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Library Web Sites: Creating Online Collections and Services

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LIBRARY WEB SITES

Creating Online Collections and Services

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SEVEN

Reader Services

The power of technology allows librarians to promote leisure reading by offering reader's advisory (RA) services through the library's web site. Libraries offer a wide array and varying degrees of RA services in their buildings, some of which transfer online easily and some of which require a bit more effort. Some libraries have created entire sites dedicated to reading, while others have created a page of external links, bookmarks for kids to color, and web pages promoting author visits. In a study of RA web sites, the following items were prevalent: genre book lists, a degree of interactivity, and links to external web sites (Kelly 2000). Libraries also offer access to RA subscription databases.

As explained in *Talking with Readers: A Workbook for Readers' Advisory*, RA generally consists of a mixture of passive and active strategies. Passive strategies do not involve direct patron contact and consist of creating book lists, displays, and shelving arrangements. Active strategies include those involving person-to-person contact such as leading a book discussion group or sponsoring an author visit (EBSCO 2000).

Passive strategies libraries can implement through the Web include creating reading lists and links to external RA sites of interest, offering subscription-based RA tools and reviews written by staff, and promoting book discussion groups and author visits. Active strategies for content creation on a library RA page include involving readers in the creation of reviews, setting up the online

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interaction of readers and authors, allowing readers to suggest titles for purchase, and offering online book discussions.

Web content and services cannot live exclusively on the web site without relation to the library's existing RA services. Readers expect to interact with staff about reading, and they expect staff who are competent about the latest titles, authors, old favorites, and the use of the library web site and online tools. It is important for libraries to continue to train staff in the craft of RA interviews. It is important for staff to be readers and to employ the expertise of the many reference books and online RA tools that can help them guide readers to their next book.

Last, and covered in more depth in chapter 5, a reader-centered library catalog is crucial. The ease with which a reader can access the collection and the functionality of the catalog can truly enhance a patron's reading experience. Some features that readers generally request are the ability to save a list of materials they have read; the ability to create annotations of their reading experience; the ability to create lists that can be shared with others, such as the "Listmania" function found in Amazon.com; and the ability to find out how long they will have to wait for a book. Content enrichment materials such as book cover art, tables of contents, and reviews have also greatly increased the appeal of library catalogs.

Some library catalogs offer features that net-savvy patrons are already accustomed to, such as results ranked by relevancy, a shopping cart feature, and hot links to What Others Are Reading, More by This Author, and More Like This. Libraries add these features to their web sites for increased functionality, content, and marketing appeal. Libraries should put great emphasis on the library catalog as it is the portal to their collections and one readers rely on to provide access to their reading materials.

Libraries have many possibilities to explore when delivering RA services via the Internet and can choose to offer both active and passive services for adult and youth readers. Libraries with well-established RA services will find it much easier to transfer these services to the Web because the majority of the content has been created and expert staff identified. Regardless of the type of RA content or services the library chooses to offer, it must be relevant to the library's service area. RA pages must be marketed well within the reading community and occupy a main position on the home page. Just as content is important, the technology used to publish it must be employed prudently. Technology should facilitate the end result: offering readers opportunities to learn about new authors and titles and the ability to share their experience with other readers.

RA WEB SITES TODAY

Qualities of exemplary RA web sites include visibility, clear purpose, logical organization, clean layout and loading speed, good content and links, relevance to the community, visual appeal, expertise and support, and promotion (Nordmeyer 2001). Many of these features can be applied to all types of web sites. Libraries can employ these basic principles of good web design in addition to the following suggestions for a successful RA page:

1. The RA page should be accessible from the main navigation bar so that readers can find it no matter what page they enter from.
2. The RA page should be clearly labeled so that nonlibrary users and library users can quickly identify where the link would lead.
3. RA pages for youth and adults should have appropriate designs that speak to their intended audience.

LEISURE READING IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Although the mission of academic libraries is to support the course curriculum, some academic libraries provide a leisure reading collection for students and faculty. Academic libraries may find reasons to offer a leisure reading collection, including the distance to the local public library and their ability to serve students without further strain on public library staff and collections. "Browsing rooms are vestiges of the 1920's and 1930's, developed in an era when academic libraries vigorously promoted recreational reading interests of students" (Zauha 1993, 57). However, because of financial constraints and shifting resource allocation to the academic basis of curriculum support, many college and university libraries may not offer browsing collections for leisure reading. In the absence of a browsing collection, academic libraries may support leisure reading by creating a web page that provides external links to the public library or other web resources (Vesper).

Examples

The Browsing Room

James E. Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University

<http://www.mtsu.edu/~vvesper/brow.html>

Recent additions to Savage Library's Popular Book Collection

Leslie J. Savage Library, Western State College of Colorado

<http://www.western.edu/lib/info/rentals.html>

VISIBILITY OF RA

One of the major difficulties encountered in a survey of public library web sites is the visibility of RA pages on the library's web site. Some libraries, such as the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (N.C.) (PLCMC), maintain web sites with identities entirely different from their libraries' web sites. PLCMC maintains both BookHive (*see* figure 7.1) (<http://www.bookhive.org>) and the Reader's Club (<http://www.readersclub.org>), for example.

Most libraries offer RA services off of their main page; however, many public library web sites fail to adequately label their RA services so readers can find them. An example of the variety of labels and some of the more common ones that libraries use to guide their readers to RA web pages follow:

The Reading Room, Cleveland Public Library, <http://www.cpl.org>

Good Reads, King County (Wash.) Public Library, <http://www.kcls.org>

Great Reads, Columbus (Ohio) Metropolitan Library, <http://www.cml.lib.oh.us>

Recommended Reading, Seattle Public Library, <http://www.spl.org>

Suggested Reading, Brooklyn Public Library, <http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org>

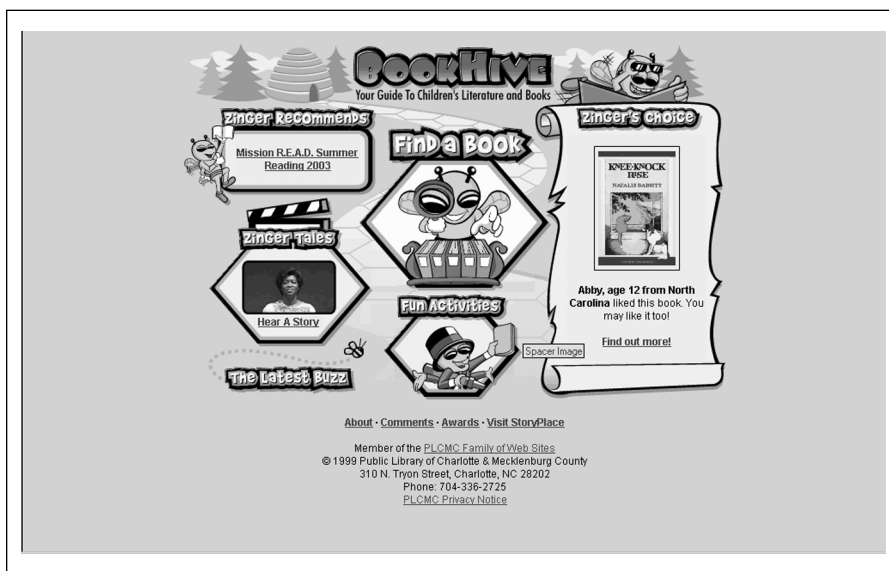


Figure 7.1 BookHive, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (N.C.). PLCMC's BookHive is a guide to children's literature and books.

LINKS TO EXTERNAL SITES

Many external sites exist that offer RA services, and readers expect libraries to offer well-organized links to these sites. These sites are sponsored by other libraries, publishers, authors, and organizations that promote reading. Among some of the popular categories are links to reading lists of best-sellers, book publishers and bookstores, book discussion guides, organizations sponsoring literary awards, links to e-books, links to literary magazines, and online book discussion groups. Libraries should not only link to these sites, but also study them and determine what appeal they have. Are they easy to navigate, professionally designed, rich with content? Adapt some of the better qualities to the library's web site.

Some of the most common RA links offered by libraries follow:

Book Spot

(<http://www.bookspot.com>)

Offers a great deal of content on categories such as best-sellers, book awards, reviews, online books, first chapters, genre fiction, online bookstores, authors, and publishers

Oprah Winfrey

(<http://www.oprah.com>; select Oprah's Books)

Lists all books selected by Oprah back to 1999 along with information about and from the authors, discussion boards, and readers' reactions to the books

The Book Report Network

(<http://www.bookreporter.com>)

Includes web sites that offer reading lists, support book discussion groups, and provide author interviews. These web sites appear to be supported, in part, by visitors' purchases of books from Amazon.com:

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

<http://www.bookreporter.com>

<http://www.teenreads.com>

<http://www.kidsreads.com>

<http://www.authorsontheweb.com>

READING LISTS

Reading lists assist library customers in locating relevant material by creating thematic connections to books and by supplying readers with lists of favorite genres and authors (Kelly 2000). Libraries have traditionally provided their

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patrons with lists of reading materials in the form of bookmarks and bibliographies. Lists can be categorized by

- genre fiction
- reading level
- subject (nonfiction)
- forthcoming titles
- staff and patron recommendations
- age or grade level or both

Because most libraries are already creating lists in print, the content is already established; however, managing these lists becomes a challenge. If the library's ILS does not provide the functionality of retrieving lists from the bibliographic databases, then the library should explore ways to automate the publishing and posting of reading lists. Libraries can supplement lists with annotations, extracts, and reviews.

Libraries should establish the following guidelines:

Length. Length of the list should be no longer than two print pages unless a menu allows users to navigate the page easily.

Hypertext Links. Intuitively, users will want to click on the title for more information or to request it be sent to them. If your ILS allows it, all titles should be in italics and generate a link to the catalog.

Bibliographic Information. Depending on the genre, determine what elements of the bibliographic record are important to visitors. For a list, include call number or location, author, and title.

Frequency. Determine if the list should be published monthly, quarterly, or annually and whether to archive it.

Format. Format the list on the web page and provide a printer-friendly alternative. Patrons and staff may want to print the page without heavy graphics so they can make notes on it.

Examples

Coming Soon to a Shelf Near You

Good Books, Las Vegas–Clark County Library District

http://www.lvcld.org/good_books/coming_titles/index.cfm

New Materials List

Webrary, Readers Services, Morton Grove (Ill.) Public Library

<http://www.webrary.org/rs/newnf.html>

SUBSCRIPTION DATABASES

Libraries can also offer links to subscription-based online web sites that can aid visitors in discovering new authors and titles by reading reviews and author biographies. When libraries offer remote access to these online tools, visitors can access them anytime, anywhere, by simply typing in their library card number. The vendors of these products are also finding ways for users to link back to the library catalog during the user's session.

Books in Print (Bowker, 888-BOWKER2)

<http://www.booksinprint.com>

Books in Print (BIP) offers lists of best-sellers, brief author biographies, annotations, a section for children's literature, fiction, and forthcoming books. This electronic product also includes access to Bowker's database of more than 165,000 publishers, distributors, wholesalers, and book agents. BIP also allows users to check whether the library has a particular title by linking to the library catalog from the title information page. This product has a great deal of functionality and content that readers will enjoy; however, some of the screens, such as those offering ordering, are written for collection development staff. Also available: *Spanish Books in Print*.

Novelist (EBSCO, 800-758-5995)

<http://www.epnet.com/public/novelist.asp>

Novelist includes more than 100,000 titles in the database, 75,000 full-text reviews, and more than 36,000 subject headings. Users will be familiar with the product's "Find a Favorite Author" or "Find a Favorite Title" buttons. In addition, *Novelist* offers a great deal of content for staff training and support for RA services. Librarians and readers will also find book lists and book discussion guides to help support book discussion leaders.

What Do I Read Next? (Gale, 800-877-GALE)

<http://www.galegroup.com>

What Do I Read Next? includes more than 100,000 highly recommended adult, young adult, and children's fiction titles. The following print titles are also included in this database: *What Do I Read Next?* *What Do Young Adults Read Next?* *What Do Children Read Next?* *What Historical Novel Do I Read Next?* and *What Inspirational Literature Do I Read Next?*

BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews often allow readers to determine whether they want to read a new book, especially those written by new or unknown authors. Additionally, subject specialists would benefit from reviews of new books in their field. The review serves not only as an informational tool, but as a marketing tool as well. Most RA services in public libraries are well established, and reviews are either already being written by staff or they are purchased for inclusion into the catalog. In some instances, libraries have created web sites based on reviews. Book reviews offer a constant stream of content for the library web site.

Staff Book Reviews

Because library staff members are typically avid readers, having them write reviews is well within their purview and adds great, homegrown content to a library web site. Libraries that purchase catalog-enriched content may also include reviews; however, allowing staff to create and post content offers a personalized touch that patrons appreciate and also offers staff an opportunity to contribute where they really excel.

Reader Book Reviews

A part of reading that is often overlooked is the opportunity to share the reader experience. Allowing readers to write reviews not only gives them the opportunity to express their thoughts, but it also allows them to participate in creating content for their library web site. The opportunity to submit content can create a feeling of ownership and help to produce a sticky web site with the hopes that reviewers will return frequently to see their reviews and read others.

Example

Reader's Club, Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (N.C.)
<http://www.readersclub.org>

The Reader's Club allows visitors to read other customer reviews and input their own reviews for display on the web page.

AUTHORS ONLINE: E-MAIL AND REAL-TIME CHATS

Libraries that host author visits may want to consider various ways to promote author titles or upcoming author visits. Chats with an author can be interactive or recorded through e-mail as described below. However, libraries can also doc-

ument an author's visit to the library by taking photographs, making video recordings, or transcribing the discussion in text or audio.

E-mail Chat

E-mail chat happens asynchronously when the library collects questions from its readers, forwards the questions on to an author, and posts the responses. Readers can submit their questions through an electronic form on the web site or on a paper form found at the public service desk. Questions are collected at the end of the submission period, organized, edited for review, and sent off to the author. The author is given a deadline by which to respond and e-mails his or her responses back to the library. The library then posts the questions and answers and often augments this with links to the catalog and the author's work, book jackets, reviews, and biographical information. Libraries can offer creative ways to access this material in addition to archiving it on their web site. The web page can be cataloged so that users searching the catalog will retrieve the web page if they search for the author.

Real-Time Chat

If an author agrees to a live chat, libraries must determine what chat service they will use, include directions for patrons to download necessary plug-ins, and publicize the event. Librarians can use the transcript to archive the exchange on the web site after the chat has ended. Live chat sessions involving multiple patrons should be moderated. Because it is difficult to predict a patron's behavior, libraries that offer this service may want to do it through a system that requires a library card because anonymity may entice a user to engage in improper conduct. The possibility of low turnout and participation may also plague an author visit set for a specific date and time. E-mail chat, although it does not sound as innovative and exciting as live chat, may be preferable for these very reasons.

RESPONDING TO READERS

The web site provides the perfect forum for interacting with visitors. In response to RA needs, two popular services librarians offer are patron suggestions for book purchases and custom bibliographies. Although these services may be quite staff-intensive, readers appreciate the personal touch they offer. After all, libraries serve their customers through responsive collections, and who would be better to suggest titles for reading lists but a librarian!

Suggest a Book

If readers find that the library has not acquired an item they would like to borrow, they may appreciate the opportunity to submit their suggestions. Depending on whether a library has centralized collection development tasks, staff can submit their suggestions, too. Although valuable for reader input, this is clearly a staff-intensive request. Some suggestions submitted by patrons may be more suitable as an interlibrary loan request. Many patrons also want a follow-up response on whether the library is going to purchase the material. Appropriate statements should be posted with the form so that viewers can be redirected to the ILL submission form, the library's collection development policy, or a statement that indicates follow-up procedures.

Examples

Duke University Libraries (N.C.)

<http://www.lib.duke.edu/colldev/ask4book.htm>

George C. Gordon Library, Worcester (Mass.) Polytechnic Institute

<http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/Library/Services/suggestpurchase.html>

Harris County (Tex.) Public Library

<http://www.hcpl.lib.tx.us/br/bookreq.htm>

Customized Bibliographies

Another popular service is a user-requested bibliography. This is similar to a reference query in that it provides individualized service and is patron-initiated. Patrons can fill out a form on the library web site requesting a reading list be sent to them via e-mail, fax, or mail. Although this is a service that is typically provided to patrons without special forms, many users and nonusers still do not understand the services that libraries provide. A form on the Web gives visitors the opportunity to ask for help in a very neutral place.

BOOK DISCUSSION GROUPS

Library-Sponsored Book Discussion Groups

Web sites offer great publicity for book discussion groups. Information about a branch's book discussion group should be displayed on the events listing as well as in the information about the library. Include a listing of titles so readers can do their reading before attending the first meeting. Questions about the book

can also be posted so readers have time for reflection prior to the book discussion. You can also use this page to send to the local bookstores or other appropriate places to market the group's activities.

Online Book Discussion Groups

Libraries may choose to offer their own online book discussion groups. Some of the challenges of online discussion include scheduling. The convenience of the Internet diminishes when you have a certain time you must attend your discussion group. Many discussion groups favor using a bulletin board. That way, readers can come and go as they please, reading and posting at their leisure. Just as in a physical meeting, a library staff member normally leads the group as moderator. Schedules for titles are created, and comments are accepted either indefinitely or they cease on a certain date. The discussion is normally archived for all viewers to read.

Other libraries work with e-mail list managers so that the discussion is posted via e-mail. Libraries can choose to test out some of the bulletin board messaging systems, such as Yahoo! groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>), before they decide on which is best for them.

Many resources are available from publishers to help librarians prepare reading guides for book discussions. Publishers such as HarperCollins (<http://www.harpercollins.com/hc/readers>), Simon & Schuster (<http://www.simonsays.com>), and Ballantine (<http://www.randomhouse.com/BRC/>) offer reading guides. Reading guides include author biographies, chapter excerpts, plot summaries, topics for discussion, and information on starting a reading group.

Supporting Readers' Book Discussions

Libraries are learning to market their materials in new ways by taking multiple copies of previous best-sellers appropriate for book discussions and packaging them as kits. Libraries provide eight to ten or more copies of the same title, include information about the book and possible discussion avenues, and offer them to local groups.

Examples

Kenton County (Ky.) Public Library

<http://www.kenton.lib.ky.us/information/kits/index.html>

Las Vegas–Clark County Library District

http://www.lvccld.org/good_books/discussion_kits/index.cfm

RA WEB SITES TOMORROW

Although RA is a cornerstone of library business, its development on library web sites remains in its infancy. As the library catalog evolves into a more reader-centered tool, RA will continue to develop into the potential as a driving force to circulate the library's collection. In addition, as library RA sites become more interactive, an "open, online dialogue and sharing of interpretations between people lend a deeper meaning to fiction itself" (Kelly 2000, 24). "The next step must be entering the live environment to negotiate and guide the public as well as to personalize services" (Feldman and Strobel 2002). The sharing of readers' thoughts and interpretations of what they read is the focal point of RA. With this interaction, technology will actually allow RA to flourish rather than impede its progress.

For more information

Adult Reading Round

<http://www.arrtreads.org>

Founded in 1984 to promote reader's advisory service and fiction collections in public and school libraries in Illinois.

Center for the Book in the Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook>

Established in 1977. Works closely with other organizations to foster understanding of the vital role of books, reading, libraries, and literacy in society. Links to state center affiliates.

Fiction-L

<http://www.webrary.org/rs/flmenu.html>

An electronic mailing list devoted to RA topics developed for and by librarians.

Reader's Advisory Sources, RUSA, ALA

<http://www.ala.org/rusa/bestbooks.html>

RUSA (ALA) links to Best Books and other award-winning lists of books.

Teen Reading

<http://www.ala.org/teenread>

Resources for libraries offering RA services for teens. Includes reading lists and information on Teen Read Week.