Nerd thrill your users:

Collaborating with liaisons to create an appealing gateway to digital collections

Authors

R. Niccole Westbrook Digital Services, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, Texas, USA

Valerie Prilop Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, Texas, USA

Elizabeth M. German Web Services, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, Texas, USA

Introduction

The case study presented in this paper describes a project that grew from two distinct needs. First, reference librarians at the University of Houston Libraries (UH Libraries, web site http://info.lib.uh.edu) needed a way to quickly access primary source materials published online in the UH Digital Library (UHDL, http://digital.lib.uh.edu), a tool organized by collection name rather than subject. For reference librarians unfamiliar with each collection published in the UHDL, locating materials related to subject areas they represented was a time consuming and frustrating process. Thus, reference librarians were not well positioned to encourage students and faculty to use the UHDL. The second need was related directly to the first. Librarians who were responsible for creating, maintaining and marketing the UHDL recognized reference librarians as a key stakeholder group, one that was not fully engaged in driving, marketing and using digital collections. Reference librarians were perceived to be a direct link to potential digital collection users. Therefore, negative perceptions of the UHDL held by reference librarians prevented dissemination of new and existing collections to potential users and hindered widespread adoption of the service.

In response to these issues, digital librarians consulted reference librarians and initiated a web project designed to create an appealing gateway to digital collections for both reference librarians and end users. The gateway was titled "Image Café" (http://lws.lib.uh.edu/image-cafe/) and offered users a taste of the materials available in the UHDL in an interface and format that was simple to navigate and encouraged reuse of the materials, specifically in presentations. The goal was to give users enough nerd thrill – the rush felt when easily locating and acquiring just the right image for a paper or presentation, for instance – to entice them to explore the UHDL when preparing current and future projects. Therefore, throughout the Image Café links direct users to the full digital library. Because the Image Café was intended to be a rapidly developed solution with a finite scope, a survey of best practices at other institutions was not conducted. Instead, the project prioritized experimentation with digital collection interfaces and innovative presentation of curated image collections. This case study explores the Image Café project in detail and includes project background, summary and results–both in terms of user and stakeholder engagement.

Founded in 1927, the University of Houston (UH, web site, www.uh.edu) is the leading public research university in Houston. Enrollment is approximately 40,000 students in more than 300 undergraduate and graduate academic programs, on campus and online. Reflecting the multicultural community of metropolitan Houston, UH is one of the most ethnically diverse research university campuses in the nation. The UH Libraries is an academic library system of the University of Houston serving students, faculty, staff and the general public. The MD Anderson Library – where the Image Café project was conducted – is the main campus library at the University of Houston. The UH Libraries are a member of the Association of Research Libraries, the Greater Western Library Alliance, and the Texas Digital Library. The Libraries hold over 2.1 million volumes. Total staff includes 48 professionals and approximately 110 support staff.

Project background

The goal of the UHDL was to make primary source materials available online in support of scholarship and student success. From its inception, reference librarian promotion and marketing of the service was identified as key to its direct dissemination to students and faculty. Therefore, reference librarians were initially targeted when the tool was rolled out. An event was held to increase reference librarian facility with the UHDL system searching and navigation and boost their familiarity with the handful of collections that were published at that time. The Digital Services department promoted the UHDL to reference librarians as a repository of images for use in research and the classroom. Reference librarians were encouraged to promote the tool to faculty and students and to offer instruction on how to navigate and locate primary source materials using this tool

Such preliminary outreach efforts were inhibited by several factors. First, search functionality in CONTENTdm was complex and unlike many other databases with RSR 40,3 470 Downloaded by Texas A&M University At 13:34 08 December 2016 (PT) which reference librarians were familiar. As a result, reference librarians perceived that searching effectively within digital collections would be time consuming to learn and challenging to teach, especially at the undergraduate level. Second, at the time of writing, the UHDL contained more than 30,000 items and the main entry-point to the digital collections was organized alphabetically by digital collection title. In order to access digitized items from the UHDL homepage, users (including reference librarians) had to scroll through an alphabetized list that contained collection titles and one thumbnail for each collection (Figure 1).
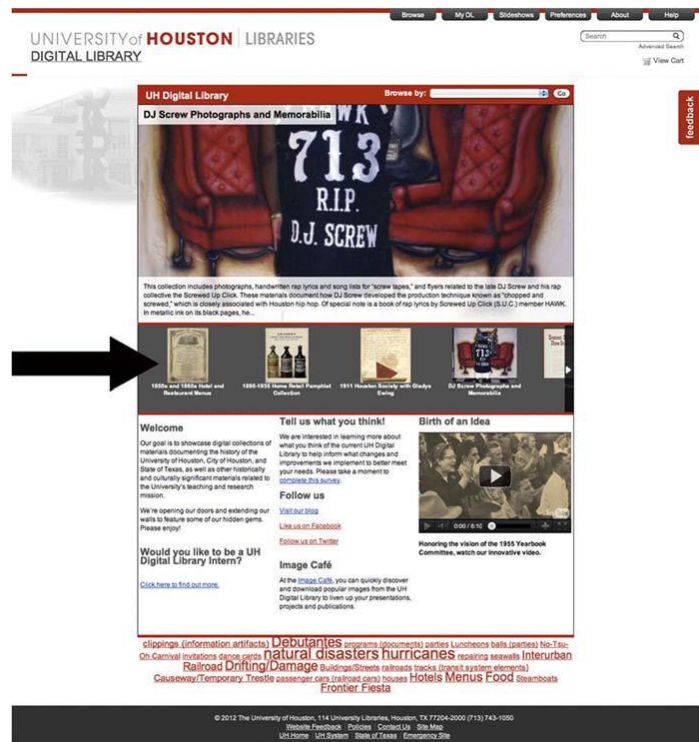

Figure 1

Some digital collection titles hint at the subject matter of materials contained within, for instance "1890-1935 Home Retail Pamphlet Collection." Others might be focused on donor or subject proper names that do not contain subject information. The collection title "Theodor de Bry's America" does not explicitly indicate to users that these materials have to do with the Spanish explorers, the New World, Christopher Columbus or Native Americans. Finally, initial collection offerings were limited in scope and were only relevant to a small segment of the reference team, primarily humanities librarians. Reference librarians working in the sciences, for instance, perceived that the UHDL was a humanities only tool and as collections grew to include more materials. This perception was difficult to change.

Eventually, the Digital Services department was able to conduct some effective reference librarian outreach, primarily in the form of a blog (http://uhdigitallibrary. blogspot.com/) and social media presence geared toward public users which many reference librarians chose to follow and share with faculty and students. However, the reference librarians continued to be seen as an under-served stakeholder group within the libraries.

A new approach

The UHDL is a service primarily provided by the Digital Services Department. However, at the UH Libraries the responsibility for providing access to digital materials, broadly defined, falls to a number of departments with different reporting structures. As such, the departments collaboratively decided to form a committee to address such issues as interoperability between systems, marketing of digital materials, usability and user experience. Originally, the committee was comprised of Digital Services, Special Collections, and Web Services representatives. Recently, the committee has been expanded to include members of Bibliographic and Metadata Services and Resource Discovery Systems. This group is known as It's All About Access, or IA3. While the departments had independently discussed the desire to engage reference librarians more fully, one of the first actions of the IA3 group was to pursue marketing of digital collections through greater reference librarian engagement

In August 2011, two representatives of IA3 meet with a sub-group of the Library's reference librarians. This meeting was meant to be an information gathering exercise for IA3 about the reference librarians' perceptions and use of the UHDL, as well as their needs regarding digital collections. The two representatives went to the meeting with four prepared discussion questions:

(1) How can we serve or help you use already published digital collections?
(2) How can we get word out about our collections to your campus departments?
(3) How can we build collections that would serve your specific teaching needs or the needs of your faculty?
(4) How can we get constructive feedback from faculty and students about the existing digital library?

Although prepared with this list of questions, the intent was to allow the conversation to flow organically. The conversation was very fruitful and resulted in a short list of ideas to take back to the full IA3 committee for consideration. Some of these ideas were quite specific, such as a request for the committee to regularly update the reference librarians about new digital collections and ongoing work in the UHDL. This request was enacted almost immediately, with a representative from IA3 presenting an update at the reference librarians' department meeting on a quarterly basis.

Other suggestions were discussed and revised by IA3. One such request was the creation of a subject tag cloud that would serve as an entry point for faculty, students, and reference librarians. This project idea was revised and is now live on the UHDL site as a dropdown menu at the top of the page that allows users to find collections by subject or format of material (Figure 2).
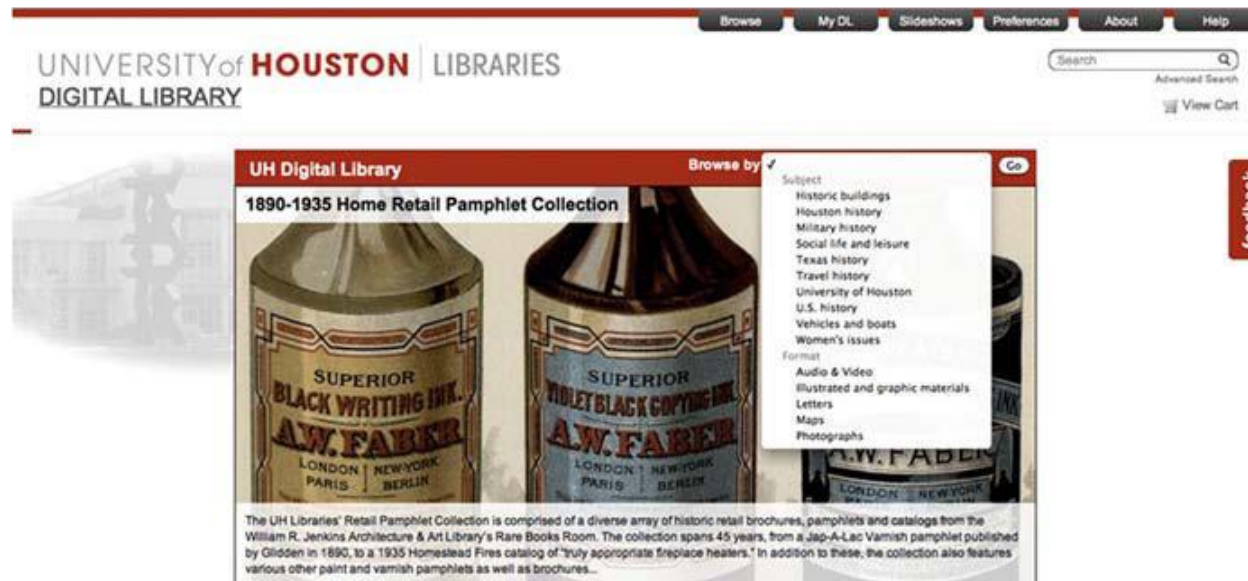

Figure 2

Another suggestion was for a series of handouts covering broad subject areas that would support study in the subject area and point to relevant collections and items in the UHDL. This suggestion was added to a list of future committee considerations.

While each of these suggestions informed decisions made by IA3 and some led to direct action, the project that was developed first and most fully was the Image Café. This project was a direct result of a reference librarian suggestion and the subsequent conversation during the initial meeting. The initial suggestion was to provide a use of the UHDL that would tap into something one reference librarian called "nerd thrill." This idea was that if faculty and students were exposed to items in the UHDL in a way that imposed little on them, they would want to see more because of the thrill of discovering what the library had to offer via just one or two interesting items. This could be done through a gateway that would encourage users to explore the UHDL further and use it for their future needs. The reference librarian suggested that this gateway might be in the form of providing easy-to-access images for use in presentations.

This idea was taken back to the full IA3 committee, who explored the idea of a gateway that would introduce faculty and students to the UHDL and entice them to return. From this the idea for the Image Café, though not yet known by that name, was born. This idea focused on providing direct access to images for presentations, projects, and classroom materials.

A sub-committee was appointed to explore the idea further and come up with a plan of action. The core of this subcommittee was made up of three IA3 members representing Digital Services, Web Services and Special Collections. Additional staff members from Web Services and Digital Services were also asked to assist with the project.

Image Café

After meeting several times, the sub-committee developed a plan for the Image Café. The decision was made to develop a curated collection of visually compelling images from the UHDL organized by common subject themes used in UH student and faculty presentations or projects. The project was designed so that images would be easy to discover and use and would draw users to the UHDL for more similar items. The Image Café would be a simple web site that was easy to navigate, did not require knowledge about individual UHDL collections, allowed for seamless downloading of images, and provided quick access to the UHDL for further exploration.

The first step in the development of the Image Café was to identify the subject themes. The group ultimately settled on 12 thematic topics, drawn from common presentation topics, such as "welcomes and introductions" and "questions and bright ideas", and topics more specifically related to the university and academia, such as "University of Houston" and "at school." The three committee members most familiar with the content of the UHDL, identified three to nine images per topic, to be included in the Image Café.

In the meantime, the two committee members in Web Services worked on the design and programming for the web site that would become the Image Café. The full sub-committee discussed and revised the plan until a simple and clear design was finalized. The sub-committee also considered particular elements of the Image Café, such as how to link to the UHDL, in what formats to offer images, and how to provide downloads. It was decided that direct links would be provided which allow users to download low-resolution images, navigate to the item within the UHDL, and request a high-resolution copy of the images. Users were also provided citation information for each image.

The final project plan was approved by IA3 and development took place in late Fall 2011. Image Café was released in December of that year. The resulting service consisted of a portal from which users could intuitively explore UHDL materials by subject (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The front page contains a slideshow that displays one item from each of the 12 thematic topics and a brief description of the site and what users will find there. Below the slideshow, each of the 12 topics is represented by an icon, which includes the title of each topic. Each icon leads users to a page where they can view the items available for that topic (Figure 4).

At the top of each topic page, there is a large display of items in the topic that changes as users click through the item thumbnails below. Additionally, on each topic page buttons for downloading low-resolution images, navigating to the item within the UHDL and requesting high-resolution versions of the images are clearly displayed. Users also have the option of downloading a zip file that contains all of the images in a particular topic.

On both the homepage and each topic page, users can download UH Libraries branded wallpapers (Figure 5).

The wallpapers page offers a selection of images from the Image Café at two common screen resolutions. Users can also navigate to the topic page for each item from the wallpapers page.

Figure 4

Marketing and outreach of the Image Café began almost immediately via a message sent to the entire UH Libraries community. The link to the Image Café was also added to the library's internal marketing page under "Graphic Tools" and the library's Presentation Skills Research Guide. In January, the Image Café was highlighted by the Faculty Senate as one of the items in their weekly "Top 5" – a curated list of recommended links that is circulated widely across campus. In February, the quarterly IA3 update to the reference librarians included detailed information about the Image Café and how to navigate the site, along with a request that the reference librarians encourage their faculty members and students to use the tool. The project was also publicized via the Libraries social media accounts throughout the spring, with posts on the Libraries Twitter (@uhoustonlib) and Facebook accounts, as
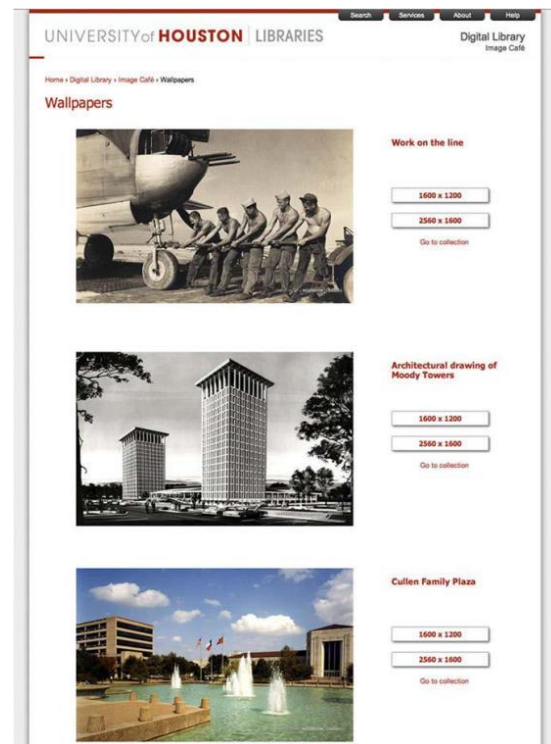

Figure 5

well as on the Digital Services social media presence (twitter, @uhdigital) and Special Collections blog (http://weblogs.lib.uh.edu/speccol/).

Results and future directions

Preliminary usage statistics on the tool itself, along with feedback from the reference librarians, have indicated that the Image Café project was a successful endeavour. While traffic to the Image Café has been relatively modest compared to other UH Libraries tools and services, with almost 500 unique viewers in the first three months it was live. As the tool becomes better known, these numbers are continuing to grow. Additionally, almost 20 percent of visitors to the site are return visitors. Because it is fairly easy to download the content available on Image Café, this number might suggest that users are returning to the site just to browse. Further studies of click analysis support this theory. All of the themed collections show roughly equal usage, with the exception of the University of Houston theme, which shows slightly higher use.

Usage statistics were positively impacted by the Faculty Senate mention of Image Café in their Top 5. For instance, the overall site bounce rate, the percentage of visitors who enter the site and leave immediately rather than viewing sub-pages, was a modest 59 percent. However, traffic to the Image Café that was referred by the Faculty Senate Top 5 showed a significant decrease in bounce rate to only 35 percent. The average pages per visit were similarly impacted with a rate of 2.75 overall and 4.55 for users referred from the Faculty Senate Top 5. When considering future marketing strategies, the project team plans to consider other UH campus listservs.

When the Image Café was announced to reference librarians in the UH Libraries, response to the service was overwhelmingly positive. Reference librarians loved the ease with which they could find and download images. Three months after Image Café went live, representatives from the IA3 project team met with reference librarians to gauge whether the project had its desired effect, encouraging reference librarians to pass along UHDL materials to their students and faculty. Reference librarians reported that members of the team had since shared the new service with their constituents and brainstormed suggestions for further outreach to students and faculty. As with the UHDL itself, user engagement hinges largely on the receptiveness of reference librarians and their enthusiasm for the platform. Image Café has proven to be a successful model for how reference librarians prefer to identify and use digital collections. Perhaps more importantly, the relationship between digital librarians working on the UHDL and reference librarians has evolved. Reference librarians now perceive the UHDL project teams as being receptive to their specific instruction and outreach needs. In addition, reference librarians and other members of the library are increasingly seeing this collection as integrated with other UH Libraries holdings.

Needless to say, the Image Café project did not solve all of the subject entry problems inherent in the UHDL. However, it was an important act of good faith between IA3 and the reference team. Additionally, the Image Café was a fortuitous opportunity to test out subject entry concepts, which are now being explored more fully as part of a comprehensive UHDL redesign currently underway. The improved working relationship between the digital librarians and reference librarians involved in the Image Café project have allowed the UHDL redesign project team to involve reference librarians as stakeholders in this current project.

Conclusion

The Image Café project was an important step toward ongoing engagement of reference librarians and end users in the future of digital collections in the UH Libraries. Often when digital collections are formed, public services representatives are invited to the table only after a system that is not necessarily a strong match for their needs is in place. In this instance, the UH Libraries were able to realign digital services with the stakeholder group in the library with the greatest power to disseminate those tools and services. The Image Café is a visually appealing promotional tool that draws users to UH Libraries materials and has served as a model for understanding how to design interfaces that are relevant and render digital collections more discoverable.