



digital librarianship

Working with, Not Against, Web-Savvy Users



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If you have patrons who think they're so smart about the Internet, fine: Have them work with you to start new services or to maintain some Web pages. That way, everybody wins.

These days, librarians are often challenged by the savvy patrons who spend hours on the Web every day, exploring new services and products. They are the ones who come to the reference desk asking you if you have seen this new database or tried that nifty software, and want to ask questions about them, or—just as likely—talk about them, bragging about their latest discoveries. It can be taxing on the librarians who have their traditional work cut out for them, and who are also expected to know about anything that happens on the Web. Many of the savvy patrons are playing one-upmanship, and will go out of their way to prove that they know more than the librarians. Physicians and nurses face the same problems when patients come to them with information and misinformation acquired from the Web about the latest drugs that cure cancer, or that make you look 20 years younger. These are more difficult questions to handle, as they are very personal issues and often may have dire consequences, which is a serious burden on the healthcare professionals. Librarians are not under this kind of pressure, but they may still need some tools to ease the extra burden brought by Web-savvy users. My suggestion (from the convenience of the ivory tower of academia, I admit) for taming the avalanche of input is to channel it in the right direction: Work *with* the savviest patrons, not *against* them (by dismissing their input), and show that their knowledge can benefit others while satisfying the Web-savvy patrons' ego at the same time.

Savvy Searchers' Corner

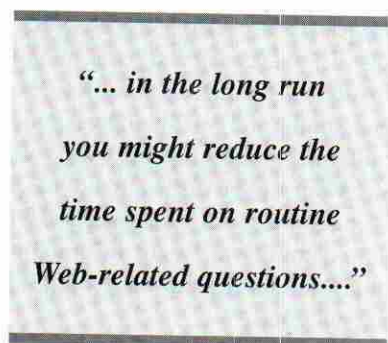
You can create a page that links from your library's home page where you can announce the latest developments in browsers, search engines, and digital resources. This would be a nice resource for those who have the interest and the attention span required to explore novel features, without handholding (aka bibliographic instruction) from librarians. This "Savvy Searchers' Corner" would include short blurbs about the most relevant new developments in the search arena. For instance, at the time I'm writing this, I'd note the extension of Google's search capabilities to 11 new word processing, spreadsheet, slide show, and PostScript files.

In most cases you may link the user directly to the developer's appropriate Help file for further information. Occasionally, it may be more efficient to illustrate how to use a new feature right inside the text of your announcement. For instance, "Use a query like this "*subject indexing*" file-type:ppt to retrieve PowerPoint documents about subject indexing."

Since such a Savvy Searchers' Corner might often announce a beta or brand new final version of software, I recommend that you add some warnings to minimize the users' frustration, such as this: "You may preview the documents in HTML format, but these converted formats are often difficult to read because of the scattered text or the color combination of the background and the fonts that Google generates for searching purposes. In this case you must

click on the title field in the results list, which in turn will invoke the appropriate host software if it is installed on the computer you use." It would also be a smart idea to provide links in the announcements for lesser-known terms from the excellent PC Webopedia (<http://www.pcwebopedia.com/TERM/P/PostScript.html>).

This Savvy Searchers' Corner could be updated weekly or fortnightly. Libraries that do not have the human resources for this might just provide a list of links to the list of new search products and services that are updated daily by the most informed and trustworthy search gurus, such as Gary Price (<http://resourceshelf.blogspot.com>) and Chris Sherman (<http://searchenginewatch.com/searchday>).



This could also be the place where the library announces digital resources that are certainly not for the faint of heart, such as the very powerful SurfWax service (<http://www.surfwax.com>), which offers far more than the typical search engines even in its free version, but hardly provides instant gratification for the full spectrum of options. Similarly, in an academic environment where computer science courses are offered, this Savvy Searchers' Corner is the place where the library can notify people about ResearchIndex, formerly known as CiteSeer (<http://citeseer.nj.nec.com>), which offers awesome citation indexing of free HTML, Adobe PDF, and PostScript documents of mostly computer and information science conference papers published on the Web.

Our Patrons Suggest

This could be a site to post your patrons' own Web site recommendations. However, you should moderate it to avoid surprises and liabilities, because a patron might post

a raving announcement about a Web site that can do homework for the kids, and might slip in the URL of a site that's not really appropriate for a public library.

Before you start letting your users post recommendations, there should be clear guidelines about the types of sites, the format, and content of the description that they must follow. It must also be clear that it is not their constitutional right to make the library post any announcement.

Such a site can provide an outlet for those who want to share their knowledge, and indeed, quite often savvy patrons will have information about a good new site, or they might offer a search tip that the librarians are not yet aware of. In the print world, *PC Magazine* has followed this route by publishing short letters from readers that suggest solutions for common problems. Such cooperation may be encouraged by giving credit to the patrons who made contributions, and by giving some award for the savviest Web user of the year.

A Web Q & A Section

We know from studies that a majority of patrons don't like to ask questions face to face because they don't want to appear ignorant. We also know that almost none of the patrons come back to the reference desk if the first advice they got did not work. But think: Providing a Q & A service could eliminate the inhibiting factor of face-to-face communication. This Q & A section can be based on answers to actual new questions by patrons, and should be made searchable to allow others to see whether their questions have already been answered. Alternatively, the Q & A section can be set up as an FAQ section, anticipating the most typical questions that patrons would ask and providing the answers. FAQs are very common on many Web sites, so this would be a very natural forum to answer such questions as, "Which search engines can search for AIDS, without retrieving every site that mentions financial aids and hearing aids?" The right answer is HotBot and AltaVista Advanced search (or Simple Search if you put your all-upper-case search term inside quotation marks).

Answering such questions can also provide a good vehicle to educate users about

the more refined searching of such ultra-smart and ultra-polite search engines as Google (which, among other niceties, gingerly suggests correctly spelled alternatives for your misspelled query term). Even savvy searchers may not know how simple it is in Google to use the Advanced Mode to limit the search term to the title or URL field.

This is another area where some Web-savvy patrons might volunteer to help. Perhaps they can put in some time to maintain such a Q & A section. Even if this option is not viable, or not reliable, it would not take too much time to have competent librarians (who know how to find the good answers) respond to questions that are asked a zillion times at the reference desk.

You might feel that this sort of Q & A or FAQ service would not really help Web-savvy patrons who are, by definition, familiar with the Web. I don't think that is the case. Given the frequency of change in the syntax of search engines, and the appearance of new ones once or twice a month, I feel that a Q & A or an FAQ site would help even the Web-savviest library users.

Savvy Is as Savvy Does

By providing such services, you are likely to make your Web-shy patrons more comfortable, and you may even help some of them to become Web-savvy searchers, which in turn benefits the library. These are activities that don't have very high overhead costs, and in the long run you might reduce the time spent on routine Web-related questions, which now dominate the reference desk and make burnout set in faster than ever. One side benefit is that it may even help your not-so-savvy fellow librarians to become more knowledgeable if they consult these resources regularly, or if they're asked to research a question and provide an answer for your FAQ. Everybody wins. ▲

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