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Advancing Your Library's Web-Based Services. ERIC Digest.

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Libraries will be utilizing the Web to provide services to an increasingly sophisticated

and demanding computer user. The mission of the Cleveland Public Library (CPL) is "to be the best urban library system in the country by providing access to the worldwide information that people and organizations need in a timely, convenient, and equitable manner." The institutional values that influenced the development of the mission put the emphasis on information and people. The best way to ensure that the access and outcome of information services is timely, convenient and equitable is to develop Web-based services that mirror and improve traditional in-house and telephone services. This clear understanding of the Web as a service delivery method and not just as a digital brochure results in a project development path leading to both self-services and live, librarian mediated services offered online and 24x7.

A successful project incorporates the following steps in this path:

1. Clarify the core values and mission.

2. Build a team of entrepreneurial staff.

3. Scan the online environment for ideas.

4. Set a course and a timeline.

5. Find library and community partners.

6. Market and build customer relations.

At the core of planning for Web-based services is the goal of replicating and enhancing traditional library services in an online environment. Not surprisingly, a survey of 1,500 library users conducted in May, 2002 at the CPL branches and main library confirmed that circulation, reference, services for young people, and readers' advisory were the most popular draws to the local library. A well-rounded, service-oriented approach to developing a library's Web presence requires attention to all four of our patrons' priorities.

CIRCULATION

As the online services of our for-profit competitors grow, so do our patrons' expectations. Our clientele demands the same tools from the library's Web site that they benefit from on commercial Web sites. Our patrons shop, bank, invest, and communicate via the Internet. They make little distinction between what they can do in commerce and what they would like to do via their library Web site. To meet patron expectations, the Cleveland Public Library has introduced a package of online self-help services allowing patrons to better manage their borrowing.
The Web catalog, shared among 31 library systems in Northeast Ohio with reciprocal borrowing agreements (the CLEVNET Consortium), allows for self-initiated requests. The MyAccount feature allows patrons to manage their own accounts. Online renewal has been the most popular aspect of this feature, and in fact it rivals the circulation of the busiest CPL branch with a circulation of over 375,000 in its first nine months. In addition, patrons can delete requests and review outstanding fines. This is timely and convenient for patrons, and it saves a great deal of staff time and attention.

Accounting for more savings is the NetNotice e-mail notification service. Patrons sign up through a Web form to obtain their pickup and overdue notices via e-mail. They can also register to automatically receive their MyAccount information in an e-mail message every week on a designated day. The e-mail message includes the online renewal functionality for those e-mail programs that support it.

Statistics show that, had it not been for one-half million online renewals, the library's circulation would have decreased in 2001. Future opportunities to enhance library services include the ability to register for and obtain a library card number online as well as to pay fines and fees via a credit card using a secure Web interface. With so many resources available to the online user, it is contradictory to require a patron to be physically present in a library to obtain the authority to use them. The library card number is the gateway to 110 remote databases and thousands of e-books. Another service in the works is home delivery of requested library materials. Currently patrons can choose from 96 possible pickup locations in Northeastern Ohio. Soon, they will be able to choose delivery to their home or office.

REFERENCE SERVICES

Cleveland Public Library and the CLEVNET consortium created and launched a live Web reference service on June 11, 2001. KnowItNow24X7 is a remarkable achievement using an efficient and effective project management process. The 20-year consortium relationship of the 31 CLEVNET libraries is based on a shared automation system that CPL owns and manages. Together, librarians from the Cleveland Public Main Library, CLEVNET libraries, and our contracted overnight service provider have answered over 17,000 questions.

Cleveland Public Library was prepared to take many of the financial and technological risks associated with this aggressive and innovative project, but the combined creativity, staff talent and commitment made the project a success. Although CLEVNET is the first to have launched a 24x7 public library live Web reference service, many such services quickly followed, including 24/7 (Metropolitan Cooperative Library System in California), Smarty Pants (Denver), and Q&A NJ (New Jersey).

KnowItNow24X7 librarians utilize the complete resources of the Internet and the CLEVNET subscriptions to over 110 online databases. They can even scan documents available in print collections and send them to the patron via Adobe Capture. It is essential that the public have access to the full range of resources. Live Web reference offers the opportunity to demonstrate Internet searching strategies, introduce subscription databases, and showcase unique materials in the collection.

The Cleveland Law Library is a CLEVNET member. This association enables KnowItNow24X7 users to access both the special collection and the staff of professional law librarians when the information needs are beyond the scope of traditional public library service. Since legal and medical information are traditionally problematic areas for public library reference staff, establishing a partnership with MetroHealth Systems, Cuyahoga County's public hospital, presented an exciting enhancement to live information. Nursing staff already trained to answer a 24x7 phone line embraced the KnowItNow24X7 service and are ideal partners for public librarians. Now KnowItNow24X7 users are connected to health care professionals for answers to questions that involve diagnosis and referral.

SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

HomeworkNow is the promotional name given to KnowItNow24X7 to encourage school-age youth to log on and get assistance whenever they need it and where ever they need it. HomeworkNow offers the full range of information services described above including the connection to MetroHealth. Questions asked via HomeworkNow.net represent 40% of the total virtual reference questions. In addition, a contract with Tutor.com, a commercial web-based tutoring service, offers specialized academic support from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily. Other public libraries, including Boston Public and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, are also taking advantage of Tutor.com. KnowItNow24X7 librarians answer factual questions, guide research projects, and suggest bibliographic resources. Tutors use whiteboard technology to work on math problems, proofread papers, and assist students in working through concepts in English, science, and social studies.

YRead.org is a Web site for teens, educators, and individuals interested in young adult books. Featured authors, including Walter Dean Myers and Suzanne Fisher Staples, have participated in the live, mediated book chat, which is a regularly scheduled monthly event. Youth are also invited to write book reviews and post comments about books, but the live interaction with other readers is the most exciting feature. YRead? is

funded by the Ohio Library Foundation's Drew Carey Young Adult Services Program.

READERS' ADVISORY

The next frontier is addressing readers' advisory. Catalog enhancements, such as book covers, reviews, and first chapters, are already standard attractions. Lists of suggested titles with links to the catalog and Web-based reserves are also part of the current fabric of library Web services. Web-based services, such as Book Browser, What to Read Next and others, help match readers with their next book. Online book discussion groups such as our own Yread? are popular features that use bulletin boards or live chat rooms to share ideas. The next step must be entering the live environment to negotiate and guide the public as well as to personalize services. Staff competencies and deciding the scope of the service are the big questions in developing this element of the Web-based service, however, CLEVNET plans to tackle the questions early in 2003.

TIPS FOR ADVANCING WEB-BASED SERVICES

Commit to 24x7 access to library services. Offering 24x7 service is essential whether it's self-service circulation or librarian mediated online reference. Making the commitment to go 24x7 from the start simplifies every aspect of the project, from staff training to marketing. Creative partnering and outsourcing can make this possible both logistically and financially.

Take risks and move quickly. When planning for advanced Web services, try not to get bogged down in the what-ifs. First set a goal and a time line. Ask your planning team to plan only what is necessary to get started. Develop a sparse model and be flexible and willing to let standards and guidelines develop as needed, rather than planning for every possible scenario before you launch the service.

Utilize all library resources as well as the Internet. Librarians preach that not everything is available free on the Internet, so when offering Web-based services, do not ignore the traditional resources we have always depended on. One way to do this is to incorporate scanning. Print materials can be scanned and converted to PDF quickly and easily with readily available software (try Adobe Capture), and the PDF document can be pushed or e-mailed to the patron.

Find information partners that complement library service. We often say, "librarians don't know all the answers, we just know where to find them." Often the best answer is a referral to an expert. This is certainly the case with legal and medical information. Use the latest technology to connect to the experts in your community. Find partners such as the county hospital and law library to offer online information services through your Web site.

Use targeted marketing techniques to reach new audiences. Continually enhancing your Web-based services gives new opportunities to target new audiences. Simple ideas

include creating a link to e-mail notification subscription on the screen where your patrons place reserves and speaking at meetings of your local community organizations about your services.

Partnerships and collaborations are the cornerstone of CPL Library Director Andrew Venable's philosophy of service and the library's practice in advancing Web-based services. He is often quoted as saying, "Together we achieve the extraordinary." Bringing together people and information through advanced Web-based services capitalizes on what librarian's do best--assist people with finding information to meet their individual needs. The result is greater satisfaction of current users, new appeal for non-users, an energized and motivated staff, and new relevance in our communities.

FURTHER RESOURCES

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She is an adjunct faculty member of Syracuse University School of Information Studies and the co-author of several articles and books including Serving Families and Children Through Partnerships (Neal-Schuman, 1996) and Learning Environments for Young Children (ALA, 1998).

Tracy Strobel joined the Cleveland Public Library in November 1999 as its first Web Applications Supervisor. Her responsibilities include coordinating the creation and maintenance of the library's online services, including the Web catalog, home page, subscription databases, staff Intranet and live reference services.

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