

Thinking of Building a Web Site?

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There are many things to consider when you begin to think about building a site on the World Wide Web. This is a discussion of some of the more basic considerations. These observations are based in part on the presentation entitled "Building a Web Site: The Pasadena Experience" from the 1996 CLA Annual Conference. It is based on experiences in public library settings but includes elements applicable anywhere.

Goal

As you undertake consideration of developing a web site, first clarify what it is you hope to accomplish. It is easy to get caught up in the glamour and popularity of the World Wide Web and lose sight of your organization's mission. Define how the Web will help you accomplish your goals. Investigate whether or not it will be a means to saving time or money and whether your customers will receive some added value through what you provide. Think carefully about who your users are and what information is important to them.

Explore

Before making any decisions about your Web site, explore other sites extensively. Visit the web sites of InfoPeople libraries, university libraries and the cities listed by City.net. Look at the ways others have structured their information. Find sites you like and those you do not like. This experience will help you formulate an idea of what you can do. Talk to people who have already developed Web pages and ask what they would do differently if they were starting over.

Environment

Human and financial resources are necessary to build and maintain a Web presence. Build support for a Web project among the decision makers in your organization. Whether yours is the lead department or a partner in the development keep your eye on the essential point--the Web is all about information. It is important to build a strong working relationship with other departments or individuals and identify how each participant can contribute to the end result. Librarians can add value to the product because of our knowledge of information seeking behaviors, our background in organizing information for retrieval and our deep knowledge of the communities in

which we operate.

On ramp or destination?

Think about what role the library has always filled and then think about how libraries have approached the World Wide Web. In the past, we have pointed people to good information in our collections and in the collections of others through catalogs, indexes and the knowledge and experience of our staff members. In addition, we provide the most comprehensive information about our own communities. In other words, we take responsibility for the information our community cares about most. This is important to remember as you begin to develop a Web presence. What makes your library unique is not its general collections but rather its special collection(s) related to your community. Capitalize on this uniqueness when you develop a site on the Web. People are most likely to visit your site if they want to find out about you. In the excitement to get on the Web, many libraries have overlooked their community information. It is not enough to post library hours, fines and fees and upcoming events; offer the information which can't be found elsewhere.

Develop in-house expertise

In order to develop and maintain a home page, you must develop staff expertise. Increasingly, we require staff members who can manage the hardware, software and connectivity issues associated with the rapid proliferation of electronic information used in libraries today. At the very least, those responsible for maintaining the currency of the information need to be comfortable with hypertext markup language and have an understanding of reference principles.

Structure

You can present information on your home page which will empower your users and enable them to have access to some of the most basic information about your community while you save reference librarians' time. Think about the questions your reference staff gets over and over again. It is possible to incorporate this information in your home page. This is where your own organizational skills come into play. It is also where it becomes necessary to balance between a deep hierarchical information structure and direct, quick access to the information sought. One element of the web which makes it especially attractive is that you can do both. Multiple links can be made to the same piece of information from various points.

Graphics

A picture may be worth a million words, but a big picture can take longer to load. Graphics are an important part of the Web. They allow you to illustrate your information in ways that are not possible with text only. Be judicious in your use of graphics. They should enhance the textual information, not overpower it. If you choose to use an intense graphic, be sure users on the Web will really benefit from seeing it or that it will add to the meaning of the information presented.

Improve access

As you organize the information to be provided on your system, think about whether you are making it easier or more difficult to find. Some information may be inappropriate on your home page. For example, you would not choose to put a list of your library holdings on your home page in lieu of using the catalog. At the same time, you may choose to provide the ability to search your catalog using a web interface or to access other databases from your web page. Think about the characteristics of the information you want to make available electronically and determine the format best suited to it. Don't get carried away and try to put everything on the web.

Keep it fresh

You would never give your patrons a copy of last month's scheduled programs or the names of last year's elected officials; don't do it on the web either. Be sure someone on your staff is assigned to monitor the information you are making available. Remove outdated information immediately. Avoid making promises you can't keep, as well. If at all possible, do not put in hypertext links that lead to dead ends. Add links only when there is something to link to. As you begin to develop a web site, you will have many ideas that you want to include. Keep them to yourself and add them only when the information is available; otherwise you are raising unrealistic expectations and wasting people's time. People will only come to your site if you provide accurate, interesting, rich current information.

Make it fun.

Prepared by Victoria L. Johnson for the California Library Association-Information Technology Section membership. (April 1996)