2014

Op Ed -- Opinions and Editorials

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Recommended Citation

Nelson, David (2014) "Op Ed -- Opinions and Editorials," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 5, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6849>

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Op Ed — Do We Need Two Library Landing Pages?

by **David Nelson** (Chair, Collection Development and Management, Walker Library, Middle Tennessee State University) <david.nelson@mtsu.edu>

I think all library Websites stink.

Now that I have your attention, I can retract a bit the bluntness of that statement. But, I don't think there will be much argument that library Websites tend to leave a lot to be desired. Part of the problem is a situation not of our own making, and often beyond our control. Library Websites, like other Websites at a university or college, are forced to dedicate a significant part of their real estate to promote the school's continuous recruiting efforts.

On the library side, there is another problem that arises for a completely different reason. Library Websites suffer from multiple personality disorder: they seek to accomplish two ends on the same page, and herein lies the root cause of their often confusing structure. Why does a person come to an academic library Website? There are exactly two reasons:

- 1) to do an actual subject search by accessing the library's various resources provided for this purpose and
- 2) to find out about specific library contacts, services, or features — hours open today, room reservations, etc. The first we can call the topical search need, the second the service need.

I suggest that each of these two very distinct activities should each be represented by its own distinct Website instead of the awkward combination of having the two on a single Website. That is, the library landing page should be a simple page that displays two options from which the user selects the one appropriate to the information need at hand:

1. Do you want to search for some topic of interest or locate a specific book, article, film, music, etc.?
2. Do you need some specific library service or need information about the library?

What do we gain by this? First of all, it allows us to develop a distinctive, unambiguous focus for these two destination pages. For the topical search page, we will now be able to more effectively optimize the page to communicate our various resources and give them the space that they merit. If one thinks about it, we spend enormous amounts of money on our

resources, yet we market them so poorly — indeed, for all intents and purposes, I would argue not at all! Yes, Libguides have been a boon in this area and likewise for those librarians who can get access to their campus LMS to strategically place links to relevant resources in their corresponding courses. But this is not a solution to the larger marketing problem.

Instead, we need to do more and do it better. A topical search page would allow the trialed resources to be more effectively communicated to the academic community and for our currently available resources to be routinely showcased. After acquiring a database, we send out the birth announcement, and then, like our languishing titles in our physical collection, it is exiled to an A-Z link. But, unlike our physical collection, our electronic resources constitute the largest share of our continuing costs. We tend to overlook the fact that each year a new cohort joins the academic community. We conduct introduction-to-research and “information literacy” sessions, but without the immediate meaningful need or constant reminder, it's just in one ear and out the other. We need to look more upon the (expensive) resources we provide as our products that need constant advertising.

The services page can now be better optimized to meet our user needs. By focusing this page only on our services, it becomes easier to monitor what most interests our users.

By forcing the user, who already has formed the implicit decision, to choose between the two options, will greatly benefit our metrics. We will have a very nicely sorted usage record. How many users today went to the topic side and how many to the services side? This will be enormously helpful. It will greatly assist in further optimizing our sites because we will be tracking usage that is specific to a task rather than needing to separate them out as we currently have them — a job which is often quite difficult.

This idea is hardly novel. Any number of financial-based sites do

this. Are you a personal investor or an institutional investor? You chose the one you are, and you get rerouted to the page you should be on. They figured out some time ago how confusing it was for their customers to find what they needed when the two were combined on one page.

Emerald did something similar by going the route of site separation with a content delivery platform (*emeraldinsight.com*) and a corporate platform (*emeraldgroupublishing.com*) in early 2014. This separation then allowed for each site to have its own distinct identity and purpose. They found that they had a significant increase in their (dual) site usage which they attribute to their decision to separate into the two sites. They saw a 36% increase in March and a 24% increase in April (personal communication, **Danny Overstreet, Emerald**).

Will users object? Will the university object? Actually, the university can still have its footprint on the landing page, which will only consist of the two decision boxes. Another advantage: plenty of space for university marketing plus a cleaner look — without the negative overwhelming look of so many sites. Far from finding this new format problematic or annoying, users will be receptive, since it will clarify the process for them.

We accomplish a number of critical objectives: maximizing as much as we can the use of our expensive resources, optimizing our pages for the very purposes to which they are devoted, and advancing our case for which we have been such poor advocates in the past ourselves — that we can effectively compete with the large search engines because we have resources that are not freely available on the Web, resources that make a university library collection unique. We can more effectively proclaim our value proposition: we supply the information that you need and cannot get elsewhere. 🌱