

## Connecting to Community: Best Practices for Designing a Digital Branch

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### **Abstract:**

In this article the authors provide an overview of the concept of a digital branch library and the manner in which it can be used to enhance academic library community engagement. As the front door to the branch, the library's Website is key to going beyond service provision toward sustaining relationships with faculty, students, staff, and community. The authors provide a rationale for increasing interactivity based on the public relations theory of relationship building. A report of research on the characteristics of community college library Websites illustrates the challenges of creating a digital branch. Subsequent conversations with and a survey of Web managers has provided a list of recommendations for implementation strategies that can be employed by academic libraries of all types.

**Keywords:** community college libraries | engagement, public relations | relationship building | Website management | David King | James Grunig | Linda Hon

### **Article:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Six years ago David King (2009) introduced the concept of a digital branch library. King's idea was to recreate the features most used and desired in a traditional, brick and mortar library in a virtual environment. That is, beyond simply providing the links and resources typically found on a library's Website, a digital branch seeks to create opportunities for engagement and interactivity between library staff and patrons. So, rather than seek information in the card catalog or database, a customer could review featured readings and user comments for recommendations and feedback. Or, perhaps patrons might participate in an online book club or discussion group, or submit a poem or drawing for display in a virtual exhibit. A digital library

mirrors the key features of its more traditional physical counterpart and finds ways to encourage its users to stay and “hang out” for a while.

Given advances in technology, as well as the pervasiveness of social media platforms and other tools that foster user participation, King's idea seemed timely. Further, competition from a growing number of sources, economic impediments, and changes in customer expectations all support digital branches as a logical next step. Yet six years later, very few libraries, including community college libraries, have embraced this concept and the benefits it offers as a public relations tool through its ability to help build relationships with patrons.

To better understand how digital branch libraries can serve community college libraries as a tool for greater engagement with their patrons, the objectives for this article are to:

1. Provide a clear understanding of the purpose and benefits of a digital branch library;
2. Explain the importance of public relations, specifically relationship-building, as a critical component of libraries' strategic planning;
3. Provide recommendations to develop a digital branch for any size or type community college library, based on the results of three studies analyzing the characteristics and effectiveness of digital branches.

## **BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this article is to provide community college libraries with recommendations that will enhance their interactions with patrons through the development of a digital branch library. And while the focus for these interactions is an online environment, the foundation for all the recommendations offered is the concept of relationship building with the goal of creating a greater sense of community among all library patrons. As such, these ideas can be applied to both electronic and face-to-face interactions, as well as a variety of library settings, including academic and public libraries.

To begin, digital branch libraries are defined by their four, key components and their benefits to both libraries and patrons is identified. Next, the importance of public relations as a strategic reason for developing a digital branch is offered. A brief overview of traditional approaches to public relations by libraries is compared to the newer, more effective model of public relations: relationship building.

These background sections serve as a foundation for the second half of the article which addresses the practical needs of community college libraries, specifically, understanding and meeting the needs of their patrons. This can be a challenge for many libraries who have become

comfortable maintaining the status quo because “that's how we do it!”, or who may be hampered by financial or administrative restrictions that limit their ability to change.

The second section begins by bringing together the overlapping concepts of digital branches and relationship building as a means of creating a community for library patrons. Then, a blueprint for best practices is provided with clear, and easily implemented recommendations for developing a digital branch library. This blueprint is based on the results of multiple studies, whose findings are highlighted to offer insights into the successes and challenges faced by other libraries. The article concludes with suggestions for future research on the subject of digital branch libraries.

## **Website or Digital Branch?**

### **Information Architecture and Usability**

Like a library building, the main purpose of a library's Website is to connect potential and actual patrons to the resources that the library owns. In the early days of the World Wide Web, libraries were most concerned with providing a place where links to electronic resources would be provided (Cisler 1995), and the optimal arrangement of the links, tips for overcoming technical challenges, and discussions of e-resources dominated the library literature at that time (Shropshire 2003). There was very little talk about how to communicate about library events, conduct fundraising, or engage in other public relations activities, as Welch (2005) found when she surveyed academic libraries. She found that although 70% had links to news, fewer than half offered information about exhibits or other activities that were happening inside the library.

Every Website has a particular design, some of which follow the principles embodied in information architecture, defined as “the systematic structural organization of database information to support ease of use” (Chandler and Munday 2011). When a Website is well-constructed it exhibits a comprehensible form that allows users to find the product or service that they are seeking. For instance, good design would make sure that a majority of users would be able to easily discover the links to the library's catalog and databases. The success of a well-designed layout can be measured by ascertaining its usability (Alshamari and Mayhew 2009; Chow, Bridges, and Commander 2014; Kim 2011). Usability is the study of whether the architecture actually works for particular users of the site.

Studies have identified a number of variables that can influence how users will be affected including such items as placement and font size of links, ease of learning the system, and appeal of graphics. These factors are tested with potential and actual users though, of course, not all users can be examined. User characteristics such as age, digital literacy, and experience may prevent a person from comprehending all of the features of a site. Chow, Bridges, and Commander (2014) found that academic and public library Websites shared many common features when measured against a Website usability checklist.

A well-designed Website may help library users connect to resources but it will not automatically engage them or entice them to return. Shropshire (2003) studied the management of academic library Websites and found that many were ready to move beyond technical issues and into the management of the site to provide services. Major barriers to moving in that direction were appropriately trained staff, managing content providers, and having a vision for the site as a communication tool. In her study of university library Websites Kim (2011) found that most were designed based on another Website rather than being designed in response to expressed user needs.

Website information architecture is the design of the digital branch's front door. Measuring its usability is an important first step but it does not delineate how to run the branch's operations. With the continuing advancement of interactive tools, the Website can become a fully functioning digital branch and that is a priority. According to a 2010 OCLC study of library users, the library Website, despite its link to many services, is not the first place that library patrons go for information (De Rosa, Gauder, Cellentani, Dalrymple, and Olszewski 2011). It has long been a truism that people check with friends and trusted others for information before going to published source (Taylor 1968). In the social media world, trusted tweeters, blogs, and Facebook friends may be called upon before the authoritative, but difficult to navigate world of the library. No matter how well-structured a library's digital branch may be, without a relationship between patrons and the library entity, no one will use it.

### **Digital Branch**

In keeping with Shropshire's ideas of managing a library's Website, David Lee King (2009) of Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library promotes the idea of the digital branch. Using his library's Website as a model, he encourages librarians to think beyond the Website as an information source and instead think of it as a place where users come to connect with a real staff, real building, real collection, and real community.

A *real staff* in the digital branch is staff information that, at a minimum, provides name and digital contact information for all librarians and staff. Additionally, providing titles, functions, and pictures creates opportunities for visitors to connect to people that they may never see in-person. Providing this information makes it easier for a student or faculty member to target their question to the most knowledgeable person and helps create a better sense of community.

A *real building* provides a visual destination and helps establish a focal point that can help the customer connect. A picture of the building provides a visual destination, and clearly identifying the street address or building number helps direct people who may never before have visited the physical structure to more easily find it. Like its brick and mortar counterpart, a digital real building should be easy to navigate, so that the real collection and the real staff should be clearly identifiable.

A *real collection* is one of the easiest elements to share on the Website with links to the databases, e-books, and the catalog. It easily provides a sense of what the library's collection might offer to the visitor at the digital branch. The arrangement of the links is important and that is where information architecture comes to the fore. Research shows that people spend only 25–30 seconds deciding if they are interested in a Webpage; as such, library materials must be interesting and interactive to capture someone's interest in interacting with the library's materials (Chow, Bridges, and Commander 2014).

*Real community* is a more ephemeral concept that involves the sense that through the Website, users could connect to the library and perhaps even to each other. Real community makes the digital branch a place where patrons want to visit, repeatedly. For example, King (2012) provides on his main page links to library blogs and Goodreads where people can leave comments, and also to librarian Twitter content which provides frequent daily updates. Features such as these go beyond simply providing information by encouraging community involvement as contributors to the site.

In 2012, King wrote a progress report on his digital branch, including notes on the branch operation and management. He considers himself the digital branch manager and, as such, he approves content and leads the social media and content teams. The site has many blogs, each linked to a particular part of the physical collection, which are called “neighborhoods,” with content provided by multiple librarians. An example of a neighborhood might be a cooking section with sources available in the catalog or databases, with a corresponding blog or other social media site. The digital branch has areas with other active social media connections such as Goodreads, Pinterest, and Twitter; and King keeps statistics on the number of visits, reads, and posts to these tools. These statistics and posts are reviewed and ultimately lead to changes at the branch. Ongoing assessment is also included: traditional usability studies are conducted with various user groups; and statistics from page reads, to hits on links are analyzed. Reflection on these elements of feedback is part of the conversation that the digital branch manager has with the users.

The digital branch that King (2009, 2012) envisions is equally applicable to academic libraries. The need to connect library services to a far flung user population is just as important in a community college or university, especially as online education expands and the physical campus becomes less central. To do that, the digital branch must provide experiences that match the contexts of the patrons who will visit the digital branch (Dubroy 2010). For academic libraries their constituents primarily are their faculty, students, and staff. The question for these libraries is how to offer the same experience of serendipity that can be had from entering a library's front door. Offering the kind of opportunities that King (2009, 2012) advocates for the library not only provides services but creates a sense of community. Further, by linking to Goodreads reviews or YouTube films of a lecture, or simply providing a space for visitors to interact on Twitter, libraries can *create* community, not simply *serve* a community.

## Library Innovations Related to the Digital Branch

There are several innovations in academic librarianship that reflect the idea of the digital branch library. One of these is the appearance of new librarian positions that are variously labeled “User Experience Librarian,” “Emerging Technology Librarian,” and “Instructional Technology Librarian.” These positions incorporate the use of social media and instructional technology to help students and faculty use the electronic resources of the library and connect to the library through use of some of the activities mentioned as part of the digital branch. In describing the role of a User Experience Librarian, Dorney (2009) describes the central part of the job as understanding the needs of the library's users. With the recent launch of a new journal called *Weave: The Journal of Library User Experience*, the work of these librarians, including what is referred to here as the function of a digital branch librarian, is becoming institutionalized.

Another evolving area is that of embedded librarianship (American Association of Law Librarians, Boucher, Hagan, International Legal Technology Association, and Mayes 2012; Dewey 2004; Ramsay and Kinnie 2006), which has been growing since 2004. As implemented in many institutions, an embedded librarian is connected to a particular class, perhaps via a learning management system, and creates LibGuides and tutorials specifically for that class. Connections made in this way are strong and lasting but can be labor intensive to create. As such it makes sense to share those creations with multiple classes. For example, perhaps a librarian is embedded in two sections of English 101 at a school that offers many more sections with similar, if not exactly the same assignment. Centering this newly developed collection of LibGuides and tutorials on the library's Website or digital branch where all students can benefit maximizes the efforts across many interested students and faculty. Organizing these resources into the English 101 “neighborhood,” as King (2012) did, offers students in all of the sections access to a variety of options to how they might approach an assignment.

Makerspaces, or digital media commons, as they are often known in academic libraries, are another growing library trend that have equally important connections to the digital branch (Good 2013). These spaces, where students create media projects and experiments, exist exclusively for content creation. Promoting not only the use of makerspaces, but also the original creations that result from the communities that develop in these spaces is a clear example of real community.

A final innovation that can expand digital branch services, though currently not typically implemented in libraries, is a service like YahooAnswers. The technical functionality behind that service categorizes questions that it receives and posts both the authoritative answer and answers that are crowdsourced from many individuals. Providing a similar type of posting of reference questions related to a particular class would provide an opportunity to build community across classes. As with embedded librarianship, technology might be leveraged more broadly than working with a single class, and students would feel empowered to share their answers with their

classmates. Among other more practical benefits is the continued development of real community.

To sum, digital branch libraries go beyond traditional information dissemination methods characteristic of Websites to create a more vibrant, active “place” that addresses the collective information-seeking needs of all patrons. In the next section, the benefits of following a public relations approach to develop a digital branch are discussed.

## **Public Relations and Relationship Building**

### **Traditional Models of Public Relations**

Public relations serves as the means by which organizations build mutually beneficial relationships with their publics (Public Relations Society of America 2013). The foundation of public relations as a profession is based on four models. The *press agency* model of public relations is characterized by manipulation as a means of getting messages across, with little regard for truthfulness or ethics (Grunig and Hunt 1984). Infomercials promoting products that promise remarkable outcomes supported by “testimonials” of satisfied users exemplify this model. The *public information model* (Grunig and Hunt 1984) moves toward a more ethical approach and is based in truth and an accurate reporting of facts. However this model does little more than provide information, with minimal research or credible support provided, as is often depicted by company Websites.

As the field of public relations grew and evolved, two additional models were identified. The *two-way asymmetrical model* uses research to better understand stakeholder needs (Grunig and Hunt 1984). However, despite being a two-way model which suggests a more equitable back-and-forth approach than the previous models, the two-way asymmetrical model remains unbalanced as it benefits the organization using it much more so than their customer. This is because the “research” gathered is used to enhance the organization's ability to promote their product or service rather than seek input for the purpose of addressing its stakeholder needs. This model is often seen in the advertising industry. An example would be Company X surveying mothers who have children who participate in sports to solicit their safety concerns. However, the information gathered is used to bolster a campaign for helmets or “new and improved” cleats, rather than creating new equipment that actually keeps their children safer.

The final model, the *two-way symmetrical model*, attempts to provide the balance missing from the asymmetrical model. This model also uses research, but with the goal of gaining a mutual understanding and encouraging communication between organizations and stakeholders. Focus groups designed to elicit credible and valuable consumer feedback to help a company better identify and address those consumers’ issues demonstrates this model.

### **Relationship-Building in Public Relations**

These four models help provide a lens through which public relations efforts have developed over the years, as well as the different contexts in which they are used. More recently, however, a newer model has emerged as the public relations standard: *relationship-building*.

Relationship building moves beyond the two-way symmetrical model to consider a wider range of factors that contribute to the relationship, including desired outcomes, precedents, perceptions, behaviors and more. As suggested, the focus of this model is not on the organization or the customers it serves, but rather on the *relationship* that exists between them (Ferguson 1984); that is, the relationship is its own entity. As with all relationships, this requires moving beyond an inward focus on the individual parties involved in the relationship to a more collaborative, outward focus on the relationship itself. For many organizations, this represents a challenging new approach. To be clear, a relationship-building approach does not suggest that organizations focus on their customers at the expense of their goals or profit. On the contrary, the belief is that organizations will increase their profit because of the collaborative, mutual benefit both parties receive from their positive relationship.

### **Libraries' Efforts at Public Relations**

Research supports that libraries, academic and public, have been undertaking a variety of efforts over the past several decades which they label as public relations, though the line between public relations and marketing is often blurred (Vaughan 1987; Welch 2005). These efforts generally have focused on areas such as raising awareness, promoting services, and increasing visibility. While these are reasonable goals, such activities align more closely with the public information model of public relations. That is, they provide necessary and relevant information, but do not engage patrons in any way or seek to build communal relationships which are characterized by each party providing benefits to the other out of concern for that party's well-being, versus the promise of payback (Hon and Grunig 1999). Further, since the communication is one-way, this type of outreach does not solicit any information that would help the library identify the kinds of programs or services that their constituents want.

More specific to digital branch libraries, there has been an increase in research on the use of Websites as a public relations tool. Although there is agreement that Websites are a valuable and necessary resource, there is also consensus that they are not used effectively for public relations purposes (Kent, Taylor, and White 2003; Ryan 2003; Welch 2005). Recommendations include making sure sites are clearly navigable (Pook and Bishop 2006) and customizing sites to make them competitive with more popular research resources such as Google Scholar (Detlor and Lewis 2006).

The role of the librarian should also be considered when assessing the public relations efforts of community college libraries. The constantly changing role of libraries and the information-seeking behaviors of patrons that use them necessitates that librarians adapt to new and different position requirements. This can be a challenge for librarians who already manage an



overwhelming array of information resources as part of, or in addition to their regular collection. Further, community college librarians typically do not receive training specific to community colleges, or for the technological requirements of their job, which might understandably limit their interest in or ability to focus on public relations.

### **Relationship-Building as a Public Relations Tool for Community College Libraries**

Just as academic librarians face new challenges in their role, so do the libraries. As noted, the way in which people look for information continues to change as does the availability and variety of options they have from which to seek it. Libraries have not been the primary source for information for some time (Association of College and Research Libraries 2007) and in order to provide effective and comprehensive resources to the patrons that they are appointed to serve, changes must be made. These challenges are particularly difficult for community college libraries. Like their peer institutions, they face budget cuts and understaffing, but additionally they also serve publics who are more diverse than at other institutions, and these populations go beyond faculty and staff to include members of the community (American Association of Community Colleges 2011).

Given these challenges, it not only makes sense, but is imperative that libraries do more to connect with their patrons through relationship-building. Because most community college libraries have existing Websites to use as a framework, relationship-building via the development of a digital branch library provides an immediate and accessible starting point. Many constituents, such as students, prefer the convenience of electronic access to their library. Creating a digital branch with resources that addresses not only immediate needs but also encourages them to come back and interact with library staff, or just “hang out” to participate in other offerings will help reestablish the library as central to the communities it serves.

Next, the second half of this article links relationship building and King's (2009) concept of *real community*, with further support offered from research specific to community college libraries. Based on these findings, recommendations for developing a digital branch library are offered.

## **ENGAGING PATRONS THROUGH A DIGITAL BRANCH**

### **Relationship-Building to Create a Real Community**

While all elements of King's (2009) digital branch contribute to a more effective way to communicate with patrons, building real community, that is, an authentic connection, is the greater goal. Because relationship building characteristics, specifically that of communal relationships (Hon and Grunig 1999), so closely align with King's concept of community, they are an excellent baseline from which to develop digital branches. Indeed a host of research, from both public relations and library studies perspectives supports this.

### **Dialogic Public Relations**

Dialogic communication has its foundation in relationship building and the view that relationships, both good and bad, are the core of public relations practice (Ledingham and Bruning 2000). Another tenet is that organizations communicate honestly and ethically with their customers (Kent, Taylor, and White 2003). These principles have been researched specifically looking at Websites of corporations (Park and Reber 2008), nonprofit organizations (Ingenhoff and Koelling 2008; Kent, Taylor, and White 2003; Seltzer and Mitrook 2007), and colleges (Hall 2002; Kang and Norton 2006), including community colleges (McAllister-Spooner and Kent 2009). These studies consistently reveal that although some organizations follow relationship building criteria to some extent, none did it effectively or comprehensively enough to fully meet their customers' needs.

Research on libraries' public relations efforts likewise recognizes a need for improvement in addressing customer concerns. Hall's (2002) research on community colleges was based on Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship building guidelines. She found that relationship building characteristics were influential in gaining support from the various groups served by community colleges. Marshall (2001), Vaughan (1987), and Welch (2005) advocated the use of public relations to create support for their mission. Hallahan (2001), Kang and Norton (2006), and Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) all viewed Websites as effective tools for maintaining relationships with users, and supported previous research that found gaps in the relational use of Websites.

The depth and breadth of research in this area confirms the relevance of relationship building as a necessary means of creating a connection with patrons, and cements its importance to libraries as a public relations function. When additional challenges such as financial cutbacks, competition from an increasing number of sources and changing customer needs are factored in, the need for a change becomes even more apparent. In the next section the results of three studies that looked at community college library efforts to engage their various constituents are discussed, followed by practical steps that can be taken to convert a Website to a digital branch.

## **What Community College Libraries Are Doing**

### **Study 1: Website Review**

In order to understand the relationship between digital branch libraries and relationship building the authors chose to study the key characteristics of community college library Websites in 2012. [A complete report of this study, including a more in-depth review of the characteristics of relationship-building, can be found in Pampaloni and Bird (2014).] Identifying the presence of certain characteristics on a Website is a method that had been used by Welch (2005) and others to show how libraries are presenting themselves on the Internet.

One hundred randomly chosen community college Websites were viewed by the research team. Community college libraries were chosen because larger university libraries had been the focus of previous studies and, at the time, this type of school was enjoying renewed interest and publicity (White House, 2010). In addition, the potential patrons of these libraries is quite broad.

Community college libraries are often the only advanced educational institution in a geographical area and they are often open to the public, as well as their faculty, students, and staff. Because their campuses are not residential, building community is more difficult; therefore it can be more effective when done digitally. Using the experience of community college libraries as a lens to examine the digital branch can help all academic libraries with strategies to reach their increasingly online constituents.

The list of Website characteristics was related to both attributes of the digital branch (King 2009, 2012) and relationship building (Hon and Grunig 1999). The initial list was tested by multiple viewers who came to agreement about whether a certain characteristic was present. For instance, *real collection* was related to links for databases, the library catalog, electronic books. The presence of these items would indicate the trust, satisfaction, commitment, and an exchange relationship in the Hon and Grunig (1999) guidelines. Trust is inferred because the Website is accessible and library users can go to it to get their questions answered. If they use the site as the researchers did then the possibility for satisfaction is present. Commitment to use the library in the future is implied in the first use. The exchange relationship is inherent in the fact that patrons will use the collection to obtain information; information is the currency of the exchange.

*Real staff* was denoted by the presence of contact information, notes of expertise or duties, and the help function. Since the goal for this study was to determine only if the identified characteristics were present, there was no attempt to evaluate the quality of effectiveness of any given item on the list. Some libraries had a simple general contact email, while others had full lists of staff with expertise and a picture included, though both would be rated equally. In the same way, a request for assistance might be the ability to send an email to a generic, anonymous address or it might be live chat reference. The mixed meaning of the link labeled “Ask-a-Librarian” was anecdotally reported by the research team and demonstrated that libraries need to be cognizant about what users are expecting when they click on that link.

The results for the presence of a *real building* on the site were interesting because, once again, there was considerable variation. Links to hours of operation, contact information, directions, about us, and help were rated in this section. Some libraries chose to include at least one picture of their space, sometime there were many. Most libraries had one of these elements and therefore counted as having a real building but if the study had characterized the quality of this characteristic, again, anecdotally by the raters, a greater sense of connecting to the organization was conveyed by a picture.

In contrast, *real community* was characterized by the presence of a live help function like Ask-a-Librarian, user reviews, librarian or staff produced blogs, LibGuides and tutorials, QR codes, programs/services offered, user generated content, and social media links. Again, only the presence of these factors was noted; comments and other types of feedback, which would be a better indication of interaction, were not evaluated.

Library Websites were reviewed for the inclusion of these elements which were noted on a spreadsheet, and then analyzed using factor analysis to see if the library exhibited *real community*. Only eight of 94 sites reviewed showed the presence of real community. (See Pampaloni and Bird (2014) for the worksheet questions and complete results.)

Because the focus of the first study was to identify simply whether or not digital branch characteristics were present on community college library sites, follow-up was necessary to better understand how (and how effectively) those characteristics were being employed. That is, while the first study determined if a site included a blog, for example, it did not consider appropriateness of content, how frequently the blog was updated, or whether or not anyone read or commented on it. To get at some of these distinctions, two follow-up studies were conducted.

## **Study 2: Interviews**

Using the results from the first study as a guide, seven individual schools that received high scores, indicating the presence of characteristics relevant to digital branches and relationship-building, were contacted to request an interview; five schools agreed. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain more detailed information about how these high-ranking schools were using their Websites to actively engage their patrons. It should be noted that while these schools may not have been attempting specifically to incorporate elements of digital branches into their sites, their use of certain tactics suggest to the researchers a recognition of the changing needs of libraries. As such, it acknowledges a related need for libraries to adapt accordingly, even if the concept of a digital branch is unfamiliar. Thus the purpose of this analysis is to identify what libraries are currently doing and how those efforts can be enhanced to help build relationships.

Among the five schools, approaches to addressing patron's needs reflected some consistent elements. For example, users of these libraries were predominantly students and faculty, often with a core group of community members who used resources or checked-out materials. The primary use of the libraries appeared to be related to coursework or research, as evidenced by the questions the libraries receive from users, and the high use of databases and related resources such as LibGuides. Libraries that expend effort to maintain these resources and ensure that they are easily accessible for users indicate strength in their “real collections.”

When it came to characteristics more directly associated with relationship-building, however, perspectives on what constituted engagement varied. For some schools, responses often reflected services one would expect a library to provide. For example, when asked what aspect of their site they were most proud, responses included features like course reserves and LibGuides. Certainly these are useful and necessary resources that address the needs of a large group of library users. However, offering an expected service in electronic format simply provides an alternative means of accessing information, versus, for example, engaging with the user to help develop a “neighborhood” in a new part of the collection or referring the user to a different section of the digital branch that features a variety of books, speeches and videos on the topic. Similarly, in

terms of efforts undertaken to actively engage patrons, some libraries talked about the training classes they offer, or the email messages they sent regarding library updates. Again, these types of efforts fulfill a highly functional role in informing users, though this level of effort is best described by the public information model of public relations. Other libraries use social media such as Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook to reach out to their constituents. While these platforms offer a different approach, more often than not they, too, are being used in a way that serves only an informational role by *providing* information from the library, rather than *seeking* information from users.

The librarians themselves recognized the limitations of their sites. When asked to describe their site in one word, responses ranged from cluttered to usable to comprehensive. These generally lukewarm self-analyses indicate a recognition for a continued need to reach constituents. Despite their concerns, however, they rated their sites quite high, with all but one library ranking themselves at least a nine on a 10-point scale. While funding was a significant concern for most schools, many found ways to manage the impact. That is, cuts in funding and staffing created challenges whose reverberations were felt throughout the library, but some schools felt they were being supported as well as they could by their institutions.

On a positive note, librarians and library staff had responsibility for maintaining the site and providing content across libraries. Some schools did this in conjunction with other departments such as information technology or the university's communications departments and found those relationships to work adequately. Many librarians also benefited from various types of training, both from their school about institutional issues, as well as some technical training that helped them manage their site. This level of flexibility and freedom in developing content and controlling the site creates opportunities for relationship building because librarians can seek ways to determine their patrons' needs, and also track the efforts they make. Currently, very few libraries effectively track their users or their usage. Those that do analysis use tools such as Google Analytics that are built into their system. This level of evaluation is a good first step as it gives an overview of what resources are used; however, a much deeper analysis should be taken periodically to understand how effective the resources are in actually meeting users' needs.

While all the libraries interviewed could benefit from further relationship building to create a digital branch, there also were efforts being made that demonstrated an understanding of customer needs. Some libraries' use of Facebook and their integration of social media with their sites suggests appeal to a wider audience and higher levels of feedback. Also, a source of pride for one library was the librarian's observation that the previously common comments complaining about the Website were now absent. This indicates responsiveness on behalf of the library in addressing their patrons' needs, as well as diligence in continued oversight in that they recognized the decrease in negativity. The clearest example of relationship building, however, was from a librarian's response to a question about training needs. He hit the nail squarely on the head when he explained that their greatest need was in figuring out how all the data and assessments that they collected could be translated into services and programs for their users.

This example of clear customer focus epitomizes relationship building, communal relationships, and a goal of real community.

The purpose of conducting interviews with community college libraries that scored high in the first study was to gain additional information on how the characteristics associated with digital branches and relationship building were being used. Based on librarians' responses, both in the answers they provided to the interview questions as well as side comments to the authors, there is still work to be done to bring their sites to the level of interactivity and engagement that marks digital branches. Indeed all but one library said that they would not consider themselves to be a digital branch, though they were working in that direction. (Note: the authors would not have considered any of these libraries, including the one that self-identified positively as a digital branch, to meet the criteria.) There seems to be a misconception that making resources available electronically, and incorporating the use of social media links to the site constitutes a digital branch based solely on technological features. While these features address patrons' needs through convenience and ease of access to information, and address the concept of real collections and, to a lesser extent, real staff, they miss the much more critical relationship building elements that lead to real community. Without that, libraries will continue to serve primarily a functional role, which most likely can be better addressed through other means.

### **Study 3: Survey**

To reach a wider audience, a survey was created that sought information from those in charge of the library Websites in community college libraries. An invitation to take a survey was offered on various community college library listservs and was sent directly to the schools whose Websites had been reviewed in the first study. Fourteen questions were asked about control over the Website, training, and whether the Website could be considered a digital branch. Sixty-six surveys were completed.

Control over the Website was distributed broadly. The survey had two options that indicated that the library was in direct control of either "library supervisor" (18% of participants chose this) or "library staff" (31% chose this). Thus, about half of the respondents had control over the library's Website. The college's information technology (IT) department was chosen by 23% of the respondents while 28% chose an "other" option. Other responses included the college public relations or communications department (4 respondents), shared arrangements between various departments (7 respondents), and several that were in remote locations including an "off-site web design co."

There were different views of the success of the shared arrangements. One respondent wrote that "The library submits requests to our IT department and they quickly and kindly make the changes for us. This system works remarkably well." While another indicated that the Website was done by "library faculty *constrained* [author emphasis] by IT templates." One participant

described the arrangement as “Edited primarily by librarians but the website, like other college department, is ultimately under Communications ...”

When presented with a description of a digital branch, most survey respondents rated their Website as representing real staff and real collections well. Notably low, however, was their presentation of real building and real community. Only 7% of respondents ranked their real building representation at a high level, while 22% rated it as having the lowest amount of representation on the Website. Real community fared even worse with only 8% rating themselves as high, while half rated themselves low.

This was mirrored in the results for a question on engagement activities. Only 27% had library staff blogs and only 2% had a space for original user content, with 4% having book clubs or discussions. The majority responded that they had an Ask-a-Librarian service but it was not consistently clear as to whether this was real-time and interactive such as chat, or email based. In the “other” category, some respondents wrote in that they provide an embedded librarianship service, a highly interactive activity even though it is limited to particular classes with the permission of the faculty members. Frequency of updating is another indicator of interactivity. Only 26% of respondents wrote that they create new content at least once a week, while many chose a category at less than monthly.

An open-ended question on unique features to engage users elaborated on the previous answers. Several mentioned Shelfari, a social media book sharing site from Amazon.com similar to LibraryThing, and Goodreads. Widgets from these systems can be linked with the library's new acquisitions and automatically displayed. Two other respondents wondered if Primo represented a unique interactive feature. This discovery layer from Ex Libris is an excellent way to enhance the real collection but it does not necessarily add to relationship building or create a sense of real community because it has no interactive features.

Answers given by two respondents illustrated the limited view that librarians sometimes hold of the possibility for interactivity. “Research content and instructional (information literacy) materials are embedded into individual course learning management systems” and “Library guides created for specific classes or assignment” are wonderful examples of customizing the content in response to user needs, but in a one-way fashion, much like the public information model described in an earlier section. Unless there are opportunities for the users to respond to the effectiveness of these LibGuides and modules, then they are not dynamic enough to build a sense of community. In addition, these customizations are class-by-class, a labor intensive method that does not build community across various courses.

Another example of providing unique content was articulated by a respondent who mentioned that the library had digitized the library's collection of college yearbooks. This is an appropriate first step in reflecting a library's singular collection but might be followed up with something

more interactive, like a quiz on the basketball team's best record, or a review of changes in the college mascot.

A follow-on question, again open-ended, asked about the top three desired changes to the Website. Answers were assigned to the category of control (16 responses), less is more (2 responses), interactivity (18 responses), and discovery systems (5 responses). Typical responses illustrate each category. The focus on control might be linked to the question on who controls the Website. It was typified by comments like, “My hands are tied by the content management system my campus uses” or “Wrest control from vendor lock-down. Make it responsive. Use WordPress” or “For the library staff to control it instead of IT. To have an ‘ask a librarian’ or some kind of interactive button. Have a library tab on the college's website that involves only 1 click to reach it.” Less is more described the writers desire to de-clutter the Website while discovery systems like Ex Libris Primo mentioned above were also desired to help Web visitors access content more easily.

Interactivity was the most frequently mentioned change desired and these comments show what was meant: “Make it more dynamic,” “Add a blog, a photo gallery of library events and the library newsletter” and even more specifically “Mobile-friendly, Instructional videos within LibGuides, In-person help available via email, chat, or video during ALL open hours. Currently only at 38 percent.” These responses show the desire to have users connect with library staff and possibly with each other to create a library-centered community.

A telling comment in this section shows how differently librarians may react to the concept of a digital branch. The first writer is skeptical that any changes need to be made and appears to believe that the effort to use public relations theory in libraries is misguided:

Nothing; it's a lean mean searching machine. Has contact info and instructions on how to get materials. Am solo librarian—it works. Really concerned you think CC libraries have to be like a public library... Why? Mission is to get the information in the students' hands and make sure they are computer literate.

The second respondent wrote that the library was already in the midst of big changes with outcomes as yet to be determined. Some of the changes were stimulated by asking their patrons how the Website works for them:

It's hard to say. We're in the process of changing everything right now. 1) Adding a New Books virtual bookshelf to our webpage. 2) Changing our “Ask a Librarian” service to “Get Help.” Based on student feedback, our users don't want to ask someone for help but they don't mind “Get Help” because it feels more empowering.

Focusing on public relations does not make every library like a public library. Instead, all libraries have publics (or patrons, or users) who must want to interact with them. There are competing entities, including those same public libraries (Antell 2004) that can supply what



patrons want and where they may be more comfortable. Relationship building creates more connections to potential users, which can be enhanced and developed throughout their student status and beyond.

The final survey question involved whether the respondents would describe their Website as a “digital branch library.” The majority answer was negative, with a typical answer reflected in this response to an open-ended reason statement, “We’re just not there yet with our services. It’s not so much about the website so much as the support behind the website.” Another stated that, “There are not enough ways to connect directly with staff. While we do have some of those features, they are seldom used by librarians or staff.” While others simply stated, “no real engagement.” In other words, interactivity was seen as the main component that was lacking.

But others were sure that they did have a digital branch because the library has the right sort of collection, as in this statement, “We have more electronic books, films, newspapers, magazines, journals than we have in our physical building.” As noted earlier the nature of the collection is only one aspect of a digital branch. Without the other components, the Website only functions as a pointer to content.

Another question on the survey was about training. Respondents chose one of five answers with the majority, 39%, choosing a workshop or conference as their most recent source of training. Although this level of training is adequate for knowing how to add content to an existing site, it does not provide enough knowledge of information architecture to create a truly interactive site. Using LibGuides as a base for the Website can help because the standard template is useful and easy to learn. Adding interesting and challenging content may require a semester long introduction to Website design either during the master's level program or during undergraduate courses in communication or media studies.

The need for properly trained staff was echoed in a question that read, “Identify the area of greatest need you would address if you were able to hire a new staff member.” The top three answers in order of choice were: instructional technology, 33%; marketing library services, 15%; and embedded librarianship, 15%. Each of these relates to the digital branch, including instructional technology which provides the tools to create unique content.

### **Summary of the Studies**

Some community college librarians felt that they did offer a digital branch experience to their patrons but most did not fit the criteria that the researchers set for these Websites. Many survey respondents felt that they offered some of the attributes of the digital branch; this is encouraging, but the interviewees felt that although they had highly-rated sites in the researcher's view, they were not quite on target with engaging content. Nonetheless, some librarian participants in both the surveys and the interviews felt that a real collection was adequate for their constituents. Still, many felt that they wanted more control over the Website so that they could offer experiences

that were interactive and would build solid relationships with their faculty, staff, and students. They wanted to design a digital branch that would serve their real community.

## **Recommendations for Creating a Digital Branch at Your Academic Library**

The practical recommendations provided here address each of King's (2009) digital branch categories—real staff, real collections, real building and real community—through the use of relationship building characteristics focused on developing more communal relationships with patrons. Many of these recommendations are easily implemented, allowing libraries to begin a transition to a digital branch. Some others may require a greater effort and coordination with parties outside the library, as well as financial support or shifts in staffing. These recommendations should be viewed as a framework and potential examples, but certainly not a finite list. Individual libraries have a better sense of their constituents, the culture, geography, and many other factors that can contribute to new and innovative ways of providing services, and these should guide the development of their digital branch.

### **Know Your Audience**

#### *Put Patrons First*

Do not assume the needs of your users: ask them, and ask in many ways! Create an online survey to identify the specific needs, both academic and personal of all your patrons; the challenges they face in using the site; resources they would like; and what they look for in a library. Also, have opportunities for quick feedback throughout the site (e.g., automatic response requests after a chat with a librarian, or to an email response, or as a pop-up when a customer logs off). Have a contest asking what they would do if they were “Librarian for a Day!” Incentives and prizes might encourage participation.

#### *Recognize Constituents' Uniqueness*

Neither students nor faculty are homogenous groups. While each group may have similar goals, the way in which their goals are achieved varies widely. Even among faculty, seasoned professors, first-time instructors, and adjunct professors have very different approaches in how they teach courses and interact with students. Similarly, some students learn better aurally while others prefer visuals; writing comes naturally to a gifted few while others struggle with grammar, structure, and/or content; and students whose primary language is not English face a host of additional challenges in and out of the classroom. Be sure that resources and programs being offered consider the uniqueness of all users.

#### *Address Comprehensive Needs of Users*

Students, faculty, staff, and community members have many areas of interest beyond those that affiliate them with the library. Create opportunities to explore several areas of interests. For example, create a health and fitness event/neighborhood with a targeted books and readings; host a podcast featuring a local nutritionist or trainer; provide links to local parks, community events and public health screenings; provide information on courses offered by the college related to health and fitness; and have a weight loss or “eat healthy” contest where participants record their daily activity and meals. Also, incorporate other opportunities specific to the geographic area in which the library is located, such as skiing or swimming events.

### *Collaborate*

Listening to different voices, both internally and externally, is critical to the development of a digital branch as it provides valuable insights from those with direct knowledge of patrons and their needs. Maximize the educational background, training, technical experience, and practical knowledge of staff to engage them in being more interactive with all who use the library. Engage people by having virtual meetings with faculty and go beyond collecting course materials to identify topics being discussed throughout the semester. Develop neighborhoods and special exhibits that link resources related to an overarching topic, or theme; for example, highlight a historical event, identify local connections, and provide key writings of the period. Likewise, create opportunities for students to engage with each other and with librarians through librarian office hours or a focus group.

### *Use Existing Resources*

The explosion of social media platforms over the past several years provides nearly unlimited resources to build relationships with patrons. Begin by developing a plan for the semester or year that coordinates all of your social media components (Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook). Identify topics and themes for each month, as well as contributors to take a lead on their development. Beyond posting information, engage followers with quizzes, contests and polls, being sure to post results; ask their views on library/campus/current events; take advantage of popular trends like “Throwback Thursdays” to highlight previous library (or college) activities related to that month's theme; offer incentives for participation (e.g., token gifts like pins or coupons for a beverage at the student union; or an hour with a librarian for a “10 Secrets to Writing a Research Paper.”)

### *Be Innovative*

Facilitate the creation and display of unique content. For instance, host a Maker-space event and post pictures of the creations on the Website for all to see or if there is a poetry or creative

writing magazine, publish it on the library's Website. Help local authors self-publish on a commercial site and highlight their work.

## **Assess Efforts**

### *Listen to Your Patrons*

Data and research mean nothing if they are not applied and evaluated. Many databases and social media platforms provide built-in analytics to track usage and interactions. Use these as a starting point to identify useful themes and neighborhoods for a semester. Collect email addresses for all events, exhibits and programs and email evaluations. Incentives may help increase participation. Post reviews and testimonials following events.

### *Use Systems Tools*

Discovery services such as WMS, Primo, and other systems can connect your users to all of your content in a more accessible and interactive way. Studying the effects of implementing these services on your users is crucial to understanding how such a service contributes to representing your collection in the digital branch.

## **Bigger Picture Issues**

### *Gain Control Over Library Content*

If formatting and/or content is handled or edited by another group, request control of the content (and technology if staff capabilities exist) by creating a proposal outlining your strategy, including social media, for developing a digital branch. If external forces retain control, initiate a collaboration by scheduling a meeting to outline digital branch goals for the site. Request guidance to ensure smooth transitions and ease of use by patrons.

### *Get Deeper Training or Hire Well-trained Librarians*

Assess gaps in librarian/staff knowledge and identify training opportunities. These may exist on campus, or through workshops, associations, conferences and other outside venues. When hiring new staff, ask questions specific to experiences with patrons as well as technical abilities.

## **Taking the First Step!**

Incorporating these recommendations will help create the real community King promotes as critical to libraries' ability to maintain a critical role as a "go to" source for information. In addition, the suggestions below can serve as a starting point for addressing real staff, real building and real collection issues.

*Real Staff:* Review the "Contacts" or "Who we Are" section of your site and ensure all librarians and staff are listed with areas of expertise, full contact information and a direct link; include pictures and a few sentences about favorite books, movies, or other personal note to encourage dialogue and connection.

*Real Buildings:* Create a checklist and ask a non-library employee to identify key information (building location, directions, librarian's names and specialties, contact information). This is a relatively quick, easy and cost effective update that can have immediate, positive results.

*Real Collection:* Solicit (possibly with an incentive) a student to find articles, books and other resources on a topic. Observe how long it takes, and how intuitive the layout is. If possible, do a formal usability study using the methods outlined in Chow, Bridges, and Commander (2014).

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

### **Jump to section**

The authors would like to extend their study of digital branches in academic libraries to encompass the following questions:

1. How do relationship building and real community activities in community college libraries impact the academic bottom line of student success in retention and degree completion?
  - a. Do students who engage with the library identify more with the institution therefore are more likely to be retained?
  - b. Are students who engage with the library more likely to complete their degree programs or transfer to a four-year college for a bachelor's degree?
2. Is the digital branch employed more effectively in 4-year college and university libraries

than in community colleges?

3. What level of training about public relations practices and digital branch administration is desirable in master's level library and information programs in the United States?

## **CONCLUSION**

Academic libraries are no longer the heart of the institutions that they serve. Adopting the public relations principle of relationship building as a foundation to creating a digital branch will help restore customer loyalty and re-establish libraries as “*the*” resource for their information needs. Already more and more libraries are closing because the conventional wisdom is that it is “all on the Internet.” In addition, in an alarming trend, position titles and ranks that formerly required the master's degree are being downgraded and academic librarians are losing tenure status.

It is not only important to embrace public relations but to institute the more recent models of it based on relationship building and dialogic communication. It requires interactivity and a focus on the needs of a wide variety of users. It is responsive to feedback and, in the end, it creates community, a place that students, faculty, staff, and the public will want to support and champion.

The three studies reported above give a clear view of community college librarians striving to provide a digital branch. The analysis of the Websites showed that libraries are providing real staff and real collections fairly well with some limitations. The survey showed that those limitations were, in part, driven by issues of control over the Website and lack of enough and correctly trained staff.

Some of the best practices for running a digital branch are simply an extension of what is already being done in academic libraries. Innovations such as user experience activities and embedding librarians in classes is a part of providing real community to library users. But, there are many smaller activities that can benefit a wider group. If they are implemented intentionally as part of a strategic plan, then they can have long lasting effects. It remains to be seen whether implementing these activities affects the success of students. Only further research can tell us that.

As a library educator, one of the authors is concerned that the master's degree programs are providing the right education for the environment that new librarians will inhabit. Learning Website design in a single workshop is adequate for changing content but is not sufficient training to manage the many features of a digital branch. Deeper training is required and should be provided by library school programs. Advocate for this kind of training at your alma mater and the institutions which train the librarians that you hire.

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