

**ARE YOU ONLY AS GOOD AS YOU LOOK? WHAT IS YOUR WEB SITE
SAYING ABOUT YOU?**

Elizabeth Avery
Western State College
Gunnison, CO 81231 U.S.A.
bavery@western.edu

and

Roger Kelly
MASIC
SUNY– Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794 U.S.A
rkelly@notes.cc.sunysb.edu

ABSTRACT: IAMSLIC library web sites were examined for their content and presentation of information about the library and its services. Recommendations for web page content and design are given.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the library web site is varied. It is the first point of contact of many patrons. It may be your primary public relations tool. It places us in a “fish bowl” where people can look in and say “what a great place” or “yucky, it’s too disorganized and I can’t find what I want” or even “ho hum.”

The design and content of the library web site raise many questions for individual libraries. These issues will change over time (Diaz, 1999). Regardless of the changes in technology, you should start planning your site with some basic questions about the purpose of the site and what it is you want people to know about your library.

Of the 302 IAMSLIC directory listings (as of May 2000), 124 had URLs listed. We examined all the web sites to determine which information and services were being presented. After eliminating duplicates, commercial firms, personal sites and institutional only entries, we were left with 115 URLs. There were twenty-seven inaccurate, bad, outdated or otherwise non-functioning URLs. As a result we examined eighty-eight library web sites.

WHAT ARE YOU TELLING PATRONS OF YOUR WEB SITE?

Much information can be presented on a web site. It can give basic information about the library's location, hours, staff, etc. It can be a means of accessing the collection through online catalogs, databases, links to web sites and links to other collections. It can be a means of communicating information about services and collections. It can be an instructional tool. We looked at points in each of these categories.

Basic Information

Basic information about the library can be helpful to first time, occasional and regular users. It is important that our users know where, how and when to access the library collections and services.

Patrons often want to know library hours. Slightly more than 77% of the sites listed the hours. It is useful to patrons to list both normal hours and holiday and vacation hours.

The library location is useful to patrons coming to the library from offsite and even to first time users who are part of the library's service community. This information can be provided in several ways. The street and/or building address can be given. A map and/or written directions from some focal point can be given. Seventy-five percent of the libraries indicated their location in at least one of these ways.

It is often useful for patrons to know which staff member they should contact with a specific question or problem. Sometimes, in an effort to protect individual privacy only departments are listed. If there is a staff directory with names, it can be organized alphabetically, by department, or as part of the institutional directory. There is also the option to place photographs on the web page. While 67% have a staff directory, few IAMSILIC libraries are displaying staff photographs.

The location of the library on the institutional home page can be an indication of its importance in the institution. When people have to click more than three times to find what they want, they often give up (Bao 2000). Over one-third of the libraries were directly accessible from their institution's home page. Almost 45% were accessible within two clicks of the home page. If a direct link to the library was not on the institutional home page, it might be with Academics, Research, Student Services or "About the . . ." If we found it confusing to figure out under which heading the library was located, think about confusion this causes for the user who may not know your organizational structure.

Collections

Many users want to know what they will find before they come into the physical library. More and more users are relying on web sites to give access to full-text information, such as articles, grey literature, and data. More than 80% of the sites looked at gave access to an online catalog. Almost 72% gave access to article databases. For the patron it is useful to indicate which years are covered by databases, which databases can only be accessed in the library or on campus, and which can be accessed using a password or user identification number.

Access to the online catalogs of other libraries can be useful to patrons. Many libraries, especially those in larger metropolitan areas, give access to nearby libraries or to other libraries in their system. Many give access to national collections, such as the Library of Congress or the British Library. Access to other libraries with a similar subject or geographic orientation can also be useful to researchers. A little over half (55%) of the IAMSLIC libraries web pages give access to some other libraries.

More and more our users are looking at web sites for information. These sites can be subject oriented sites which have been produced by individuals, institutions commercial sources, or organizations. Over half (64.7%) give access to web sites. One of the valuable services libraries can perform for their users is to organize these sites in a logical manner. We saw IAMSLIC library sites that did this by organizing them according to subject, geographic location, reference sources (paid or free), and as related to specific courses offered by the library's institution.

Services and Instruction

Many libraries make distinctions in the levels and kinds of services available to different patrons. Faculty, students and staff may not have all of the same privileges. A researcher and a member of the general public may have access to different services. Other libraries may want to know if they can obtain items by interlibrary loan. As libraries and their resources become more visible through their web sites, it is important that the potential users know which services are available to them. Almost 85% of the IAMSLIC libraries gave some indication of the services they provide.

As more and more patrons are relying on online access and may not even come into the library, instructional aids are becoming more important. A library can help ease the frustration of the remote user by offering instructional aids to online services and products. Some basic instruction on the information research process, types of tools or how to write a citation may also be useful to the remote user. Slightly over half (55%) of IAMSLIC libraries offer some kind of instruction to their online users.

Currency

An important issue is the currency of the web page. This can indicate to the user if the information, such as hours and staff, is current. Currency can be indicated in various ways. There can be a copyright date (if you wish to copyright your page), there can be a date of the most recent update, or there can be both. Half of the IAMSLIC libraries gave the date the page was composed or updated and/or a copyright date. Almost 20% gave a copyright date and almost one-third gave no indication of date of composition or update.

WHAT TO THINK ABOUT WHEN DESIGNING YOUR WEB SITE

There are some basic questions to ask when you decide you want to develop or revise the existing web site for your library. First, you need to decide the purpose of your web site. Is it to give information about your library? Is it to provide access to information resources both in your library and elsewhere, such as the web? Do you want to provide instruction to remote or after hour users? How much of your web site will be publicity for library collections and services?

Second, you should define the primary audience of your web site. Keep in mind that you have a secondary audience of anyone, anywhere in the world who might find your site while doing a web search.

Third you need to decide at what it is that you want others to know about your library. This includes your current users, new users, outsider users, and anyone who might just find your web site interesting. You might want to point out the strengths of your collections and services. You might highlight unique collections or items in the collection.

Once you have answered these questions, then you should redefine your purpose. You should be able to articulate a concise, easy-to-understand mission statement for you web site. This will serve as the guiding principle as you design your site and the individual pages.

DESIGN TIPS

You want people to be able to use your site easily. In order to do that it should be inviting, which includes being easy on the eyes, professional looking, organized and disabled accessible. Some pages are so cluttered with text and/or graphics that it is difficult to keep your focus or even to find what you want on the page.

Icons should give an indication of the meaning or content of the link. Think about the universal signage in common use. It is intended to let people who may not read the language, or may not even be literate, get to where they want to go. Icons should be the same kind of simple representation of the concept.

The number of links should be kept to a minimum. As previously noted, people do not want to have to click through several layers to get the information they want.

Disabled accessibility is increasingly important. As technology allows sight and hearing impaired easier access to computer resources, we need to design our site to be able to be used by these patrons. An excellent place to test your site is Bobby, <<http://www.cast.org/bobby/>> created by the Center for Applied Special Technology. Other useful sites are listed at the W3C , Web Accessibility Site <<http://www.w3.org/WAI/ER/existingtools.html#Evaluation>>.

Remember there is beauty in simplicity.

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