

The first step to a quality web site is a good homepage. This is the page by which a library will most often be judged. It is often the first page a searcher or patron will see and it needs to be usable. I let this be one of my main criteria for selection of my top five sites. I easily looked at over 100 pages, some only for a second or two while I screamed “oh no!” – others for much longer. This is truly an addictive assignment. I finally came up with my shortlist of 18 sites and then muddled through those until I got it down to seven, then five. Sometimes a site would have an ok homepage, but that would be just about it. Or there would be no consistency between the pages, which is an important aspect - a consistent look and feel that guided a user from page to page. It was difficult to come up with my top five. In many ways the perfect page would be a blending of a little bit of each of the following pages. However, I think any library looking to revamp their website would be well served in looking at the following sites.

The first site is that of the Multnomah County Library (<http://www.multcolib.org/>), which serves the metropolitan area of Portland, Oregon. This homepage is well-organized and broken into four key areas. As each category shows the contents, there is no guessing what might be contained in “About Your Library”. Patrons can access library hours, the catalog, virtual reference, etc. with just one click. They have flattened the possible hierarchy of the pages to get more on the top page, and this in my opinion is very good. Whenever users don’t have to guess what link they should choose for something is a plus.

Particularly as librarians and library staff often assume that all our users know the meaning of the library jargon we use, however, this is often not the case.

The content of the homepage is quite good. A user would get a good sense of what this library has to offer them. From asking a reference question via email, to seeing what “Cyber Senior” classes are available. (This would have been a great one to look at for the senior services assignment). Electronic resources, various youth resources, and access to your account are right there for straight from the homepage. Again, since they have put many key links (19 main ones) on their homepage, it simply allows them to show more of what they have to offer. The subsequent pages have a consistent look and feel to them, and you can easily navigate into pages and back out again as there is a link to the homepage in the upper right corner of each page. The pages also do well to link back and forth to each other, truly making a web of information.

Aesthetically speaking, the page uses color sparingly, but enough to keep it from looking boring. There is a photo to the left, which changes with each reload of the page. This adds an interesting and dynamic element to the page. I’m still not completely sure how I feel about the images to the right – which I assume change from time to time to highlight events or collections in the library. They may make the page look a bit too busy, but the benefits of the pages win out. Other key qualities on the homepage is an alternative site in Spanish, a text version link, a “last updated” date, as well as a link for “questions, comments and suggestions”. There is also a general search for the website listed on the homepage. Overall the page is quite usable and not intimidating at all.

The next site is the Williamsburg Regional Library (<http://www.wrl.org/>), which serves the Williamsburg, VA area. This page actually grew on me as I continued to explore it. I feel it is very well organized and uncluttered. I'm not sure I care for their use of photos in their design – but since they are kept clearly apart from the information, as opposed to be interspersed throughout (which seems to be a favorite thing for public libraries to do) it doesn't get in the way of the information. And the information is very good. They also use color, but in a minimal way (aside from that within the photos). Williamsburg also puts many links to their most important pages on the homepage – including the catalog, library hours, a site map, and a site search directly from the homepage. They also have contact information, as well as links to “ask a librarian”. The homepage also tells the best resolution for viewing the page, as well as gives a “last updated” date.

On lower level pages the look and feel are kept consistent by the simple use of colors and fonts. A navigation bar follows the user through many (though not all) of the lower level pages making navigation quick and easy. The other pages are well organized and uncluttered. They don't try to do too much on one page, instead opting to make several pages instead of confusing users with four topics on one page. They have one page that takes you to either the “Kid's Corner”, “Teen Turf” or “Parent's Place”. These sites have a slightly different look and feel to them, but they maintain enough similarities in design, font and color use that you know where you are. They have simply chosen to give these areas a bit more individuality given their audiences. Lower level pages also contain a link back to the homepage in the lower left corner.

The third site is that of the San Francisco Public Library (<http://sfpl.lib.ca.us/>). A big city like San Francisco...one might expect something colorful and exciting from their public library. Nope. They have clearly learned that simplicity is the way to go. I don't want to see dancing bears, floating clouds, spinning globes, or books opening and closing over and over again (yes, I saw all these things during my exploration). This site is simple. It might even be a touch boring – but their goal is to get the information to their users in the best way, not show off all the new flash skills they learned.

Some features of this site include Spanish version, a catalog search box straight from the homepage, and a site search. A link to hours, locations and phone numbers is prominently located right in the middle, underneath the only photo on the page. Near the bottom you also find a “mailto” link, as well as the library's main address and phone number. The lower level pages keep the same look and feel, while maintaining a sidebar which houses five main items, the “catalog”, “electronic resources”, “search the internet”, and “search our site”. They have 18 main links off their homepage – a very good number. As in the earlier site, this shows that they are reducing the page hierarchy to put information people want up front. This gets items such as “your account” and “ask a librarian” right where the user wants it – at the beginning. Other page contents include links to kids, teens, internet resources, job openings, news pages, and events calendar, just to name a few. There is also a link to their Internet use policy at the bottom of the page.

Graphically, they have done some interesting things on their site. Except for the sidebar buttons on the subsequent pages, all of their links are good old-fashioned text links, in the tried and true blue color. This hardly ever happens these days – which might

add to the slightly “boring” look this page has. They haven’t made image links on their homepage as many other sites have -- they are working in Times New Roman. However, this is going to keep their site accessible to ancient machines dialing in on a 28.8 modem, as well as to a variety of accessibility software. They are definitely taking the “less is more” approach as far as font and color are concerned. They are all about the shades of blue. I appreciate their somewhat minimalist approach.

The fourth site is the newly revamped page of the Spokane Public Library (<http://198.1.37.9/>) in Washington State - so new in fact they are still linking to a straight IP address. I went back and forth as to whether or not to include this site, but in the end it won. I decided to include it probably more for design reasons than anything else. I want to believe that the content is organized just strongly as the design carried out – and I think it is. This page feels very inviting to me. Now my split personality will come out. As much as I appreciated the simplicity of San Francisco’s site, I appreciate the design elements of this site. Perhaps because I feel like I understand the reasoning behind both. This site could certainly give old modems and/or browsers some troubles, as it is more graphic intensive, but it does make me want to linger longer than at the SFPL. Perhaps it is the photos of the nice smiling people or the color choice. Spokane is using the ALA’s “@ your library” – and it works quite well on their homepage. There are several great features that follow you from page to page. At any time you can access your account – there is always an entry box at the bottom of the page for you to put your card number and pin. I think this is pretty cool. Also, in the upper right hand corner, underneath the top header bar, there is the date – BIG. I like that, I’m not sure why, perhaps I just

always forget what day it is. Yes, the more time I spend here the less time I want to spend at the SFPL. Hum. Well, I still stand by my thoughts that the SFPL is a good page. Content over design. Spokane is just reminding me how much I can appreciate a good usable design. And I really came upon so few of those in my hunt.

There is good content here as well. Library hours are slightly buried inside “About the Library”. But there is a site map, address and phone number info, and a link to their “Ask Us” service from the homepage. They also have useful links to their library newsletter, community information, branch libraries, kids, teens, “readers” and government. The lower level pages are easy to navigate through – and the top, bottom and sidebars follow you throughout. This might require more scrolling or shorter pages, but I don’t see it as an initial problem. In short, I find Spokane’s design to be clean and content friendly.

Continuing on with our fifth and final contestant...err, winner that is. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (<http://www.carnegielibrary.org/>) site makes you feel like you can do a lot. And indeed you can. With JavaScript enabled on your browser (which most are – and accessibility software works well with most javascript) there are over fifty links from the top homepage alone! There is also website search box if you don’t want to look through the categories and links, and there is a link to a “live” librarian. They were the only library to have a separate “Help” page linked to from the top. They also have a site map, and contact information, as well as links at the bottom of the page to directions. They have a “Fast Find” menu at the very top that acts as yet a third access point from the homepage to certain information. In fact that is what I noticed about this page, the wealth of information, and the variety of ways to get to it. Not everyone thinks alike – and this page responds to that. As

far as categories go – they are similar to other sites, but the links off those categories get quite specific – but again, they do so at a glance. One content area that this library has that others really did not is an extensive collection of resource/research guides. They must have a huge staff of librarians, because not only do they have literally hundreds of research guides, but they also have an equal amount of book lists of similar topics. They also have subject guides! The more I look around at this site the more impressed I am. They put many an academic library to shame. Though I could also see a new user possibly becoming overwhelmed. But then again, they are laying out all the information quite clearly, so you only need to go where you want to.

In terms of design, theirs is a simple one -- they use color and fonts consistently, making the pages work together. There are elements such as the top toolbar, the “Fast Find” and the sidebar site search that follow the user throughout the site, allowing easy navigation to other areas. The site is not graphics intensive, and the homepage houses the main photo. Something that this library does that others did not is that they sell merchandise with the library logo on it -- mugs, t-shirts, etc, as well as items dealing with historic Pittsburgh themes. Being a well-known, large library probably helps sales quite a bit. I would really like to see a copy of their budget – this library looks amazing (and I have always heard it is).

I knew these sites were similar in some ways, different in others. I think talking through them made me realize how many different ways there are to present information to your audience. Each library has to decide for itself what would best serve its clientele, while at the same time be manageable for the staff.

Honorable Mentions

I have a few other sites that are worth mentioning. The New Haven Public Library (<http://www.nhfpl.lib.ct.us/>) has a nice design, but the longer I spent on the page, the less user-friendly I found it. The Arapahoe Library District (<http://www.arapahoelibraries.org/>) has its site available in four different languages -- English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Russian! I found this impressive enough to warrant mentioning. It is a pretty good site as well.

I wanted to include the Evansville Public Library (<http://evcpl.lib.in.us/>), but in the end didn't due to their use of unruly frames and poor use of their top homepage. I liked their sidebar quite a bit, for its colors and design, as well as for its category breakdown. However, they wasted a tremendous amount of space on the homepage – giving absolutely no useful information without clicking into the site, so it had to go.

And taking the award for what not to do for your homepage...there were many, but this one really stuck out in my mind. I'm not sure what the fine people at the Central Mississippi Regional Library System (<http://www.cmrls.lib.ms.us/>) were thinking...but I would say they broke just about every design rule in the book. Interestingly, some of the lower level pages get considerably better, but many do not.

In closing – this was fun!