LEST WE FORGET

A few attention-worthy aspects of optimizing library Web sites garner less notice in the commercial sector because the return on the investment is not large enough. These ethical considerations are neither outside the scope of libraries, nor mutually exclusive from optimizing library Web sites.

Accessibility

Ensuring access in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act is a major undertaking and worthy goal for libraries. A common misconception is to place disabled users into the niche of the technologically challenged when in fact this user population is more likely to have access to technology that others do not. Creating content that is accessible from a wide array of speech recognition software, magnifiers, input and output devices, and large print screens goes a long way toward helping accessibility initiatives. New technological demands for general audiences might help these initiatives move forward, or at least give libraries two birds to kill with a single stone.

Who would have thought that a personal digital appliance (such as a Palm Pilot) or a cell phone might make the best ally for those seeking ADA compliance on the Web? As cutting edge developers wished for faster access, bigger monitors, more CPU speed, and an end to the battle between Netscape and Microsoft Internet Explorer, technology delivered wireless access, tiny displays, miniscule computer memory, and new text-only Web interfaces. In the past, libraries buried their collective heads in the sand when ADA compliance was mentioned, or when they thought the burden of Lynx/text-only access was gone. Web development has come full circle.

Plain text and attention to content over glitz could be the Web's best practice of the 21st century—good news for libraries and content providers.

A sampling of IT Accessibility Websites

ALA Office for IT Policy—www.ala.org/oitp/index.html

CAST Bobby Software—www.cast.org/bobby

Federal IT Accessibility Initiative—www.section508.gov

National Center for Accessible Media (NCAM)—http://ncam.wgbh.org

W3C Web Accessibility Initiative—www.w3.org/WAI

Web Accessibility in Mind (WebAIM)—www.Webaim.org

Standards

Many of the links above, especially the work of the W3C, drive local, national, and international adherence to standards. Although all Web developers will walk the thin line between standards and newly available features, libraries will undoubtedly be expected to continue their fight for stronger adherence to standards, especially among the vendors on whom they rely.

Standards, moreover, mean more than just Z39.50 and MARC. The new services that libraries provide require a growing knowledge and acceptance of emerging standards such as the Open eBook Standard and the NISO Circulation Interchange Protocol, and the OpenURL. For a complete list of NISO standards that affect libraries, see the NISO Standards Resource page.

Privacy

Privacy is a particular concern of libraries and must be considered when optimizing services. Unencumbered by the desire for anonymity that libraries hold sacred, the private sector has successfully developed Web services whose nature depends on the user's willingness to sacrifice privacy.

We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

—Article III of the American Library Association Code of Ethics

Libraries respect the user's right to privacy. Whether libraries do as much as they can to protect those rights could be called into question with the growing reliance on the products of third-party content providers. The online environment offers new challenges to libraries to ensure compliance with their own standards of ethical conduct.

Privacy protection as a service has not taken root, but it could become especially desirable in an information environment that favors convenience over anonymity. Libraries might be the ones to provide this service, but in doing so should ensure they are up to the task.

Privacy used to be a black-and-white issue for libraries, a case of all or nothing. Now, librarians and users alike constantly ask how much privacy they are willing to sacrifice for convenience and personalization. One way out is for the library to offer its own personalized services through products such as library portals and current awareness services.

Lacking that service, libraries must address two questions. First, are users educated about library privacy policies? And second, what can libraries do to help users make educated decisions about foregoing their privacy for features in the online services that libraries license (Pace, p. 2)?

Whether the methods of usability engineering are applied in more libraries, even a heightened awareness of usability aids libraries in developing and enhancing Web services.

Libraries' long-term success is marked by the never-ending stream of short-term shifts in strategy, markets, user populations, trends, gimmicks, and technology. Furthermore, libraries excel at the circular process of assessing change and refocusing efforts in an efficient manner to best serve their users.

The Web likely happened too fast and was developed (and continues to be developed) at such a rapid pace that no one could be expected to keep up. Regardless, the focus on the end user gives libraries a distinct advantage over other information professionals who must grapple with both new technology and the demands of the world's seemingly insatiable thirst for information.

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