Planning for the Next Phase

Abstract

This concluding chapter of "Building the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Transforming Your Library Website" discusses strategies for keeping your site current with upgrades and changes. Using his own library as an example to guide others, the author discusses principals for keeping the dialogue between community, staff and patrons going strong as the site progresses.

Now that you have a functional digital branch, what are your next steps? That question is a bit hard to answer, and the answer will largely depend on your library's goals, future changes on the Web, and your patrons' changing needs. This year, Topeka is deep in the strategic planning process. Some of the goals that come out of this process will directly impact our digital branch. I can explain what Topeka's next steps are, as well as some possible ways to relate those steps to your own situation. Our goals include

- Current updates to the site
- Building outposts
- Strategic plan
- No "dry rot"
- Teaching and training

Each of these goals is explained in more detail below.

Current Updates

In many ways, building our digital branch at Topeka was the easy part. Now we have to update all the content streams we have created for our patrons. Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library plans to constantly make improvements to the site, just like a small business that continues to upgrade its physical setting.

One of the first steps we have planned in our process is to run some usability tests. We'll run small tests to figure out if people can successfully find our databases. We also want to look at the site with these three questions in mind: Why should I care? Why should I click? What do I get from this? We want to answer those questions in a positive way to encourage patrons to use our website.

We are currently in the process of redesigning our main page. The first version of our page is too long, and has that "There's a database under here" look. We don't want our "database undies" showing, so we're redesigning to improve that front page experience. We also want to look at each service or touch point on our site and improve those touch points. In general, we need to meet with the group in charge of that area—like meeting with the Youth Services staff to talk about the kids' and teens' pages and work on improving those pages.

We'll also want to talk to kids and teens and find out what they want to do at our digital branch. What would they like to do on our site that they can't currently do? What types of sites do they like to visit? We need to find out this information, then rework those parts of our site to provide better service to those kids and teens.

We want to improve our library catalog. We have started meeting with a catalog committee to think through these questions: What do we like about the front and back ends of our ILS system? What's missing that we want to include? What are our dreams for the catalog, both on the back end and for our patrons? We plan to summarize this

information in a document and then start meeting with ILS vendors with our list of features in mind.

We have also been talking about using an open source overlay for our catalog. At this point, it seems like we won't be upgrading our ILS system for at least two to five years, given the current economic climate. But an open source overlay would improve a very important part of our catalog (at least to the digital branch)—our patrons' experience using the catalog.

The general concept behind our updates should be applied to any library website—keep upgrading your site. Nothing should be off-limits in this effort—as I mentioned above, we are redesigning our main page. If a part of your digital branch can be improved, improve it. Additionally, it's always good to be thinking about usability. Just as we are working constantly to make our site at Topeka as user-friendly as possible, you should always be thinking about how users perceive your web page.

Building Outposts

At Topeka, our next priority is going to be building and nurturing our outposts. We also want other local websites, like those by our local businesses, agencies and news media, to link back to us. Other options we might pursue include the local university library website or Wi-Fi start pages in local coffee shops. When people get their coffee, we want them to see our link and maybe one or two of our most used services. We can even make that reciprocal—we may give a Friends of the Library membership to the businesses that provide us with a link. This would help the library to be seen by people, even if they're outside of the building.

We are also looking to increase the role of widgets in our digital branch. For example, we can embed an IM widget in various places on our website. We have done this in our library catalog, so when no hits are found for a search, instead of a blank page staring at the customer, there's an instant messaging "Ask Us Now" widget that patrons can use. In effect, we put a smiling reference librarian at what used to be a dead end.

Inside the digital branch, we are also building what I'd call internal outposts. For example, we have an art gallery in the library that's quite popular. To push it a bit more, we might build some unobtrusive ad placements. For example, we could include images of gallery artwork on our Fun in Topeka blog and make those images linkable to the current art show in the gallery.

Finally, we have just created an e-mail newsletter that points to cool stuff we do at the library. We already have a ton of patron e-mail addresses in our patron database. Why not use those connections to share information about the library (assuming you have already asked for permission to use the e-mail addresses)?

Strategic Planning: Next Steps

As I previously mentioned, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library is in the midst of strategic planning (see figure 16). We have done a GIS study and worked with a company to help us develop some marketing ideas. How do the website and the digital branch fit into all this? We're still figuring that out, so these are only my best guesses at this point. Here are some general directions we plan to take in regards to the digital branch within the strategic planning process.

We need to sell ourselves more. We have lots of products, like books, magazines, and databases, but our biggest asset is our librarians, and we really don't promote them much, if at all. Our staff make the library run, answer questions, and make our materials easier to find. We are realizing that we can promote that more.

One way to do this with the digital branch is to work on making our library staff more authentic online. There are many ways to accomplish this. For example, we already include headshots of blog post authors, with their names beside each article they write. We could also include more video in blog posts. People like watching online video, hence the growth of video sites like YouTube. As I mentioned, video is easy to create, especially with a simple-to-use video camera like a Flip. Library staff can easily supplement their blog post with video. Seeing the actual librarian in a video within the blog post can help make us more authentic and help users understand that they are talking to a real person.

Twitter can also help. Twitter is a great way to connect with customers. Setting up a forum is similar. With both, we can follow business owners in Topeka and interact with them as a professional business owner resource. In the forum, we can let business owners interact with each other, monitor the conversations, and supply needed

Figure 16
Topeka librarians in a strategic planning session.

input whenever we can, like links to relevant sites or relevant materials in the library.

No Dry Rot

Now for something I called the "no dry rot" plan. I need to establish a committee whose goal is to keep the digital branch innovative and moving forward. This group will look at where we've been, what's working, and what's not, and figure out next steps for the digital branch. In other words, they help to prevent dry rot at your digital branch.

There are different ways to do this. One is to invite a mix of patrons and staff to the table and set up the committee in that way. This will work great if you have engaged staff and patrons who understand your direction and are willing to help. At this point, my library has established what we call the Creative Group to do this. The Creative Group is composed of our marketing department, our Web team, and our program events manager. We look at all aspects of communication–from print to digital–and try to improve, cutting down on duplication and other redundancies. This group sometimes looks at emerging trends to see what works and what doesn't.

Part of this process is also measurement. We need to figure out how to measure the digital branch's success. Analytics programs help measure total Web visits, time on site (which shows engagement with our content), time spent on blogs or even articles, and total views of a video. Those are all great numbers to track to show growth and use.

We can also track other interesting trends, like the number of conversations taking place in the comments of our blogs, Flickr photos, and YouTube videos.

Teaching/Training

Finally, I come to teaching and training. We have created a very cool digital branch that uses lots of interesting new-fangled tools. Guess what? We probably need to teach our customers what we're doing, how we're using these tools, and what they can do with it and give our staff a refresher.

When building websites, every day can be a journey. That journey will take you down roads you've never travelled, using new modes of transportation. And that's OK–that's what makes building and working in a digital branch so interesting.

I can't tell you what route your road will follow, since it's always under construction. But I can tell you the destination. Sharing the content of your library is one part of the destination. As long as your patrons can read, watch, or listen, it really doesn't matter what type of transportation they used. Participation is another part of the destination. Libraries will continue to connect with their communities in big and small ways and will continue to help connect individuals in the local community to each other.