they technically have the correct markup, they don't always convey the same information that someone who can see might get. This is another reason to carefully consider the worth of a graphic. If it needs to provide important information, will everyone receive it equally?
- **Credibility.** I have often said that if a library has a carousel, I can quickly tell which libraries have someone with graphic design savvy on staff and which don't. If a library's graphics are cluttered, are poorly laid out, or have insufficient contrast, that's a large blemish on the professionalism of the institution. Carousels take up a great deal of home page real estate and should put the library's best (visual) foot forward.
- **Data plans.** These days more than half of your library's website visitors are coming via a mobile device. Unlimited data plans are still quite expensive and not the norm. This means that every time a mobile user has to download an image, it is literally costing them money in the sense that it deducts from their existing data balance. Before you plop that cutesy graphic up on the site, ask yourself: Would *you* pay to see that image? If the answer is no, don't use it.

There's little question that illustrations and photographs, if well thought out, can add interest to text content. Evaluation of the worth of each graphic, however, is a critical step in keeping your library's site streamlined and usable.

Notes

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4. Shawn Lawton Henry, ed., "Introduction to Web Accessibility," World Wide Web Consortium, last modified October 6, 2021, https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro.

5. "Disability Impacts All of Us," National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed September 16, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html.
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7. Nick Babich, "The 4 Golden Rules of UI Design," October 7, 2019, XD Ideas, Adobe, https://xd.adobe.com/ideas/process/ui-design/4-golden-rules-ui-design/.