

Senior Services in the Public Library

I liked doing this assignment for several reasons. First of all I find the assignment to be an interesting one. The “senior” population continues to grow and as you said this population is more active than ever. Also, as children and teen services often are so pervasive on a libraries web site, I was curious how easy it would be to find services for the older adult. It also becomes a study in web site usability. One of the biggest problems for libraries has been the marketing of resources and services. The question is always asked, how can we get patrons to know what we have to offer? This has never been more important as libraries now offer such a wealth of informational access, programs and services. There are debates of course, as to how much a library’s web page really sells its resources and services – and it can be argued that it is dependant on what kind of technology its clientele has access too. Some may argue that your average senior citizen is not a savvy web user – so why create pages listing resources for them, as that might not be the best way to get the word out? This may be true in some cases, but as time goes on, more and more older adults will be using the internet for a wide range of uses, and libraries must realize this. For my three public libraries I chose the Boston Public Library (BPL), merely to further explore my local resource, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and the Tampa Bay Public Library. I picked a library in Florida simply because of all the retirees.

I started with the BPL [<http://www.bpl.org>]. In brief, they have some interesting resources, though finding them on the web page was not easy. When one goes to the

main web page for the BPL they might feel a bit overwhelmed. It is a busy page, presenting a lot of information. There is a “Teen Lounge” and a “Kids Page” right at the top, but nothing for older adults, or even adults. You can find an adult booklist from the “Quick Find” feature, but that links you to an area in research services. I ended up going to the search/site index page. The internal search engine is broken, so I did a “find in page” for senior. Eventually I did find something. Under “Central Library”, in “Adult Services” is a link to “Senior Adults”. While I did find this information I think it is quite hidden from the average patron. Not everyone understands a site index, and perhaps if the search engine had actually been working that would have been ok, but, as it hasn’t been for several days it is a problem. I went back and clicked through to see if it was intuitive at all. Once you click to the Central Library (which isn’t terribly intuitive in the first place) you then come upon “Adult and Readers Information Services”. That page lists a number of things, none of which are services to older adults. However, in the sidebar, if you are paying attention, you will see that it has been expanded to include a range of items, one of them being “Senior Adults”. From this page one learns of a number of services or resources for the older adult. They have a large print book collection, Bi-Folkal kits, mobile library services for the homebound, and perhaps the most interesting – the “Never Too Late” group. This group, established in 1950, is the longest existing library-sponsored program for older adults in the country. The program offers a wide range of informal educational programs, covering a wide range of topics and formats. Several programs are devoted each season to topics, issues, etc., that are of particular interest to senior adults. Not listed within these services is a variety of equipment owned by the BPL that the older adult may need in order to access

information. This may be because of hearing or vision loss, or some other age related disability. This information would be useful to have linked on the Senior Adult page as well. As far as making the all the information more accessible, a link on the top page right alongside of kids and teens would do the trick. However, top level real estate is hard to come by – however, given that seniors may not know all the tricks of searching, it might not be a bad idea. Also, posting this information, or particularly the information regarding the “Never Too Late” group around the library would be helpful, as well as in communities with a higher percentage of older adults. In general, once you find the information, you discover that the BPL does have materials and services for the older adult; just making sure they know that is the key.

The next library I tackled was the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (formal name for the Pittsburgh Public Library) [<http://www.clpgh.org>]. I liked their website right away, but again, you find the top link for kids and teens, and nothing for adults or older adults. It was again through some non-intuitive searching that I found what I needed. In fact, each time I went back to the page I would find some other gem of information that I hadn't found before. They have a prominently displayed search engine, so I used it. I did a search for “senior services”, “senior”, “senior adult” and “senior citizens”. Most of my hits were referencing “resource guides” that the library has put together. Through some reverse searching I then went into the “resources” section, went to “guides”, and then guessed that “senior citizens” might be found in the section entitled “Society, People, and Cultures”. Here I could see, in a much clearer way, all the resource guides available for the older adult. From one of these pages I also learned that the library has a print collection for senior citizens as well, located in the social sciences department of the

main library. However, when one finds their way on the website to this area, the only thing listed is their collection of BiFolkal kits.

I then went into the Services menu and they did have a section for seniors, however, the only thing listed was computer training. However, it is interesting that they have computer classes especially for seniors. I think this would be immensely helpful for the older adult to be learning in a classroom of peers. There is also a section on services for people with disabilities, which again, like the BPL lists a variety of adaptive technology equipment, such as screen readers, talking books, etc. This is one of those tricky areas. You want the seniors who need this to be able to find it – but you don't want all seniors to think the library assumes they have all gone deaf and blind in their old age. But at the same time, an older adult might not think of himself or herself as “disabled” but some of this equipment might be extremely helpful to them. It certainly isn't a problem to be solved in a short paper. Lastly, Carnegie also has several programs of interest to seniors. I found these by doing a search from their events/classes menu (interestingly, the computer classes do not come up in this search). They do have a book club for senior adults, as well as a number of wellness programs that would be of interest to seniors, although they are not targeted specifically as such. They also have a bookmobile service, and while I couldn't find it stated, I have to believe they also have a program for the homebound. Also, services like their phone and/or internet “Ask a Librarian” could be better marketed to older adults, particularly those who are homebound (and obviously with access to a computer or telephone.) or without transportation.

Carnegie really seems to have a lot of resources and services for their older community. I expected as much, as Pittsburgh does have a well-established older population. However, they would be well served by a web page that brought together all of the information in one place. I'm not even sure I found it all, because as I mentioned before, each time I searched the page I would find a new piece of information. You really can't ask your patrons to do that though. And again, posting information about their programs and services in physical locations where older adults go (community centers, retirement homes, grocery stores, churches, etc.) would be very helpful.

The last library I looked at was Tampa Public Library [<http://www.thpl.org/>], which is part of the Tampa-Hillsborough County library system. This was clearly the simplest page I looked at. Not in a negative way, it just seemed easier to use from the start. From the main page I chose "services". Once on the services page there are many listing that a senior might be interested in. However, there is no special category for them. However, as the services are not deeply buried within the website, this seems ok. The first topic I explored was "Accessible Library Services", in which a number of adaptive technologies, equipment and services are listed. They have a very wide array of equipment for visually impaired patrons, as well as the Talking Book service. A good thing about their services page is that things are listed twice. Many of the items listed under Accessible Library Services are also listed on the main Services page, such as the Bookmobile Service, the Books-by-Mail program, the large print book collection, and the talking books collection. These are clearly some of their most important services, and they are doing well to let that be known. For their large print collection they have access to the second largest collection of large print materials in the country, through their

partnership with Sun City Center library. They also have online book clubs that could be great for the homebound individual. Some of these take the form of email discussion while they also have “audio online” book clubs. Very nice for the visually impaired – or for anyone who just wants to listen instead of read. Tampa has a wide variety of adult programming, which is listed both on the web and in a monthly newsletter. While they don’t have programming specifically listed for seniors, many of the topics would be of interest, from gardening, to book discussions, to healthcare, prescription medication, cancer care, etc. A number of these programs were created with the older adult in mind. Finally, they have a section called “Juniors to Seniors” in which interview with older adults have been recorded and transcribed in efforts to create and encourage “improved understanding and communication between generations in Hillsborough County”...it “connects younger and older citizens in a positive educational environment”. Tampa takes the first place prize as far as web organization of resources and services for seniors.

In conclusion, each of the libraries I explored had a fair amount of resources, services and programs for the older adult. How they were presented on the web site was vastly different from library to library, but happily, it doesn’t seem that any of these libraries have forgotten their older clientele, and in fact in Tampa you get the sense that they are the main clientele. However, if the web was the only way for seniors to learn about the services in Boston and in Pittsburgh, I would be very worried. I will hope that they market in other ways and hopefully will in time gather their resources and services on one easily found page. Not only for the seniors to be able to find easily, but also their family or caregiver.