

# The library in the digital marketplace: Strategies for our future

By Jenny Benedict & Emira Mears.

## Introduction

The digital marketplace is becoming increasingly crowded with over a trillion web pages in existence and more being created daily worldwide. At the same time, vendors are stepping in to offer direct-to-consumer access at little or no cost to content for which people used to come to libraries. Plus, the major players in the marketplace like Google and Amazon have huge staff and financial resources to create, distribute and promote new online services, as well as to put behind innovation.

Given a challenging landscape, how can libraries best position themselves in the online environment? At the October Netspeed Conference in Edmonton, West Vancouver Memorial Library Director of Library Services Jenny Benedict and Lead Strategist at Raised Eyebrow Emira Mears presented a framework for planning an effective digital strategy.

## Planning a Digital Strategy

Jenny opened by saying, "Libraries have the opportunity to develop online presences that resonate and are relevant within our communities. Our biggest advantages are our local connection to our visitors and our ability to adapt to changing interests and concerns."

Getting to the heart of those opportunities, and using them to our advantage to garner attention over the larger content producers, means thinking and planning strategically. Jenny and Emira shared their three-phase framework for doing so:

1. Develop the strategy
2. Align the execution with the strategy
3. Measure the effectiveness of the strategy

## Developing the Strategy

A digital strategy determines the goals for your online presence. Developing a digital strategy can be accomplished through the following three steps:

1. Define your unique value proposition
2. Identify current pain points
3. Define what success means to you

The key to doing this work is in asking the right questions.

To define **your unique value proposition**, ask, "What is your library's unique role in your community?"

One way to determine what makes your library unique is to do a website audit of other organizations. Through comparing and contrasting, assess who are the other key stakeholders in your community that serve the same audience as you do, what kind of content they produce, what value they provide, and what your library offers that no other organization can.

*e.g. We are the only public community space where people of all ages and backgrounds have equal access to knowledge resources.*

To determine your core values, identify the traits that represent your highest priorities and your deeply held driving forces. Decide what terms best describe your library.

*e.g. inclusiveness, sustainability, welcoming, trusted*

To **identify your pain points** ask "What are the challenges associated with our current digital presence?"

Gathering feedback from staff and visitors, as well as analyzing usage data, will help you to understand what people think and how they feel about your current site. Some key aspects to analyze are:

- Does the design of your website's homepage reflect your community and your library's place in it?
- What are people asking for that they can't find independently?
- What content isn't being used? Why isn't it being used? Is it the nature of the content, how it is presented, or where it is located?
- Where is functionality or time holding staff back from making certain postings?
- What processes are inefficient and cumbersome for staff?

*e.g. Navigation no longer reflects the range of available resources for our different populations.*

To **define what success means to you** ask "What would we like our online presence to be that it isn't now?"

Think about what changes you would like to see in online visitor behavior and emotional response.

- What do you want your online visitors to do more of or differently than they do now?
- How do you want your online visitors to feel about their experience of using your site?
- What do you want your online presence to look like?

Be sure to also reflect your unique value proposition and resolve your pain points. You may have as many eight or ten goals in total.

*e.g. We want our online visitors to have an increased sense of connectedness with our facility and our staff.*

### Aligning the Execution with the Strategy

Once you have your value proposition, pain points and goals, you need to ensure that all the decisions you make about the content, architecture, design, tools and workflows are in alignment with them.

You can divide the resources you have available into five key assets. You need a solid understanding of all five to ensure that you are intentional about how you design your online presence. Your digital presence should both meet your community's' needs and support your library's own strategic goals as an organization. These assets are:

1. **Audience**  
Who is your website for?
2. **Content**  
What types and kinds of online content does your audience need?
3. **Platforms**  
What digital platforms are best for your audience need?
4. **Staff Resources**  
How much staff time and what skills do you have available to maintain your site?
5. **Tools**  
What tools do you need to manage your online content?

### Audience

In libraries we can easily have five to seven different audiences using our services and its worth taking the time to understand more about what motivates them to interact with the library online.

To do audience profiles, some great questions to ask are:

- Who are the people you are serving? What motivates them to choose you over others?
- What are they looking for? How can you be of service to them?
- What else would you like to give them?

Knowing this influences the type of content your site houses, the content structure and labeling, as well as the priorities for navigation.

### Content

You are likely already putting many different types of content online, and you probably have more that you produce offline that isn't making its way to your digital presence yet. And then there's likely still more content you aspire to create and share. Listing the big buckets of content that your digital presence can contain helps to set priorities around organizing it.

- Operational information (borrowing, fees, hours, meeting rooms etc)
- Collection information/enhanced content (recommendations from librarians, lists, reviews etc)
- Catalogue items
- Photos
- Video/Audio
- Online databases
- Event descriptions and registrations
- Content others create that you want to share/point to

Another lens to apply to your content is to think about not just the type of content but the subject matter, including:

- General vs. local content  
How much does your community need you to provide access to general information? How can you contextualize that information for a local setting? And, how much does your community need you to be a repository and provide access to locally generated content?

- Internally vs. externally produced  
How much are you going to internally produce or update vs. what is provided by vendors? Does

internally created content, such as curated booklists, story time videos, step-by-step instructional screencasts, have greater value?

- Duplication of physical vs. uniquely digital Should we be thinking of our online presence as a mirror of our physical collections and services or develop unique digital properties?

### Platforms

Just as you have many different types of content, you likely have multiple platforms where content is currently shared. In a typical library these days that might include:

- Your main website
- Your online catalogue
- Digital collections tools
- Email newsletter
- Blog
- Social channels (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, Pinterest, etc)

Each of these can be customized in terms of look of feel to reflect the library and the community. Additionally, the choice of platform needs to correspond with the type of content and the desired audience you want it to reach.

### Staff Resources

Your staff are likely not sitting around wondering where to spend their time. Ideally, aligning the execution of your digital strategy will help you maximize staff time to meet the larger goals you've set for your digital presence, while engaging your staff and their existing knowledge and abilities. Some key questions to consider are:

- How much time is managing existing content taking? Are there efficiencies? (Go back to your pain points)
- How often can we realistically update content?
- Do we have the right training to produce the content we want? (video, audio, fancy images etc.)

### Tools

Tools can include everything from video editing software to analytics that help you measure impact. Some typical tools a library might use include:

- Photo editing software
- Video/audio editing software
- Website CMS (Drupal, Wordpress, Expression Engine, etc)
- Social Managers like Hootsuite
- Google Analytics/Web analytics

To align the execution of your strategy, consider what tools you already have and what additional tools you will need to achieve your goals.

### Measuring the Effectiveness of the Strategy

Libraries are accustomed to focusing on usage of resources as a measure of effectiveness. For example, we tend to look at the most frequently visited pages on our sites. While those numbers can be valuable, you also want to measure outcomes that are tied directly to your goals. In particular, measures that assess engagement can tell you how the online behaviour of your online visitors is changing.

Some examples of measures that you can track include:

Usage	Engagement
-Increased traffic	-Increased time per session
-Increased use of online functionality	-Increased time per resource
-Increased per session use of multiple platforms/resources	-Decrease in bounce rate
	-Increased sharing of content
	-Increased sense of connectedness
	-Increased ease and enjoyment
	-Increase in offline/real world engagements

### Considerations for the Future

A digital strategy is a living process. After the foundation is set, it's just as important to incorporate ongoing evaluation and evolution in order to fine-tune, modify and add components. An incremental approach to updating a website protects the initial investment and postpones the need for a full redesign. A plan to continually improve the site also ensures that your visitors have a continuity of experience. With an effective, long-term digital strategy in place, online visitors will stay longer and return more often.

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