

# Building Web Sites That Work for Your Media Center

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## Library Media Programs in a Web-Wise World

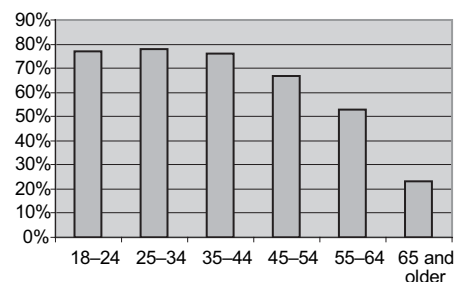


Figure 1.  
Internet users by age

John Horrigan, of the Pew Internet and American Life Project <www.pewinternet.org> recently presented information about Internet usage and age demographics to an audience at OTX Research, a technology firm that supports real estate and mortgage industries.<sup>1</sup> He noted that the highest percent of users are from ages eighteen to forty-four, peaking with twenty-five-to thirty-four-year-olds (figure 1). Of importance to OTX was the fact that these age groups are homebuyers. Of importance to us is that these Internet users are the parents of our students.

In "The Changing Picture of Who's Online and What They Do," another Pew publication, Mary Madden reported that aside from e-mail (still the killer app of the Net) and surfing for fun, the top five daily activities of Net users are: getting the news (29 million); research as part of a job (22 million); looking for information on a hobby or interest (22 million); answering a question (22 million); and researching a product or service for purchase (21 million).<sup>2</sup>

Not only are more Americans using the Internet, but they are using it every day to solve everyday problems. How can we, as media professionals, leverage these behaviors through our school library media Web sites to help us do our jobs?

### Planning Your New Web Site or Web Reconstruction

You may already have a Web site for your media center. You have worked hard to select the resources that you feel your school's teachers and students need. You have mastered technical

skills in order to place bullets at the beginning of each Web link and to create a nice, clean, sans serif font for the text. You have probably taken great care in digitally photographing features of your library and anguished over getting the images smaller than fifty kilobytes so that it will not significantly slow the loading of your page. Good for you!

But does your Web site help you do your job?

### Goal

As you consider constructing—or reconstructing—a library media center Web site, the first and foremost question you need to ask and answer is "why?" In answering this question, we tend to immediately think of our everyday efforts to provide valuable information to teachers and students as a primary reason for a school library media Web site. However, we must challenge ourselves to step back and examine the overreaching goals of our job—assisting students to become successful learners as well as supporting teachers in their efforts to create and craft meaningful learning experiences for their students—and to do this within the context of a contemporary information environment. Keep your program goals front and center when planning your Web site.

You might also want to identify the problems and barriers that prevent students and teachers from making the best use of media services in your school. You may have a series of valuable reference books that are being underutilized, or teachers who are not make

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significant use of flexible scheduling. Consider using your Web site to help you overcome those barriers.

## Target Audience and Actions

No professional accomplishes his or her goals alone. It happens when a community (small or large) behaves in ways that lead to success. In creating a Web site that works, it is important to think of your audience as your success community, people who are in a position to help you do your job. It will include the teachers and students in your school. But you might also consider school and district administrators, parents, and the broader community that the school serves.

The key to developing a Web site that helps you do your job is identifying how your target audience can help you accomplish your goals. Toyota's webmaster wants to see car buyers entering their dealerships to buy their cars. You want to see students curiously examining books on your shelves and trying to answer essential questions, or teachers asking you for help in identifying Web links for a WebQuest they are building. You want to see parents reading to their children at night and community members voting for that bond referendum. Consider how your Web site can make those things happen.

## Content and Format

Next, think about the information that will provoke and empower the behaviors you wish to see. If you want to see parents engaged in their children's reading through Accelerated Reader or other reading programs, then include an interactive listing of available books. Solicit book reviews from teachers, students, or even parents and publish them on the Web site. If you want to help teachers make better use of flexible scheduling of library media resources, then consider an online curriculum map for the school. With access to current and future curriculum activities, you can make teachers aware of resources and services in a timely way that helps them do their job—helping you to do yours.

If you need new investments in media technologies, feature a dream media center page where you describe the services that

could be offered to students if you had a mini lab of computers, a video studio, or media production stations. Whatever your dream or long-term goals, use your Web page to communicate that. You never know who will see it and help you get there!

## Design

The technical task of getting your Web site information through the thousands of miles of cable, airways, routers, and switches is the easy part. The hard part is spanning the final eighteen inches between the users' computer display and their understanding. This depends upon the design of your Web page, and design is hard. However, there are a few rules that will help information present itself to users.

## Media and Format

Most of the readers of this article went to school when communication skills involved, almost exclusively, writing. Writing remains core to communicating specific ideas to our audiences. However, other media, such as images, animation, sound, music, and even video, might better communicate some information.

Complex data can often be more effectively conveyed with graphs. Other concepts need animation or mini-movies to explain them. Images, music, and video can evoke emotion as well as convey information. Use these media formats, but only if they help you accomplish your goals. Otherwise, they distract people from it.

## Layout

People do not come to the Internet to read. If they want to read, then they curl up with a good book. People come to the Internet to learn, to answer a question, or to solve a problem, typically scanning Web pages for information. Your information becomes more valuable to the reader if it is scannable. To make a Web page (or printed page) more usable:

- **Indent the content.** When headings and subheads extend to the left, they are easier to scan, and the reader can more easily find the information they need (figure 2).
- **Keep paragraphs short.** Most paragraphs of text should be no more than

three or four sentences. This makes information appear less time consuming, and therefore more inviting, to the reader (figure 2).

- **Bullet your lists.** Any list that exceeds two items should be bulleted, communicating to the scanning eye that it is a list of items or options (figure 3).
- **Use fonts wisely.** Display different types of information in different fonts. For instance, a set of instructions might be displayed as larger text than that of the general content, indicating to the scanning eye that the information has a different goal (figure 4).
- **Create eye magnets.** Speculate on the questions or problems that might cause people to click the link to view your page and then find text within your page that is related to these ideas and bold it. Also add images to catch the eye (figure 5).

## Inviting Returns

Remember, you are building a Web page to help you do your job and, more importantly, to help other people help you do your job. You will achieve this goal when people actually use your Web pages and return to reuse them. So, getting

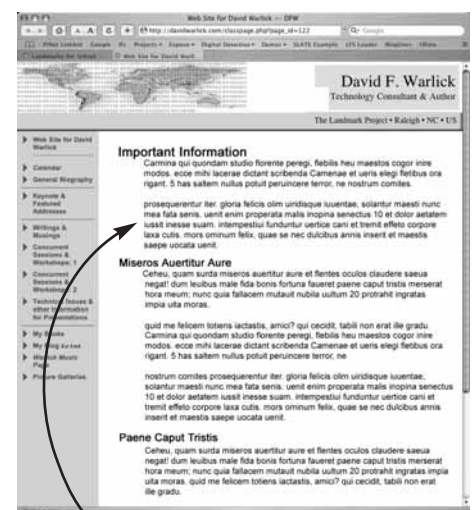


Figure 2. Concise blurbs and readability

people to your site is critical to your success. Here are some tips to attract visitors:

- Make sure that the media center's Web site is prominently featured and linked from the school site.
- Convince teachers to link to the media center site from their classroom Web pages.
- Feature your site URL on all handouts, policy manuals, and any other documents that come from the library media center.
- If teachers use word processing to create their own handouts or study guides, create a template file for them that includes the URL of the media center site at the top or bottom of every page.
- If you have an answering machine or voice mail in the media center, then include in your answer message the URL of the site, suggesting that callers might find the answer to their question online.
- Include the URL on your business card. They are inexpensive, easy to carry, and easy to distribute.

Getting people to your site is only step one. The next task is getting them to come back. Tips for encouraging return visits:

- Another approach to help people help you do your job is to think of unique ways to help them do their jobs. For example, each week, scan the TV guide looking for programming that is relevant to what teachers are teaching. Create a section of your Web site that lists these programs along with their times and channels.
- For families and community, offer information that is timely. Learn what media technologies are popular this holiday season (laptops, wireless networks, digital video camcorders, MP3 players) and link to reviews on the various brands.
- At the end of the school year, offer information about vacation destinations. In fact, you might solicit reviews from students on vacation trips that they took during previous vacation seasons.

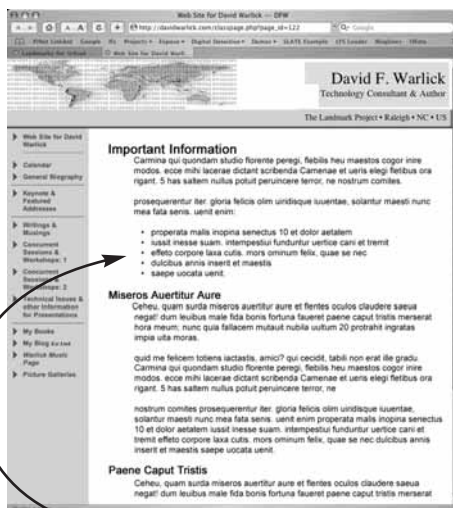
### Literacy

At the heart of this article and your school library media Web site is communication—delivering messages across a digital and networked information environment that add value to the services that we provide. This is not only an increasingly everyday aspect of work among many professionals, but it is an essential skill.

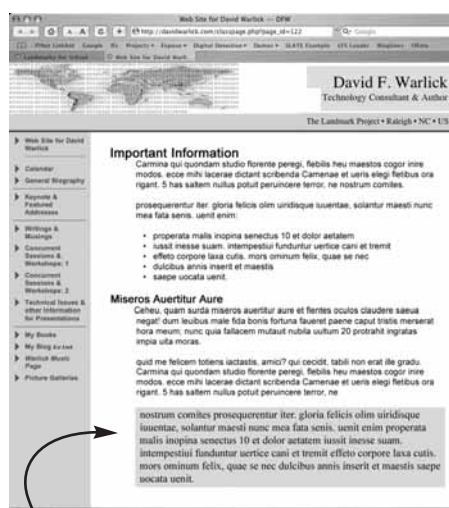
Information is abundant and becoming overwhelming. In order for our messages to be read, heard, or seen, they must compete for our audience's attention. Use your Web site as a model of communication for your community. Integrate images to add color, build animations to express complex concepts, use sound to communicate with emotions, and use video to tell a story. Help students and staff become wise consumers and literate citizens through the information you provide and the way your Web site communicates. That is the work we do. ●

### References

1. John B. Horrigan, "Trends in Internet Adoption and Use: Comparing Minority Groups," presentation given at OTX Research, May 11, 2004.
2. Mary Madden and Lee Rainier, "America's Online Pursuits: The Changing Picture of Who's Online and What They Do," Pew Internet and American Life Project, 22 Dec. 2003, <[www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Online\\_Pursuits\\_Final.PDF](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Online_Pursuits_Final.PDF)>. Accessed 1 July 2004.



Lists should be bulleted



Distinguish information with different fonts and highlighting



Create eye magnets to draw reader attention to content

Figure 3. Typography aids scanning

Figure 4. Typography signals types of information

Figure 5. Images and bolded text catch the eye