



# INTRODUCTION

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## ▶ WHAT IS USER EXPERIENCE (UX) FOR THE WEB AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

User experience for the web is all about how users feel when interacting with a website or interface. As you might imagine, web UX is a small subset of a larger discipline that deals with how users feel about interacting with *anything*: a system, product, service, or space. For the purposes of this book, when we talk about UX, we're really referring to web UX, which, as a discipline, is a coming together of the fields of information architecture, interaction design, interface design, and usability.

However, at the heart of it, UX is so much more. If you have ever experienced sheer delight when using a website that is simple, easy, understands what you are trying to accomplish, and helps you get there, then you know that a good user experience is also about how a well-designed website makes you *feel* (important, delighted, competent, and any number of other positive adjectives). At the same time, if you've had the misfortune of using a website that is confusing, one that puts up roadblocks at every turn and doesn't help you accomplish what you set out to, you know that a bad user experience is also about how a poorly designed website makes you feel (frustrated, annoyed, incompetent, and many other negative adjectives)!

This is exactly why UX matters. It's not difficult to come up with a clean, streamlined information architecture for your site; it's also fairly easy to work through all the interactions on a site to create a functional interaction design; and, as you will see, usability testing your site isn't rocket science—it takes some time and planning, but it's a fairly straightforward pursuit. But all of these practices rolled up together is what ensures that positive experience for your users.

## ► WHY SHOULD LIBRARIES CARE ABOUT UX?

You've already made it to Chapter 1, so we're guessing you don't need a lot of convincing about why libraries should care about UX. However, we feel it's important to reiterate that the principles of good web UX should matter a great deal to libraries, because we are already fighting an uphill battle when it comes to our users' attention. Content and information are no longer scarce commodities that require the mediation of the library—thanks to the web, both are plentiful, which has changed the value proposition of libraries. As we continue to retool to respond to the changes in the information marketplace and meet the needs of our users, it is more imperative than ever that we are attentive to our web presences, providing online experiences that are simple, intuitive, and delightful.

## ► THE LARGER SCOPE OF UX AND HOW IT RELATES TO WEB UX

As we mentioned previously, the website designs and interfaces you expose your users to are only part of the whole user experience picture. Ideally, all of your library's touch points—the places where your users come into contact with your library—will be aligned and well designed. This means that creating a holistic and positive user experience includes designing great print materials, signs, customer service, facilities, reference work flows, programs, collections, and services. This might seem daunting. It is indeed a lot of work and sometimes difficult. But it is crucial for the success of your library.

The experience you try to facilitate through your website is an important component of the total user experience you provide. It is often the first touch point with which people come into contact. Patrons use it frequently as the gateway to your catalog and other online resources and services. It is also a challenging piece of the UX puzzle. While you likely have different physical spaces for different

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types of library users, creating distinct digital spaces isn't necessarily desirable. However, with adequate user research you can create a website that will meet the needs of your most important audiences.

## ► WHAT A LIBRARY WEBSITE SHOULD DO

Most website behavior is task oriented: people have an information need or need to accomplish something and they use the web as a tool to meet that need. There are a few websites that people browse for fun and entertainment, but your library's website probably isn't one of them.

Library websites should differ as much as the communities they serve differ. Conversely, library websites will share many characteristics because of the similarities of people everywhere. Libraries' responses to these similarities should make up the basic functionality of every library website—things like library hours, locations, services, loan period information and catalog searching should be included. Getting these basic things right—something that few libraries do—is the first step to creating interesting and thriving library websites. It doesn't make sense to build on a shaky foundation, but many libraries do because it is relatively easy. As additional functionality gets tacked on, websites quickly become complicated, and information that patrons want becomes increasingly difficult to find. This book encourages you to get the basics right first before you consider taking your website to the next level.

## ► THE CATALOG PROBLEM

Your website is not as important as your catalog. This is a fact. We've asked many nonlibrarians about what they do on library websites, and the usual response is "Place reserves on books." This is subtly different from how we think of our websites and catalogs (i.e., as distinct things). So, either our users see the two as the same thing, or they ignore our websites and just use our catalogs. Looking at website analytics suggests the latter.

The primacy of the catalog is understandable and unfortunate. It is understandable because people want to accomplish things by using websites. In the case of libraries, the number one critical task is access to content. For public libraries this means books, movies, and music. For academic libraries, add in journal articles. It is unfortunate, because we have very little control over the visual and interaction

design of our catalogs. This is worth repeating: we have very little control over the look and behavior of the number one thing people want to do on our websites. The solution to this problem isn't within the scope of this book, but it is a problem that we want to acknowledge. Having well-designed library websites will get us only so far. To provide the ability to find library items, some libraries will still subject their users to an interface that is not only different from the rest of their website but also one that is poor. This lack of control over the catalog is the number one problem for library websites.

## ► CENTRAL TENETS

The techniques in this book will help you create a user-centered website. Here are some things we believe about library websites that inform our designs and will help you create the better websites.

### **Less Is Less (and That's a Good Thing)**

Your goal is to make your library's site as small as it can be while still meeting the needs of your users. This will result in patrons finding stuff with greater ease and less ongoing maintenance for your web team.

### **Patrons Don't Read Library Websites, They Scan Them**

Nothing against your library website, really. People don't do much reading on the web period. Instead, people hope to learn bits of knowledge or accomplish tasks. Knowing this fact should impact the way we write for library websites. Information should be presented in easy-to-skim chunks.

### **Good UX for One Is Good UX for All**

Accessibility is an extremely important issue for websites. So much so that web accessibility is often legally mandated for public organizations (depending on what country/state/province you're in), and, because most libraries are public organizations, compliance with web accessibility guidelines is a pressing matter for most of us. While this book does not specifically aim to make your website compliant with whatever accessibility legislation you operate under, we believe that adhering to web accessibility standards is not a limitation but an opportunity. Much like universal design is all about improving design and usability

to the benefit of everyone, making your website accessible will improve the experience of your site for *all* your users, not just the ones who use adaptive technology for their browsing needs.

### **A Library Website Isn't a Portal to the Web**

With near ubiquitous and constant web connectivity via computers and mobile devices, the entire notion of a starting place on the web is a bit dated. Even if it wasn't, patrons wouldn't start their web experiences on your library's website. They don't visit your library's site for links to their e-mail or to find out the weather or to find search engines. If your site has them, remove these extraneous bits.

### **Library Websites Are for Library Users, Not Librarians**

Sometimes portions of library websites are designed for librarians to use on the job. When librarians are accustomed to using the library website daily it can be difficult to redesign the site for patrons. If you face resistance when removing librarian-centered content from your website, put the content in question on your staff intranet. If you don't already have one, consider creating one. You can adapt the techniques in this book to design a website for library staff, too.

### **When in Doubt, Leave It Out**

You should be able to strongly articulate reasons for including every single thing that's on your library's site. If you're not sure why something is on your site and can't find a reason, remove it. The same thing goes for content that is considered "nice to have" on the site. Everything on the site should be essential. If it is not essential, it shouldn't be there.