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THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT LIBRARY WEBSITES

BEYOND YOUR PRECONCEPTIONS

Laura Solomon

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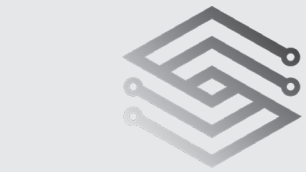

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About the Author

Laura Solomon is the library services manager for the Ohio Public Library Information Network (https://oplin.ohio.gov/) and a W3C-certified front-end web developer. She has been doing web development and design for more than twenty years, both in public libraries and as an independent consultant. She specializes in developing with Drupal (https://www.drupal.org/). She is a 2010 *Library Journal* Mover and Shaker (https://www.libraryjournal.com/section/movers). She's written three books (https://www.meanlaura.com/books) about social media and content marketing, specifically for libraries, and speaks nationally on both these and technology-related topics. As a former children's librarian, she enjoys bringing the fun of technology to audiences and giving libraries the tools they need to better serve the virtual customer.

Abstract

In this issue of *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 58, no. 3), we'll look at the common preconceptions of library websites and web design and work toward understanding what makes a useful, relevant library website that is user-friendly.

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Chapter 1

Overcoming Preconceptions of the Perfect Library Website

Anecdotes versus Research

There's No Such Thing as a Perfect Website

Strive for continuous improvement, instead of perfection.

—Kim Collins

Perhaps the most common question I get from webinar attendees is, "Can you recommend a website that we should try to emulate?" This makes sense: I've probably spent an hour going on about library website dos and don'ts, so that logically raises the question "Do you have an example of the perfect library website?" Not only is this the most common question I get, it's also the hardest one for me to answer. Here's why:

- **I've never seen a site that is, in its entirety, "perfect." And I bet you haven't, either.** Aside from the fact that some factors can be subjective, I tend to assess individual elements on their own merits. The navigation may be excellent, but the listings of upcoming events may have potential usability issues. The search function may be terrible, but the footer is well organized. When I talk to clients, I've noticed that they tend to evaluate sites in the same way. They'll look at my portfolio and tell me they like one thing from Site A and another from Site B. Some will tell me they specifically despise that thing from Site C and can't understand why anyone would have done what Site C did. Even though it's unconscious, many of us parse sites apart into their component parts when forming our opinions.
- **The needs of one library do not necessarily completely overlap the needs of another.** Especially if you're comparing, say, the needs of a large metro system with those serving a small rural community. While that cool feature you saw on the big city website might be nifty, it may not solve any problems for rural patrons. Even libraries of similar size may have needs for specific functions.
- **Even if a library needs it, it may not be able to *maintain* it.** When it comes to website features, library staff tend to have eyes bigger than their stomachs, so to speak. They load up their sites with extra functions and features, not calculating the cost in staff time those things might require. Countless newsletters, blogs, and photo albums, just as examples, have languished after installation: they seemed like a great idea during the build process, but staff didn't have time to keep them up.
- **Politics play a bigger part than most people suspect.** There's a significant amount of internal politics that can become part of the web design process. Perhaps it's the involvement of the library's board, preferences of the library administrators, or territorial behavior by various staff members. While many of these battles are fought behind the scenes, they do impact a designer's work and the progress of a library's site. It's not unusual for libraries to tell me that they want things that are terrible ideas, simply because "the director said so." Despite my best efforts to convince them otherwise, the director's choice may still stand. To this day, there are some sites I've done that I don't show to anyone because the internal politics of the library made them into hodgepodges of bad practice.

When we look at a library website, there are a multitude of decisions that likely went into its creation, and it's not always easy to discern why or how

those decisions were made. While many parts of web design are *not* subjective (and a good number of those will be covered in this book), "perfect" can still be very subjective in the eyes of the library staff members who are emotionally invested in their website.

Website Work Begins with Education

Though art may be subjective, Web design is not. In Web design, there is a right way and a wrong way to approach layout, navigation, copy, white space, and other critical website components.

—Andrew Follett

A lot of my job comes down to education.

Sure, I spend a good chunk of my time designing websites and writing code. A lot of that work wouldn't happen, though, without me paving the way with information. This is a little-known truth for most web designers: educating the client is often one of the first—and most important—steps of the design process.

Back in the early days of the web, a lot of design work happened in a vacuum, lacking real guidelines and data. Fortunately, the medium has matured, and rules can now be objectively applied. The maturity of data and existence of standards are often news to many clients whom web designers and developers work with. I've heard web myths spouted by library clients often, including the following:

- "Nothing should be more than three clicks from the home page." *(Not true.)*
- "Carousels are awesome!" *(Spoiler alert: Au contraire, they're often bad for users.)*
- "We know what our users think/how they use our website." *(Statements like this are almost always based only on staff anecdotes.)*
- "We need graphics to jazz up the website." *(Don't even get me started on the problems in this one.)*

If the idea is circa 1999, I've probably heard it touted as gospel more than once in the recent past.

Why do these myths continue to be perpetuated in libraries? Perhaps because so many of us grew up alongside the web. We were initiated in the very early days when it was truly a Wild West–type environment. Not everyone realizes that those days are long gone and there are real sheriffs in town.

Another reason? Some truths are hard. The fact that carousels actively turn off users doesn't jibe with the love affair many libraries have with them. The fact that users often don't need or even like graphics takes much of the fun out of web work. Mythology persists, even in an industry devoted to the dissemination of information, because it can be hard to give up what's comfortable.

Yet another cause: libraries spend a lot of time looking at the websites of *other* libraries. Just because XYZ Library did it doesn't make it right. That library may be operating under the same outdated or mythologically based assumptions you are. If you want to know what really works, look at sites in industries that live or die by whether people buy their services or products online or rely heavily on online donors. Those companies and organizations depend on the science of usability and often have invested a large amount of funds to make sure that users have a frictionless experience.

My hope is that, by the time I eventually retire, whoever comes after me has to do a lot less myth busting in libraries. In the meantime, let's all be information professionals: let's put aside our outdated views and our own convenience to create better websites for users.

Modern Web Building Is Far Beyond That Bit of HTML You Learned in Grad School

Pretending to know everything closes the door to finding out what's really there.

—Neil deGrasse Tyson

It is far from unusual for me to hear something like this, when someone is introduced to their library's website: "Oh, I know how to program in HTML. I'm sure I'll have no trouble." To be brutally honest, I cringe any time I hear this, for a whole host of different reasons. Let me try to sum them up, in no particular order:

- Just the fact that the person used the word "programming" tells me they weren't paying attention somewhere, because HTML is definitely *not* a programming language. It's a markup language. Java, C++, Perl? All programming languages. If the person doesn't know the difference, that sets off big alarm bells in my head. What else don't they know that they probably should?
- These days, my work is that of a front-end web developer for a state agency. The last real programming I did was to write a library registration program from scratch in Perl (this was before the advent of commercial systems). Now I do scripting, which is typically done in either PHP or JavaScript. Both are far more complex than HTML, but still not programming.
- Leaving the problematic word "programming" aside, it's likely that what they learned was HTML 4.x, which is now deprecated. And the differences between 4.x and the current version, 5.x, are not small ones. This puts me, as someone who focuses

on current best practices, in the difficult position of trying to verify just what the person knows. Most don't even realize HTML has version numbers or which version they learned.

- Lastly, there's the piece of this that requires me to explain to them that they're working with a content management system (CMS) as their new website. This means that users put in content without needing to know anything technical. In other words, no HTML required. This usually results in the staff person, who had been hoping to show off their alleged prowess, inevitably being disappointed (although the rest of the staff are likely thrilled, and being easy for the layperson is one of the main benefits of a CMS).

Another variant I'll hear sometimes is along the lines of "Oh, our library is going to build our own site from scratch," which is then often followed with the same line of "I know HTML." This one also makes me cringe. Sure, they might be able to maybe build something brochure-like with only HTML. Even if they are familiar with CSS, that's not going to be enough to make a modern website. Here are two reasons why:

1. **Websites are now almost exclusively database-driven.** That means that all of the data is stored in a database (e.g., MySQL, PostgreSQL). Then scripting in the code of the website pulls that data as needed.
2. **A lot more must be considered now, beyond just the structural code** (which is all the HTML is). Is the site optimized for speed? Does it display cleanly across different browsers and devices? Is it accessible? Is it secure from attacks like SQL injections? Back in the 1990s, HTML was enough. It hasn't been enough since at least the early 2000s.

Most of this could be interpreted as "Laura is pretty grumpy and fussing over semantics." To be fair, that probably isn't wrong. However, my point goes further than just those judgments.

One of the luxuries that I have, doing web work for not-for-profit agencies *as* a not-for-profit agency, is being able to educate clients without dancing around any proverbial bushes. To me, clients being able to understand what's involved in modern web development helps them to manage expectations about cost, timelines, and maintenance. An educated client is far better to work with, and most libraries seem to appreciate my candid approach, which differs wildly from that of a for-profit web shop operation. I'm not obligated to upsell, for instance. There is no profit, and I get no commission.

There's nothing wrong with you knowing something about HTML, but that entails a responsibility to understand its limitations. If you're paying someone to build a site for your library, you're also paying for their expertise and knowledge. Become an educated client.

When It Comes to the Website, Are You Like a Climate Change Denier?

Without data, you're just another person with an opinion.

—W. Edwards Deming

One of the least comfortable parts of my job as a web developer/designer is to convince library clients that certain things they want are not actually in their best interests. People often have elements in mind that they think "look cool," but those features or functions may not have anything to do with making the site easier for the library's patrons. Carousels come to mind: they may "look cool," but they are well-known obstructions when it comes to site usability. Heck, they're even part of a UX (user experience) drinking game.[1] It has gotten to the point where I now dutifully tell people why they're a bad idea; then, having done my due diligence, I go build sites with them anyway. Why? Because I'm *tired*, that's why. We'll take a closer look at why to avoid carousels in chapter 5.

Many functions of a library's site become territorial or political footballs. So-and-so doesn't want to make their colleague mad by taking something away or changing it. Carousels make it so *everybody* gets to have their "stuff" on the home page, visitors' convenience be damned. A singular patron didn't like it when the link to the catalog moved, so, good heavens, don't move *that*.

Carousels are not the only issue where this kind of denial comes up, but this issue is perhaps one of the most egregious in my work. As information professionals, we should seek out studies and evidence on user experience and web design in favor of our own preferences or anecdotes. If we ignore the scientific studies, it's like denying the reality of climate change despite all growing evidence to the contrary—because it is an inconvenient truth.

These types of battles are ongoing in libraries (and other fields, I suspect). Too many are likely stuck in the mindset of the very early days of the web, when there were no established concrete rules and web professionals were literally guessing how users would behave around certain types of elements or layouts. Whether you want your site to have a carousel or not is irrelevant; the web design and user experience fields are now based on science—there's not a whole lot of subjective stuff under the hood anymore. Professionals have been studying human behavior online now for the better part of two decades.

Change is hard, but I've watched it happen in libraries. We've made ourselves relevant in the internet age when many predicted people would stop coming and we would slowly die out. Even suggesting libraries are irrelevant anymore gets you roasted on social media. We've adapted and evolved. Why, then, is accepting and applying behavioral data with web design so difficult for us?

The Plural of Anecdote Is NOT Data

Anecdotal evidence leads us to conclusions that we wish to be true, not conclusions that actually are true.

—Barry Beyerstein

Several years ago, I tweeted:

> How many times have you heard "But the patrons want . . ." with no real data to back it up? #libux

The response to that, both online and off, was very interesting. It was liked and retweeted a bit, but it also instigated some discussion on Twitter.

> **Responder A:** "In my exp the squeaky wheels get the grease. Policy & design decisions have been reversed based on a single patron's comment."
>
> **Responder B:** "in my experience many senior staff have selective hearing and only hear some squeaks."
>
> **Responder A:** "Heh. At my last POW the approach seemed to be to listen to *everyone* & then do what they asked for where poss."
>
> **Responder A:** "I suspect this was partly due to receiving patron feedback so infrequently—we really took it to ♥ when it came."
>
> **ME:** "The problem, of course, is that anecdotes are not the plural of data."
>
> **Responder B**: "nice approach but eventually you end up with opposite requests. That's what libs don't deal with well."
>
> **Responder C**: "lots of squeaks sounds like the perfect time to go get some data."
>
> **Responder B:** "otoh if you wait for 'data' before changing things you'll never experiment."
>
> **Responder C:** "there's still value in checking whether something is an issue for a small group or a large one."
>
> **Responder B:** "yes but I've seen 'no data' used as a conservative roadblock to change."
>
> **Responder D:** "anecdotes are certainly used as a roadblock to change."
>
> **Responder A:** "By some weird coincidence I was faced w/ this today. Training staff in new ILS & being given anecdotes as 'proof' that the new system was no good/couldn't support their workflows. It was bullshit, & just used as an excuse to reject change. Change that is coming no matter how much they drag their heels. I am still steaming."

I'm a tech. I like having numbers (although I will be the first to tell you that I am very bad at making them do things mathematically). I always cringe when someone tells me, "But the patrons want . . ." How do they *know* this? Did they do a survey? Is that what their web metrics show? Can they quote a study?

Storytelling is, without question, a powerful tool when used in conjunction with the conveying of information. When you can tell a story with your statistics, it becomes a very clear picture. But stories, alone, are just that . . . stories.

I don't think anecdotes should be discarded entirely; rather, they need to serve as a jumping-off point for further research. Consider the story to be the hypothesis behind your next survey or deep dive into metrics. Can you prove it true or false? The story itself cannot reasonably be the data.

Note

1. Patrick Neeman, "UX Drinking Game: If Someone Says Carousel, Drink," http://www.uxdrinkinggame.com/drink/if-someone-says-carousel-drink/.

Chapter 2

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

* 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.

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.

* 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

* 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.

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

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Chapter 4

Easily Implementable Changes to Improve Your Website

Make Your Links and Buttons More Effective

Efficiency is doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right things.

—Peter Drucker

Before we can talk about links or buttons, we've got to cover an important concept in online marketing. It's called the CTA ("call to action"). Douglas Karr, writing for Martech, defines CTA: "A call to action is typically as a region of the screen that drives the reader to click-through to engage further with a brand."[1]

Whenever you ask someone to subscribe to your library's newsletter, register for a program, or get further information, those are examples of CTAs. They're very common online, but very few libraries have truly mastered how to make these attractive to readers. "Getting people to perform a click of a mouse button—or any desired action—however, is never easy. It takes careful planning and strategizing to get people to heed your CTA, let alone act on it."[2] It's simply easier for people to ignore what you'd like them to do than to, you know, actually *do* it.

Let's talk about two (2) easy fixes that you can make right now.

Stop with the Dated and Vague Link Text

Which of these is better, and why?

1. "Click here for more bestsellers."
2. "See the latest *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list."

Did you pick choice 2? You win! This does two things far better than choice 1. Firstly, it ditches the horrendous "Click here" phrase, which has long been shunned by both marketers and usability experts alike. Users know how to click a link. Using that verbiage is a throwback to the very early days of the internet when people literally didn't look for hyperlinks or know what to do with them. So, that's redundant, useless, and annoying. Secondly, people now *do* look for links. In fact, they scan text specifically for them. This means that when someone finds a link, they want to know right away what they'll get if and when they click it. Specificity really does matter here. The first example does not explain what anyone really gets. It's a vague promise of "more bestsellers." Bestsellers determined by whom? What kind?

The argument against choice 2 is usually along the lines of "That's too long!" Yes, it's long. That's OK. The goal is to get people's interest, and you can't do that if your CTA is lame.

Place It Properly

There are generally two recommended places to put CTAs. And to be blunt, those guidelines are a little wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey, because it can depend a good deal on the design of the thing containing the CTA. However, for the most part, they go either

- above the fold or
- below the post.

If you're a web designer or developer, the first recommendation is going to make you cringe. There is no more "fold." But the idea still applies. Put the CTA toward the top of the page or post so that people will be more likely to see it as the content is downloading.

However, putting it at the end of the post can have more advantages. Because people have to engage with

the content (e.g., scroll) to get to it, the chances are actually higher that people will actually click the CTA when they encounter it, says Benitez.[3]

On library websites, we want visitors to do things all the time. We want them to reserve materials, register for programs, and learn new things. How we ask them to do these things can make a big difference in whether they're actually accomplished.

Got Pictures? You're Missing a Step

You gotta climb the steps—you can't skip them.

—Zig Ziglar

Most library staff I work with understand that when you take an image off a digital camera, it's huge. It's easy to *see* that it's huge; often, the photo may take up more space than the physical size of your monitor. So most library staff understand that those digital images must be resized to fit on their libraries' websites. However, many nontechs don't always know that you need to also *optimize* those images. What does this mean?

Optimizing an image means not just making it visually smaller, but also taking out useless pixels that can't be seen by the human eye. This results in the image downloading significantly faster—a boon, not just for the inevitable mobile users, but even for the ones using a desktop or laptop on a broadband connection. According to Google, more than half of visitors will abandon a site if it takes more than three seconds to load.[4] It's in your library's best interests to get images as small as possible—not just visually, but the file size needs to be dropped as well.

Many professional graphics programs have some kind of native optimization tool, but for most casual use, I recommend an online tool called Web Photo Resizer. It's free, and you don't even have to register to use it. You just upload your image (it can be up to 5 MB), then let it do the work. It shows you the original and the new, optimized image; usually, you won't be able to even notice a difference. You just download the new one and you're done.

Web Photo Resizer
http://webresizer.com

Getting all of the images on your website optimized might be tedious, but it's very, very important. Users have limited tolerance for slow sites. In addition, the larger the file size of an image, the more of a mobile user's data plan it will use. Costing library patrons literal time and money is not a good strategy for happy users.

Level Up Your Website with This One Little Thing

Sometimes a little thing gives happiness to someone. So never stop doing little things.

—Anurag Prakash Ray

Several years ago, my workplace did a study to determine the state of various issues on public library websites in Ohio. One of the numbers that was concerning was the widespread lack of a favicon. Over 45 percent of the 171 libraries evaluated didn't have one.

If you're unfamiliar with it, the term is simply a mashup of the word "favorite" and the word "icon." It's the little icon that sits to the left of the page title in the page tab in most browsers. It also shows up as the little symbol for a page in your bookmarks or favorites list. When you're a tab junkie (let's not talk about how many tabs I might have open at a time because I probably need professional help), those little favicons are a lifesaver. Sometimes, one can't tell one tab from another without those because there's simply no room for the full-page title. Or, if you're scrolling through a very long list of bookmarks, that little icon can make finding a particular link much easier. In short, it's a user experience issue when a site doesn't have one.

Favicons don't just make for a more usable site. If your site doesn't have a custom favicon (or, worse, shows the default content management system one), that's a branding opportunity being missed. More importantly, it shows an unfinished, less professional website.

There are basically two steps for getting a favicon for your site:

1. Create the actual favicon.
2. Put the appropriate HTML tag into the `<head>` of your website.

Creating a Favicon

Favicons have to be in a specific format: .ico. Not all graphics programs can export in this format, but never fear: there are tools like Favic-O-Matic that can take your image (generally GIF, JPG, or PNG) and convert it to the .ico format. Note that your original image should generally already be 32×32 pixels before you start using a favicon export tool.

Favic-O-Matic
https://favicomatic.com

If your library's logo is too complex to fit clearly into a 32×32 block, try using just a recognizable part

of it. If that's still an issue, it might be time to get a new logo. For guidelines about what makes a good logo these days, try my three-part series on library logos, "Why Your Library's Logo Might Be Terrible."

Why Your Library's Logo Might Be Terrible
https://meanlaura.com/why-your-librarys-logo-might-be-terrible-understanding-what-a-logo-does/

Using the HTML Tag

Once you have your .ico file, the next step is to put an HTML tag into the `<head>` of your website. If your library uses a CMS, there are generally specific ways to insert tags into the site header (sorry, you'll need to do some googling for your particular CMS). Regardless, the syntax for the tag generally is

```
<link rel="shortcut icon"
href="YOUR _ PATH _ TO _ FAVICON"
type="image/x-icon">
```

So, YOUR_PATH_TO_FAVICON might be something like:

"`https://mylibrary.org/files/favicon.ico`" (or, better, make it a relative URL, and use just "`/files/favicon.ico`")

Favicons are important both to the user's experience and to your library's credibility. It doesn't take a huge effort to add one and has a well-worth-it payoff.

Make Search Less Painful for Your Users

I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.

—Maya Angelou

If your library's website doesn't have a search field at all, this section isn't for you. (Your site has much bigger issues to contend with, but feel free to use this section to guide the creation of a search function. Go get one . . . NOW.)

However, if your website does have a search feature, chances are that you still aren't off the hook. As user behavior has evolved, so have best practices for search features, and many libraries have not kept up with the data.

Where I work, we've been progressively implementing more usable searches for our clients' websites as new information becomes available. I thought I'd share our changes so you may use them as a guide for cleaning up your own problems.

- **We've gotten rid of placeholder text.** If you're not sure what placeholder text is, it's simply any text already seen in the field before the user types any input. Originally, we thought it would be helpful to have a clue as to what to put in the search field. Turns out, it's a bad idea. It causes more confusion for users, especially those with some types of disabilities.[5] Buh-bye, placeholder text.
- **We've gotten rid of the jargon.** We've long encouraged our clients to avoid terms like "links" in their sites' navigation. However, we didn't apply this logic to search options. We provide a federated search for statewide research databases, called the Ohio Web Library. That option is one of the search choices we provide to our website clients. And that's what we called the option to search it: "Ohio Web Library." Nobody really knew what that was. We did provide a small link nearby, labeled "What is this?" Looking back, expecting people to click this was probably nuts. We've changed the search choice to "Magazines & Journals."
- **We've placed it right.** On sites where the search box was not already in the top right of the header, we're (slowly) getting them moved. That location is pretty much already a standard web convention, and we don't want to make people search for search.

Those are the changes we're making. However, in my scoping out of many other library websites, I found a couple of other common problems that we didn't have, including these:

- **Searching only the catalog.** Yes, the catalog gets searched the most. But don't hobble your users; give them an option to also search the regular website as well.
- **Multiple search boxes.** Talk about cognitive load! When there is more than one search box (such as one for the catalog and one for the site), users must spend time thinking about which they want. And making users think is bad. Having two search boxes has long been viewed as poor practice. Easier to implement than just one, yes. But this isn't about you; it's about the user.

Many library staff aren't aware that there are usability-related best practices for a search feature. This list of dos and don'ts can serve as a handy resource for getting it right.

Notes

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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.

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Chapter 6

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.

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