

Creating an Effective Online Presence

Nobody Is Reading Your Stuff

Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short.

—Henry David Thoreau

All too often, when I look at a library’s website, what I see resembles the following:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Praesent nisl odio, suscipit quis imperdiet et, dignissim ut augue. Sed adipiscing rutrum porta. Ut a erat sit amet nisl posuere tincidunt. Nam eu nulla arcu, vitae congue enim. In lacinia mollis hendrerit. Nullam urna turpis, iaculis ut iaculis aliquam, congue in lacus. Etiam varius facilisis erat sit amet euismod. Morbi id gravida ipsum. Integer posuere felis sit amet lorem bibendum nec ornare ipsum tempor.

Got that? Me neither. And it wasn’t just because it was written in fake Lorem Ipsum Latin.

If you’re like the typical online visitor, your eyes simply glazed over because you were presented with a huge chunk of text. Jakob Nielsen, long considered the godfather of web usability, found that people read, at most, 28 percent of a web page.¹ Now, that says “web page,” not “web item.” So if your library’s home page has other stuff on it besides that hunk of indigestible text, you’re in trouble, because nobody is reading your verbiage, and now they’re not looking at most of the other content there, either.

Nielsen also found, in that same study, that people read the entire page only if it is twenty-five words or less.² Knowing that, you might simply throw up your

hands and say, “We’re up a creek. We can’t possibly narrow our entire front page down to twenty-five words!” Well, yes, you’re right. You probably can’t.

Think about the last time you read an entire web page, from top to bottom. What’s that? You can’t remember? Chances are, you may never have read an entire page on the web. Nielsen found, as far back as 1997, that people scan the web, they don’t actually read.³ What are we scanning for? That’s easy—we’re looking for things that stand out or are relevant to us, individually. As libraries writing for the public, we can’t always predict what keywords will attract an individual—but we sure can make what we post online easier to digest. Here’s some help:

Think of writing for the web like serving a pizza. You probably wouldn’t serve someone an entire pizza, unsliced. It’s too much to manage at one time. Nobody shoves an entire, uncut pizza pie into their mouth. Usually, we slice up a pizza. Even then, slices are too big for our mouths to handle; we are forced to take small bites before we can chew and swallow. Your writing needs to be like that: small, digestible bits.

Bullet points and headers are your friends. Break that text up into just the highlights, and assign each highlight a bullet point or a header. People are inherently attracted to bullet points—they’re like flashing Christmas lights. People also are more likely to read a small bit of text that is just a (very) short summary.

Live by Krug’s Third Law of Usability: “Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what’s left.”⁴ Yes, you read that correctly. If you are editing properly, you should be left with only 25 percent of your original content.

Narrow down what you write to the absolute essentials. Writing well for the web usually means

putting your ego in a drawer. No matter what you do, people aren't going to read most of what you write. Write anyway.

Where's the Payoff? Writing So People Give a Damn

Selling is not something you do to someone, it's something you do for someone.

—Zig Ziglar

I was once asked what advice I would give someone just starting out in public speaking. Would joining Toastmasters help? Speaking in front of a mirror? I'm still not sure what the best advice would have been, but I explained how I came to be comfortable with presenting. In my first career, I was an environmental/outdoor education teacher. My job was to keep inner city kids interested in things like the life cycles of frogs and the dietary habits of turkey vultures,* possibly while it was cold, pouring, and the kids had no expensive REI raincoats. One learned very fast to make these topics interesting, or (1) the final evaluations from the visiting parents and teachers would rip one to shreds, and (2) the kids would probably beat them to it out of sheer boredom.**

However, “interesting” is a tricky word and can mean something different from one person to the next. I discovered quickly that I needed to replace it with the word “relevant.” It was my job to make my classes relevant to those kids, to the point where they not only weren't bored but could make personal connections to the information I was providing. Without those connections, the information would almost assuredly go in one ear and out the other. In other words, it was my professional responsibility to give them a reason to care.

Let's bring this back around to libraries. Of course, we're concerned about our own relevance in this digital era. But I think we get overly focused on this worry and can lose sight of the fact that we, too, have a professional responsibility to give people a reason to care. Sure, right now many libraries are seeing large increases in usage. The sagging economy has suddenly propelled us to relevancy in the eyes of people who are trimming budgets. However, I want to bring this down to a more micro-level approach: think about individual services you provide in your library and how they are promoted.

Remember, my job wasn't to make every kid that came through our program want to join the Sierra

Club or Greenpeace: it was to connect them personally to the environment as a whole through connections to smaller, digestible parts. Libraries could be doing the same thing. For every service, collection, or event your library wants to promote, ask the question, “What does this mean to me, Library?” In this instance, “me” is the average patron who has way too many demands on their time, is desperately seeking a job, trying to sell their house, finish a degree . . . you get the idea. What will the average “I don't have time” person gain from this? Will this story time expose my child to literacy activities that will help them in school? Will my cover letters stand out? Could my house sell faster or for more money? Will I do better on final exams?

At the most basic level, every patron is asking, knowingly or not, “What's in this for me?” If you can successfully answer that question for them, you have made that personal connection. Personal connections can result in more broad-based support.

So, think a bit differently. Every time you interact with a patron, are you connecting them to something that's truly relevant to them or just pushing something the library hopes people will come to or do?

Just telling people about your library's stuff isn't enough. Benefits sell. People need to know, plainly, what the payoff is going to be for them. If the payoff isn't clear, you're doing it wrong.

Want a Better Presence Online? Get Over Yourself

Big egos are big shields for lots of empty space.

—Diana Black

I was once asked to come up with a session for new library directors about how to improve a library's online presence. At first, a lot of disparate things tumbled through my mind: usability, accessibility, engagement, and all sorts of other related buzzwords. Any one of these things could certainly rate an hour of discussion, but I wanted to narrow it down to something that was meaningful and could be conveyed in a short amount of time. After some thought, I realized that there is really only one underlying concept that makes any of these things effective. Without doing this one thing, it won't matter what kind of fancy-schmancy website a library has.

Get over yourself.

An effective online presence really comes down to *not* putting one's ego first. That could be the collective

* Turkey vultures are very cool birds. Most predators won't mess with them because one of their primary methods of defense is voluntary regurgitation; yes, that's right—they throw up on their enemies. And remember what turkey vultures eat. Carrion. Fun times. (And of immense interest to kids, of course.)

** I actually LOVED this job.

ego of the library as an institution, the ego of the director, the ego of the board of trustees, or the ego of that territorial librarian who controls the library's online content with an iron fist. As soon as any person or entity's ego overrides the need of the online patron, the library loses.

Think about the following scenarios and who they actually aim to please:

- a full list of the board of trustees, the mission statement, or both as a permanent fixture on the front page
- a site that posts only program and event announcements
- links to the staff intranet on the library's website
- online content arranged specifically for the convenience of the library staff

I've seen each of these scenarios multiple times, and the one thing they all have in common is that the library prioritized the needs of itself over those of its users. Many libraries do only what's easy or comfortable for them online. Sometimes there are logistical reasons for this, but mostly there aren't.

I encourage you to take a long, hard look at what your library does online. Are you really doing it for the patrons or to please someone or something internally? A library does good work online when it realizes that the people doing the reading of the content matter more than the people doing the creation of it.

Notes

1. Jakob Nielsen, "How Little Do Users Read?" Nielsen Norman Group, May 5, 2008, <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/how-little-do-users-read/>.
2. Nielsen, "How Little Do Users Read?"
3. Jakob Nielsen, "Why Web Users Scan Instead of Reading," Nielsen Norman Group, September 30, 1997, <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/why-web-users-scan-instead-reading/>.
4. Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* (Indianapolis, IN: New Riders, 2000), quoted in Aakarshna Anand, "Here's the Most Important Skill You Need to Fix Usability," UX Collective, February 23, 2019, <https://uxdesign.cc/heres-the-most-important-skill-you-need-to-fix-usability-43abe5fd1dea>.