

**Proposal: Improving the Riverside Public Library System Website**

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### **Abstract**

The Riverside Public Library is a seven-branch public library system which serves a large and diverse community. Though it offers many valuable programs and services, the Riverside Public Library's "front door," its website serves as more of a barrier to service than a gateway. Our team purposes an upgrade on the RPL website to improve the experience of the library user, better market the library, and meet the strategic goal of providing all Riverside residents service at all library locations.

### **Proposal: Improving the Riverside Public Library System Website**

When beginning our research for our team project to propose and implement a new and innovative program in the Riverside Public Library (RPL), our team realized that the RPL website is not user-friendly, or easily accessible to everyone, even though the library offers valuable services and resources. It is not an independent site and is a link under the local government site (Riverside Public Library, 2020), which is similar for many public libraries, but this site is not intuitive to use. There are many existing valuable services offered by RPL, as listed in its digital content (Riverside Public Library, 2020), but these are relatively difficult to access, despite one of the strategic goals of the library being to “increase customers’ digital literacy levels” (City of Riverside, 2019).

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in increased individual “dependence on technology for work, leisure, entertainment, socialization, and education” (American Library Association, 2020), and because websites are currently the “front door” to libraries and serve as a “very important electronic branch” (Buss, 2016), it is imperative that these are welcoming and informative, easily providing necessary information and resources at the click of a mouse. Therefore, instead of focusing on a specific program for the library, we are focusing on updating the current website, including interfaces that also work for mobile devices and are accessible to all user groups. It is fundamental that all programs can be accessed easily through the website, especially in the current coronavirus pandemic, also in line with a strategic goal to “implement and maintain superior customer service at all library locations” (City of Riverside, 2019). Furthermore, in line with its goal of digital literacy, having a better interface would indicate RPL is leading by example in this community.

Although a new website is not a new program or service for the library, websites are fundamental as a marketing tool for library resources and programs, to ensure continued value and sustainability of libraries in their communities. Without effective websites, the library services, programs, and initiatives do not get the focus that they need. Potter (2012) suggests that there are “seven key concepts for marketing libraries,” and using these concepts to effectively market the library through an updated website, the services the library offers can be easily accessed. The library personality can be incorporated into the website, which will appeal to the community, rather than feeling the library is just a place filled with books. It is also fundamental to ensure that only the services that the library offers are marketed. The website can also include categories for different user groups, such as adults, teens, children, retirees, unemployed, veterans, etc. with specific marketing for each category, making information or resources for each group easy to find. It is also important that the website is easy to use and takes the user to what they are looking for with minimal steps and easy instruction.

This is in line with a study on the usability of US public and academic libraries, which suggested that the library website should provide a positive first impression, with the library’s name and logo clearly displayed (Chow, Bridges, & Commander, 2014). Clear navigation tools should be found on each page, with clear home page accessibility. Font styles and formatting should be consistent, and high contrast colors should be used between the text and background. Their pages should be kept simple for the visually impaired, and the text should be able to be resized, and furthermore the graphic design should be “clean and uncluttered.” Users should be able to pick their language of preference, and the website should be accessible on a variety of different browsers (Chow, Bridges, & Commander, 2014).

It was also noted by Bakar and Jaafar (2017) that higher quality websites generate more traffic, and are generally more visible online, attracting more attention to their programming and services. This is important to ensure the sustainability of libraries, and if they are more accessible, then they are more available to those in need (Bakar & Jaafar, 2017).

Therefore, it is fundamental that the RPL website is developed in such a way that it truly develops the library and is accessible to the community it serves. Each of these concepts should be considered carefully in the development and design of the new website.

### **Project Description**

Our group decided to address the deficiencies in the RPL's web interface. By examining the places where RPL's website fails to be user-friendly and mobile-accessible, we can identify the points where we can apply our proposed solution of upgrading the website. As noted by Rubin (2016), it is "increasingly important...that websites are designed not for the designer but for the people who use them." RPL's website fails to meet its users' needs under ordinary circumstances, and with a pandemic to contend with, these circumstances are hardly ordinary. What we propose is to improve the RPL's public face making its services more desirable and accessible to its community during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and into the future.

Kerr and Rasmussen Pennington (2018) explained in their study of mobile applications in Scottish public libraries that "it is vital for public libraries to implement at least core services that are optimized for mobile devices." The RPL's website is not optimized for any use, but its mobile applicability is particularly poor. The main site is non-responsive, making it difficult to navigate on smaller screens. In order to access the "Classic Mobile Site," a user must navigate to the bottom of either the "e-Books" or "Catalog Search" sub screens (Riverside Public Library, 2020). The mobile version of the site is less busy and easier to navigate, but it is bland,

unappealing, and does not provide all the same options as the main site, let alone the ancillary pages.

By keeping user-experience design (UXD) at the forefront, the RPL can improve its website as a whole and provide a mobile-ready interface at the same time. Rubin (2016) identified a user-centered design as a fundamental part of customer service in the digital era. All branches of the library are currently closed due to the pandemic – though that information is not readily apparent on the library website – so their digital face is the only one they currently have (Downey & Horseman, 2020). Now is the perfect time for the RPL to bring its website in alignment with Morville’s criteria for a positive user experience and ensure the digital product it offers its community is useful, usable, desirable, findable, accessible, and credible (cited in Rubin, 2016).

Each of the positive user experience criteria should be addressed separately to identify what is working and what needs improvement. First, in examining usefulness, we find that the content of the website does provide a “genuine contribution to fulfilling a need” (Rubin, 2016), but is incomplete; the site’s only mention of closure due to COVID-19 is found in the fifth slide of seven updates on the homepage scroll. The City of Riverside website, which hosts the library’s site, provides information on the pandemic, but fails to reference the library. As to usability, the site is usable enough on a computer but is non-responsive for mobile use. To meet the criterion of desirability, a site must inspire “satisfaction and appreciation in the user” (Rubin, 2016), but the RPL’s site is more likely to inspire frustration and indifference as it is difficult to navigate to the function the user wants and is uniformly bland in design. A findable site is locatable and navigable, and RPL’s site is easy to locate as part of the City of Riverside site, but it is not easy to navigate directly to every desired subpage. The next criterion is accessibility for

users with disabilities. The RPL's sites many foibles are exacerbated for users with disabilities: having no search function requires users with visual impairment to struggle through the small print in the tangle of lists to find what they need. The final criterion is credibility, and here too, RPL fails to pass muster. As with the first criterion of usefulness, the problem here is completion. RPL's site is neither current nor comprehensive enough to be credible. For example, the page dedicated to the new main branch still announces the intention to open the branch in the summer of 2020, despite the summer of 2020 being over for nearly a month and none of the branches being open (Riverside Public Library, 2020).

To provide a positive user experience, these failures need to be corrected in the site and the site must be made responsive for mobile use. For greater usefulness and credibility, the site needs to be more up-to-date and explicitly explain how current events are affecting the RPL with a current timeline. One way to do this is to pin a header to the page with current impacts; for example, the Hours & Locations page header could read, "All locations are closed until further notice in accordance with state reopening plan red tier status." The site needs a responsive interface to increase its usability. A search function on the main page would greatly improve user satisfaction, make it more navigable, and streamline the design for mobile use and use by patrons with disabilities. By making these changes to the RPL website, the library system can improve its patron satisfaction during the current crisis and beyond.

### **Implementation**

The implementation of building a new website could be carried out internally by suitably qualified staff, or it could be produced by a professional web designer, so could cost from \$6,000 initially, with a further annual fee of up to \$1,000 that would include maintenance, licensing costs, etc. (Carney, 2020) up to \$25,000.

For the implementation process, the purpose of the website must be established, which we have already ascertained. Furthermore, a design plan should be determined that should include “details about the information architecture, planned structure of the site, a site map of pages to be designed and built” and any other additional information, such as different languages, scripts, font sizes, etc. (Kyrnin, 2018). The next step in the implementation would include design layout, color schemes, and general layout. Once this has been decided, the website content should be gathered and/or created, including text, images, and multimedia (Kyrnin, 2018). It is important that the content is appropriate for the target audiences. When this step has been completed, then a usability study should be considered to evaluate possible problems in the preliminary phase. Thereafter, the actual building of the website can take place, using HTML and CSS (Kyrnin, 2018). This is where it would be necessary to have the technical skills in using these technologies. Once this step of the implementation has been completed it would be necessary to check the website, and make sure all the links are functioning properly. Once the website goes live, it is necessary to continually maintain it to update content, links, and new resources to ensure it stays current (Kyrnin, 2018). This could be carried out by a librarian staffer hired for this specifically, or it could be outsourced to an external company.

These days it is more important than ever to have a good website. People first look at the website to evaluate a business or organization. In this case, patrons visit the website to determine if the library will be of any use. With so many places closed or limited access therefore making sure that the library website is accessible and easy to use. The site now represents the library for the community. Being able to find the material they want and putting it on hold is what counts. If the patrons are unable to accomplish this task the library has not done its job.



As the library website is now it is hard for most people to navigate. The library's website is combined with the government website. This causes confusion on what one is looking at when they first go to the site. Even if you know the two sites are combined, it is still hard for the common person to navigate. The page is much too busy and has too many colors. One does not know where to look first and what to click on to get where they want to go. The first thing to fix is the site. RPL needs to have its own website that is the library only. Once this is accomplished, the person who visits the site will know that everything on this site is strictly the library, which will help eliminate confusion. More people will visit the library site if they know everything there is relevant to their inquiry. The next thing to do is focus on the design of the new library site with the users in mind.

This means making sure things are clearly labeled. The people who are coming to this site are members of a diverse community. Not everyone is an expert at using technology or the Internet. Being able to easily find what they are looking for ensures they are more likely to use the site. If there needs to be subheadings, they must be under the right heading. It will also make it simpler if once they click on the link, it takes you directly there. The other thing is making sure that the page is not just full of links; the relevant information should also be available on the site. The less hoops someone must jump through to get what they want, the more they come back.

Another reason to make sure that the site is easy to use is that children may be using it. For children, it is important to add a bit of color to the site, yet there must not be so much color that it overwhelms the vision. It is important to balance it out: what needs to stand out should be highlighted appropriately. Everything needs to be formatted in a way so the patrons can follow easily from subpage to subpage. As mentioned before, the easier it is to move through the site,

the more people will come. Making these changes will ensure the library stays a vital part of the community even in these trying times.

### **Evaluations**

After implementing a new website there are several ways to evaluate success and continue to make improvements. In order to look at both aspects we need to consider the inputs and outputs of this plan and then create ways to evaluate its success. The new website would require several inputs to function completely including either staff time to curate, update, and monitor a new website or potential financial resources to hire a website service to do so. Once up and running the website would create several measurable outputs. We would be able to see the number of website visits and if successful an increase in services used, program attendees, and materials borrowed. To evaluate the success of the website we can compare future output figures to current ones and survey patrons on the website's features, usability, and accessibility.

While designing the website it is important to evaluate usability before launching. To do this we will utilize George's (2008) method of task analysis where "a realistic situation that end-users might encounter, and task(s) that end-users might want to accomplish when using the website" are tested (p. 143). We will design a series of several tasks to analysis (Appendix A) in order to evaluate usability and make necessary changes.

The techniques to measure for success would be simple. First, we would need to create baseline data of the current figures for website visits, services used, program attendees, and materials borrowed. After going live with the updated site, we can track figures over the first month and compare to the previous figures to measure for success. Then we can use these numbers to adjust and changes as needed. These numbers would provide objective data on the project's success. The second way to measure the success of the website is to gather subjective

data through a survey (Appendix B) of the patrons directly. We can ask website visitors to participate in a brief survey at the end of their visit using a pop-up advertisement. Once they have completed their visit, we can either have the survey open in a new window or have it automatically emailed. There are several ways to receive feedback outside of this method including posting survey boxes in the library, asking for feedback at the front desk during checkout (once the library doors reopen), and sending it out with a monthly letter. In getting feedback directly from patrons we will be able to evaluate the success of the website's positive user experience by measuring its usefulness, usability, desirability, findability, accessibility, and credibility (Rubin, 2016). The survey will also provide insight on how they used the site, their future use of the website, if they would recommend it to another user, and any other comments they would like to share. After viewing the numbers and reviewing feedback, continued updates and improvements can be made on the website including further technological expansion through the creation of a mobile application.

If successful, the outcomes of this website revamp could bring a complete change to the library. By implementing this project, we will be able to demonstrate the RPL's growth towards both goals of superior service and digital literacy. As the front door of the virtual library, a new website can bring an increase of program attendees, materials borrowed and services used, thus allowing the library to greater serve its community.

### Appendix A: Examples of Task Scenarios

**Scenario A** – You have changed out several books from the library, but you cannot remember when they are due back. Check your library account to find out when the books are due. Then return back to the homepage.

**Scenario B** – The library’s website has a “Digital Library” page. Navigate to this page and find *RESOURCE NAME*. Then return back to the homepage.

**Scenario C** – You are interested in attending a program at the library this week. Download this month’s calendar and find out the time and location of *PROGRAM NAME*.

**Scenario D** – You are interested in checking out *BOOK TITLE* from the library today. Logon to your library account and see if the book is currently checked-in. If it is available, place the book on hold to pick up tomorrow.

**Scenario E** – Your library book is due back tomorrow, but you would like to finish reading it and need to extend your due date. Go to your library account and extend your loan. Then return to the homepage.

**Scenario F** – You are looking for a child-friendly website on *TOPIC*. Navigate to the “Children’s” page of the website and find a site to use. Then return to the homepage.

**Scenario G** - You need help with *TASK* use the search bar to see if the library has any resources available to help you.

**Appendix B: Riverside Public Library Survey**

**Have you used our new website? Please provide some feedback!**

**What did you use the website for?**

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<b>Topic</b> Please rate the following on a scale from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (highly satisfied)	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Helpful:</b> Did the website help you find what you were looking for?	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
<b>Usable:</b> Was the website easy to navigate?	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
<b>Engaging:</b> Was the design of the website attractive?	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
<b>Findable:</b> Was the website easy to locate?	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
<b>Accessible:</b> Were you able to access information?	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
<b>Trustworthy:</b> Do you think the website is reliable and honest?	☺	☺	☺	☺	☺

<b>How likely are you to use the website...</b>							
	Extremely unlikely	Unlikely	More or less unlikely	Neutral	More or less likely	Likely	Extremely Likely
again?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
to borrow materials??	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
to engage in programs?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

**Would you recommend the website to another user?    YES    NO**

**Comments:** \_\_\_\_\_

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