

Synergy

Creating a Library Website With Social Interaction and a Collection Focus

Since launching its first website in 1997, the Arapahoe Library District (ALD) has constantly looked at ways to review and renew this vital tool for patrons. This article focuses on the process of redesigning the ALD website—the steps taken and decisions made in order to create a site that incorporates interactive elements and patron input and that uses an open source content management system (Drupal). The following information starts in the present and works its way back to the beginning of ALD’s website development.

ALD’s Present-Day Web Presence



Website work is part of the digital services department. This unit also manages the ALD’s catalog system, using Innovative Interfaces, Inc. (III) as well as the technical support for staff and the public. The digital services department oversight has provided numerous advantages including access to technical support and to the catalog. This coordination has allowed development of state-of-the-art functionality working intra-departmentally.

ALD’s three websites are managed by the coordinator/supervisor of web services—the position that the author holds—and staffed by two and a half internet librarians. One full-time librarian manages the main site, www.arapahoelibraries.org. Another full-time librarian oversees the children’s website, <http://kidsite.arapahoelibraries.org>, while the teen website, <http://teens.arapahoelibraries.org>, is handled by a part-time librarian. The main site will be the focus of this article.

About Arapahoe Library District

Founded in 1966, ALD is a library district serving Colorado’s unincorporated Arapahoe County. Located south of Denver, ALD patrons hail from the suburbs to the eastern plains of the state, covering 805 square miles. Resources offered by ALD include eight branch facilities, a bookmobile service, and outreach services within a correctional facility.

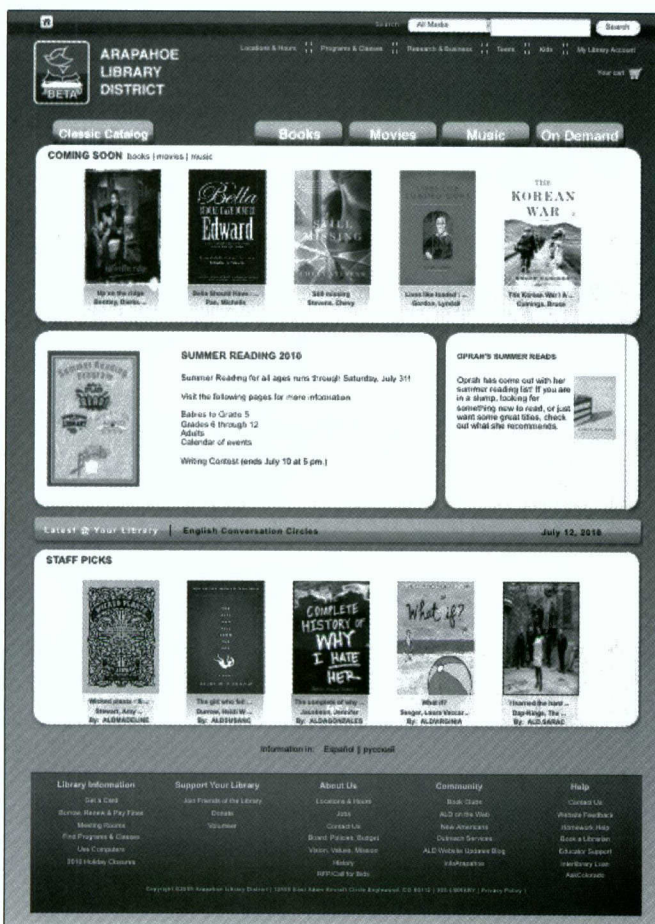




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*by
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Social features. The website was redesigned to bring patron focus to the collection. To that end, the website now features material covers to provide an online browsing experience. A secondary goal was to encompass more of the interactive functionality found in many websites. Elements now incorporated include writing reviews and adding tags on materials.



Arapahoe Library District's homepage

Adding patron and staff reviews to the website was designed to encourage library users to check out materials. Making the process available online also allows users to see their own reviews published and follow others who may be reading, listening to, or watching similar materials.

To write reviews, staff and patron users first establish an account. There is no limit on the number of reviews that can be submitted during a single session. All reviews are monitored by staff, and inappropriate reviews are deleted.

The process of submitting reviews directly to the site increases productivity among staff. Previously, staff turned in reviews via an online form through the intranet. The data were collected in a database where the internet librarians copied and posted the material on their websites. With the

new website, some staff are required to write reviews; other staff choose to post reviews. All staff reviews are identified by the designation ("staff") after their username so the public can identify staff reviews specifically.

Newly reviewed items appear directly on the website in the bottom graphic box (or carousel) called "Picks." Patrons are presented with dynamic content through this feature.

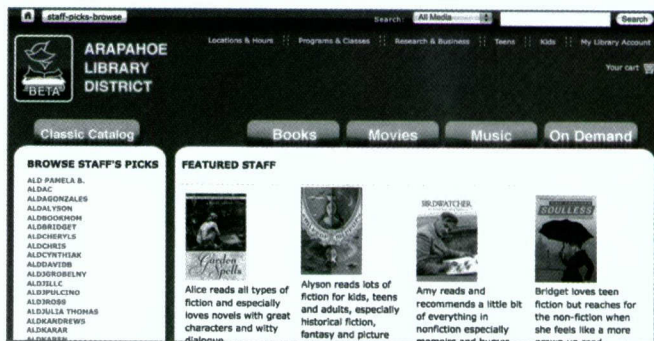
Tags are another interactive aspect of the website. Tagging lets users create dynamic lists where similar titles can be found. The internet librarians have used tagging for "if you like" lists and series information. Tags are often part of feature stories; the tag directs readers to more titles in the collection.

Staff follow certain guidelines when they create tags. For example, plural instead of singular (e.g., "mysteries" and not "mystery"), and single words are preferable. The internet librarians also have the ability to combine tags when featuring materials.

At this time, tags are not searchable; however, this is one function for future development. Tags can most easily be found by clicking on any tagged material title or through "Staff Pick" pages.

Advisory services. One of the features on the new website is the ability to provide enhanced advisory services through staff review of materials, called Staff Picks. This new feature allows staff to make recommendations to the public.

Staff Picks can be found by clicking on the "Books," "Movies," or "Music" tabs. In the "Browse" boxes on any of these pages, a link called "Staff Picks" is one option. Staff names are portrayed on the Staff Picks page if they have reviewed at least seven titles in the last 60 days. This criterion was established to ensure that current content is on the site. The right side of the page is more graphic, with a book cover plus a minibio about a staff member's reading, listening, or watching preferences. Clicking on the name presents the reviewer's picks. The latest are presented at the top and the rest are presented alphabetically underneath.



A Staff Picks display

Staff Picks are also featured in the bottom graphic box or carousel on the Books, Movies, Music, and "OnDemand" pages. Here the title, author, and Staff Pick name are all clickable and lead to further information.

ALD's virtual presence. ALD seeks a virtual presence to engage the public and interest them in the library. To help accomplish this, a link in the footer called "ALD on the Web" notifies the public of ALD's virtual presence. Icons note presences on MySpace, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter.

Multiple venues for outreach are covered in the assumption that adult Facebook readers may not necessarily want to read teen- or child-specific posts and vice versa.

The internet librarians are responsible for daily posting to their respective Facebook pages (Arapahoe Library District, Arapahoe Library District (ALD)-Teens, and Arapahoe Library District-Children's Services) and regularly to their Twitter (ArapahoeLibrary, ALD_Teens, and ALDstorytime) accounts. (To date, the teen Facebook is the most successful of ALD's virtual presences in driving traffic to the teen site.)

In addition, regular checks are carried out for user posts about ALD through Google Alerts. Any mentions are forwarded to ALD's communications department for handling.

Building a New Website

Now, back to the beginning. Focus work began in the summer of 2007 when public input was sought. Gleaned from focus group work, an online survey, and an employee survey, the following information summarizes results from the users' perspectives:

- ⊗ Patrons do not see a difference between the website and the catalog and want access to the catalog to find and place holds on materials.
- ⊗ Patrons like book and movie recommendations.
- ⊗ Patrons would like more functionality in their library account.

Further down the users' list of features used on the website is access to ALD's programs and classes, databases, and locations and hours information.

In 2008, ALD issued an RFP for website development, requiring that the website do the following:

- ⊗ Highlight the collection
- ⊗ Provide a more interactive experience
- ⊗ Seek recommendations for a new content management system

By fall of 2008, ALD had chosen two vendors. One developed the design of the site; the other created the coding and implemented the open source content management sys-

tem. Prior to this redesign, ALD had been using a custom-created content management system. A new content management system in which the internet librarians could provide more input through creating basic forms was desired. Drupal was chosen primarily because ALD could support it internally with its webmaster's skills, it fit within budget, and it was a stable open source system.

The catalog part. While the ALD website overlays the underlying catalog system, III, elements of the catalog have been pulled onto the website to provide the user with commonly used features in one setting. The Drupal III module was downloaded and modified for ALD's needs. It was important to continue to offer ALD patrons the same features and functionality they were accustomed to on the previous website. Currently, screen-scraping from the catalog, which uses the III algorithm, is done to present results. Users who prefer to search and find results by clicking on subject headings can find this feature in the catalog, labeled "Classic Catalog" and offered via tabbed navigation. The ability to search authority records is another feature unique to the Classic Catalog.

Records from the catalog are regularly imported into the website. Each unique title is issued a corresponding node number. Each node number is attached to its cover, which is imported separately from Syndetics. Comments or reviews on each node are connected via a relational table. Nodes are deleted when items are correspondingly weeded from the collection so that website search results are as current as possible.

The navigation part. We decided to take a graphic approach for presentation of the collection, and we took inspiration from retail online vendors such as iTunes, Netflix, and online bookstores. The end result portrays covers out in the graphic boxes (carousels). After many discussions, it was decided to use a navigation that is based on format; thus, the Books, Movies, Music, and OnDemand tabs are primary navigation elements.

Secondary navigation is found under the search box and provides a way for users to access "Locations & Hours," "Programs & Classes," "Research & Business," "Teens," "Kids," and "My Library Account."

For the navigation or access to noncollection-related information, a large footer that presents on every page was created.

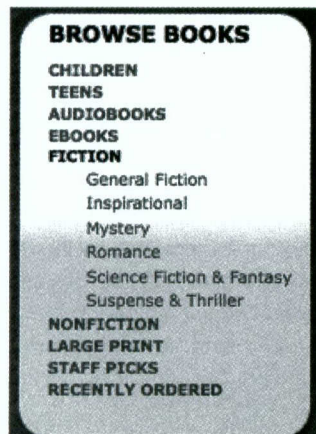
More new elements. Following a retail theme, the use of the "cart" function was implemented. This means that users can place materials into the cart and can check out all at once by entering their name, library card number, and location pickup. Users need to click on "my account" in order to further manage their holds. This takes them to the traditional library account within III.

Feature stories are now placed on all of the main navigation pages; these are changed at least weekly by the internet librarians. Only on the homepage is there a secondary news box.

On each of the Books, Movies, Music, and OnDemand pages is a "Browse" box that holds links to canned searches.



The III Feedbuilder module was purchased to create super-searches that populate these links. The links were chosen by the library materials services staff and built by the internet librarians. They run once a week and provide the most up-to-date titles.



A Browse box found under "Books"

Russian- and Spanish-language materials have been made accessible via links above the footer. Content for these pages is updated by ALD's language librarians.

More content changes.

A conscious choice was made not to populate the new website with links to outside websites. When the previous website was constructed, it was with the intention of being more of a portal site. But realizing that search engines are now doing a great job in

locating websites, it was not necessary to use the website to contain such links.

In another content change, it was decided that the new website would provide less original content than did its predecessor. This change was made because focus groups reported that they did not feel compelled to read this information.

The launch! The website launched on April 22, 2010. An article on the previous website directed patrons to the new site for preview and input. Staff meetings were held at every library branch to orient staffers to the new website and all of its features so they could talk knowledgeably with users. A "Website Updates Blog" was created, where weekly postings notified readers of changes and progress. The new website provided a link to the blog; there was also and continues to be a link, in the footer, to the blog and a separate link called "Website Feedback" in which patrons can complete the "Contact Us" form.

As expected and anticipated, many patrons offered feedback during the first month of launch. In response, these changes were made:

- Revival of "Coming Soon" lists: These lists were handpicked by ALD's internet librarian and were more popular than we realized. The Coming Soon information is portrayed on the top graphic box (carousel) on the homepage. Clicking on any of these links takes patrons to the list of handpicked titles as well as to other lists.
- Presentation of search results: Cover images were made smaller so that more results show on the first page. The

item's description was truncated, and links were added to "Check Availability" (which provides the location and availability status of the item) and "Add to Cart."

It was decided to use a navigation that is based on format.

Future Work

The next steps for website work will include improving search results. Many users feel that search results are less than optimal and are different between the website and the catalog; implementing enterprise search will improve results and will provide an improved experience for patrons.

ALD's webmaster continues to work on coding improvements and cosmetic changes to encompass browser differences. Also, the internet librarians are becoming more Drupal-savvy so they can consider Drupal modules as the website evolves to work on new functionality.

Focus group work will be conducted around advisory online services to improve functionality for these pages. And analyzing Google Analytics information will provide insight to high-hit pages. With this information comes potential modifications and changes based on patterns of use.

Conclusion

The importance of communication, internally and externally, cannot be taken for granted. Communication was well-handled when responding to patrons—ALD has responded positively to user input in making changes when many spoke to the same issue. And ALD has created a website that speaks to what users want most—the collection.

The website now incorporates elements of interactivity that hadn't been possible with ALD's previous website. As we continue to evolve and grow, who knows what new interactive elements will cross ALD's horizon? ✿

Cynthia Kiyotake has been in the library field since her teens, in which her first job was shelving materials and typing catalog cards. After obtaining her library degree from the University of Denver, she worked as the library director for the Medical Group Management Association, a trade association for medical group practices. She is currently the coordinator / supervisor of web services at ALD and oversees ALD's websites, social presence, and intranet. Kiyotake can be contacted at ckiyotake@ald.lib.co.us.

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