

WEB politics or the way to the tuffet

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Once upon a time there was a zoo librarian who wanted to introduce the people she served at the Zoo to the Internet and to create an institutional Web page so that everyone could have access to ALL the information they needed to do their jobs from their desk-top computers.

She thought that if she were able to accomplish this amazing feat, the people in her organization would come to realize the profound value of accurate, timely information and the importance of libraries and librarians would come to be a universally acknowledged truth. (You won't be surprised to learn that Hans Christian Andersen and the Brother's Grimm were among her favorite authors).

The story I am about to relate is one of unbelievable political maneuvering and intrigue. It continues to this day, and I relate this cautionary tale in the hope that other innocent, wide-eyed librarians may be able to anticipate and even avoid some of the pitfalls and ogres that appear when the magic words "Web site" are uttered.

Once upon a time ... approximately 2 years ago ...

When the National Library of Medicine announced over the Internet that they were awarding grants to connect qualified health research organizations to the Internet, our heroine immediately realized that this was the perfect way to achieve her objectives. Her primary users at the Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species work with a unique group of animals. Collaboration with wildlife health researchers throughout the world would definitely be of interest to NLM, especially in the light of ebola, hantavirus, and bovine spongiform encephalopathy. The grant would be a "slam-dunk".

Being aware of the numerous political landmines, that riddled her organization. Our heroine went to the Development Department to request their permission to apply for this grant. Although "Development" can be very jealous of their turf, they enthusiastically endorsed her plan. "BUT" they said, "you might want to run it by the Associate Director"... "Great idea" said the Associate Director, "BUT... You should consult the C.F.O."

Now the C.F.O. is a political landmine in his own right. Not only is he Chief Financial Officer, but because he was the first person in our organization to have a computer and a spreadsheet, he is also the Chief Information Officer. He went into total shock at the mention of the word "Internet". "It's a major threat to security", "It will drain I.S. staff resources". And, my personal favorite, "We won't be connected to the Internet for at least 3 years".

Our heroine decided it would be politically savvy not to challenge the second most important man in the organization - whom she had already semi-offended and went quietly back to the library. I am sure the C.F.O., like many administrators, assumed that she was busy re-shelving books, saying shhhh! To noisy patrons, and pushing her glasses back into place. Actually, she went back to the library, and began collecting information on Web-building, Intranets, I.S.P.s (Internet Service Providers) and started designing the site. She decided to build a meta-site that would serve reference resource for the zoo world.

How the librarian go to go to the ball

Fortunately there were strong political forces at work. The Zoo has a very powerful Board of Trustees and a strong, passionate membership base (200,000+ households). Members of the Board began asking our Director where the Zoo's Web page was. People began to write letters asking him about our plans for a Web site. And as everyone in the corporate "kingdom" knows, no thoughtful, well-researched study, nor any amount of staff expertise can compare to a Trustee's of-the-cuff... "Hey, why aren't we on the web yet?"

To make a long story short, the C.F.O./C.I.O, who had never been on the Internet, was told to implement a Web page. Having a financial frame of reference he decided the function of a Web page should be to sign up new members, so he developed his task force accordingly: There were 2 Development people, 1 person from Education, 1 person from Research, 2 people from I.S.(Information Systems) and at the Director's urging (because she had given Internet Workshops and formed an Internet User-Group), the librarian's name was added to the bottom of the list. No one on the committee except the librarian (and one I.S. guy) had been on the Internet. No one had even seen a Web Page. After 4 fruitless, Dilbert-like meetings, the C.F.O. ingenuously asked "So, who would like to write the Web page". Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief when the librarian raised her hand.

The librarian as the logical institutional web builder

1. Librarians understand organization, classification, storing, and accessing information. Often the development of Intranets, and Internet sites is left to I.S. Departments because librarians don't know hardware. Well, no offense to I.S. people, but they don't know content and organization.
2. The librarian is far enough down in the organizational hierarchy to be non-threatening to all other departments.
3. The librarian interfaces with the entire organization and is aware of organizational politics and jealousies, ensuring that the finished product will have objectivity and balance.

4. Librarians know how and where to find information. They were among the first on the Internet, and the first to surf the Web.
5. Librarians know the importance of determining who your user group will be and how to anticipate the kind of information they will be seeking. Building a Web page is exactly like building a collection. After determining who your primary users are, you provide them with the kinds of information they will be seeking.
6. Librarians know the importance of cross-referencing material. They naturally think in hyperlinks
7. Although librarians may not know mainframes (the servers) they do know PCs (the clients)...intimately!
8. Our experience with bibliographic instruction makes it easy for us to introduce others to the web and to explain the philosophy behind its construction.
9. Because librarians are service-oriented they have come to the rescue of nearly every person in the organization (at least all the smart people) and everyone wants to return the favor.
10. Librarians are smart enough to know that Web-building is not a one-person job and can organize and recruit all the smart people to help.

Spinning straw into gold

Moving with lightening speed, (Our heroine had no idea when they would realize the incredible power they had just given away), she scoured the organization for information: from ZooNooz, our monthly magazine, Annual Reports, press releases, old news clippings, and from unwary library users who could be convinced to "write something" for the web.

This is the straw that must be converted into succinct, cogent, entertaining, interactive pieces of "gold". It is never on time, never organized and rarely well written. Constructing submission and update schedules and providing forms to standardize formatting is essential. So is recruiting important players to develop the site. The graphic artist and the photographer are essential. The adage you can't judge a book by its cover doesn't apply to the Web. Web pages must have visual appeal...in addition to solid content.

Another problem is that most individuals can't think in hyperlinks. Our heroine went around and around with Fred until she finally just made a paper copy of all the pages she had visualized, put them in sequential order and voila!...he was sold. In fact, he was ecstatic! They ran to the Director's Office and the Director became ecstatic. Fred and the librarian began to develop a good working relationship. Actually its a lot like a bad marriage. The wife does all the work and the husband signs the checks.

The search for princely partners

Lacking technological expertise, the Zoo decided to contract-out for these services. We found a very handsome I.S.P. with the following qualifications to host our site:

1. A backbone at full T3 speeds
2. Directly connected to several Network Access Points to prevent a single point failure
3. First rate hardware and superior technical staff
4. Targeted to businesses and not individual users
5. Full-time 24-hour, 7-day support
6. Have well-documented engineering guidelines and disaster recovery plans
8. 99.8%+ dial-up connectivity (busy signals/100 connect attempts)
9. Superior security, an Uninterruptible Power Supply, and be redundant
10. A full range of services and a variety of pricing options

A "charming" Web developer was hired to do the HTML and CGI programming. We handed over the completed site design, all digitized slides, and all text files to a twenty-two year-old kid. The kid had a gorgeous smile, a long ponytail and a degree in visual arts. When I viewed his creation-in-progress a few weeks later I found he had rendered the entire site in black! Suitable for funeral parlors and rock groups, but not for zoos. I visualized our 11 venerable trustees, median age 70, going into apoplectic shock.

The kid and the librarian developed a very good relationship and a set of basic design criteria:

1. The site must be easily accessible for people with slow modems and a variety of browsers. (All pages tested on the Center for Applied Special Technology's "Bobby")
2. Natural language file names
3. Consistency throughout for headings, icons, gifs/jpegs (type, size, formatting)
4. Simple graphical elements, black and white with minimal color
5. Small page size (under 30K if possible with graphics under 10K)
6. No page longer than a printed page
7. Straight text rather than superficial colored gifs for buttons
8. Use of <ALT=description> tags for people who turn off images.
9. Height and width pixel dimension tags
10. Progressive loading for gif and jpeg files
11. Thumbnail gifs clickable to larger jpegs
12. Save full size files for re-editing
13. No "way-out" technology

In organizing the information, care was taken to avoid a "departmental" mind-set. For example, when someone comes to our site looking for a tour, they shouldn't have to guess what department might be responsible for a particular tour (Busses, Education, Society Tours, or Group Sales). They should be able to find a list of every tour we offer in one place. (Hopefully under a link labeled "Tours")

Pitfalls and ogres

In January of 1996 we went "live" with 70 pages. After the first days of glory everyone became a critic. Why don't we look like the glitzy Disney or National Geographic sites? Simple answer: \$\$\$\$. Why is there a typo on the photo caravan page? Simple answer: no

spellcheck. Why can't we have a Press Release (or Education, or Group Sales or Busses) icon at the top of the Home Page? Not so simple answer: An explanation of the philosophy behind organizational hierarchies and hyperlinks.

An animal rights group from the U.K. put up a series of slanderous pages with our name on it. Their site came up first in an Alta Vista search on our name. Our site came up 39th! I began seriously researching the "spoofing" of search engines.

Copyright violators are the evil witches of the Web. I have found our photos, information, logos and icons, "magically" transported to several other sites. A local newspaper has scanned in our official zoo map and the colored border on our stationery. They use our name repeatedly to fake-out the search engines and draw visitors to their site! The Web site "Cyberpanda" ripped off our information, panda logo and photographs and then sent us the coveted "Cyberpanda Award".

Another pitfall occurred when it was discovered that our Web site developer had also developed a site called "Flirt". A "courtesy" hyperlink from our site to the developer's site lead, some 8 clicks later, to a bare-breasted young lady. The specter of the 11 venerable trustees going into apoplectic shock reappeared! The developer was fired, but I don't think he minded. He was pictured cavorting in a haystack with the young lady just a click before she exposed herself. This same developer had also been claiming design credit for the site so I was not sorry to see him "slain".

Recently the Director of Education and the Director of P.R. (Who know relatively little about the web) have been awakened by all the press this "giant" has been generating, and have decided to make power grabs. They've called a lot of Dilbert-like meetings and talked a lot but nothing has happened...yet. (These are the real ogres).

Occasionally you "luck-out". Each week we run a statistical analysis of the visits made to our site. We know how many visitors we get, who their providers are, what country they're from, time of their visit, even what browsers they're using. I noticed we had a tremendous number of referrals from something called "CyberLust". When I checked the site I found they were asking people to declare their age. All under-age visitors found themselves hyperlinked to the Zoo.

HTML, JAVA, animation ... oh my!

Meanwhile I just keep toiling, tweaking, creating and adding. By December of 1996 the site had grown to 400 pages (HTML addresses), with 4 interactive games and a postcard section. There were 485 gifs (graphic images and small thumbnail photos) and 309 jpegs (photo enlargements). We have a minimal number of bandwidth-grabbers: 4 short quick-time movies, 7 maps, 2 sound files and 2 small animations.

I've managed to avoid frames and Java, and rather than using problematic hot technology to dazzle visitors I invite them to send "cyberzoo postcards". By allowing people to share animal pictures and personal messages with friends and relatives, we build goodwill and lots of return visits. I've also provided several interactive games to share our philosophic message and stimulate curiosity about wild animals and their ecosystems.

Our site has had visitors from 80 different countries and is currently averaging about 1500 visits a day. We've received numerous awards (Netvet's "Pick of the Litter" was the most gratifying for me) and we've been featured on the Discovery channel and in several web magazines.

Living happily ever after requires initiative, imagination, long hours and planning

For a long time librarians have believed the promise that the Information Age would deliver everything they've always wanted: respect, recognition, big budgets, and adequate staffing. The reality is that these promises will remain fairy tales unless we work hard to make them real.

When our institutions establish Web sites, we should be contributing to the selection of information and the organization of the site. When they recognize the need to integrate all information, both internal and external, into an efficient organizational Intranet, we should again be major contributors and architects.

I was fairly certain that if I did not have a hand in building our organization's Web site, I probably would not be involved in designing it's Intranet. I wanted to ensure online access to the library's book and journal collections, to our photo collection and to our archives. I knew I had to be on the frontline when it was time to fight for these priorities.

It's not easy to acquire the expertise necessary to venture into new areas. In times of immense technological change, it is a struggle to keep up-to-date on the latest developments. Here are some excellent online resources that provide both information and motivation:

1. Librarians' index to the Internet : Sections on Internet Surfing and Searching and Computers: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/InternetIndex/>
2. DigLibns Electronic discussion list: "subscribe diglibns your name" to listserv@sunsite.berkeley.edu
3. D-Lib Magazine: <http://www.dlib.org>
4. Berkeley Digital Library Sunsite: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu>
5. SunSITE, Current Cites: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/CurrentCites/>
6. Delphi's Publishing on the web: <http://www.delphi.com/pubweb>
7. Webreference: <http://www.webreference.com>

Everyone in the "Library Kingdom" knows that information without vision is worthless. Vision provides the needed frame of reference for analyzing the opportunities that arise and opportunism is critical to moving libraries and librarians into the organizational consciousness. It is only with advance planning and vision that we can be ready to "raise our hands" when someone asks..."So, who wants to build the web site."

Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet,
Spinning out pages in code
She invited all spiders to sit down be side her
So her site would rank higher in Alta Vista

The end