Evaluation:

Public library websites are complex, digital information spaces. According to Schmidt and Etches, “Library websites should differ as much as the communities they serve. Conversely, library websites will share many characteristics because of the similarities of people everywhere” (Schmidt, A., Etches, A., 2012, p. 3). The user groups of public library websites are diverse in terms of age, race, gender, language, interests, needs, and abilities. Since the websites are a resource for the diverse general public they must therefore be designed in order to be accessible to each group. Much of the web design and information architecture literature emphasizes the following key information architecture principles in designing public library websites: search capabilities, navigation and orientation, simple language and consistency (Aitta, M., Kaleva, S., & Kortelainen, T. (2008); Davidsen, S., & Yankee, E. (2003); Schmidt & Etches, 2012). This paper evaluated the following public library websites to evaluate the genre: Boston Public Library (http://www.bpl.org/#), Monroe County Public Library (http://mcpl.info/), Darien Library (http://www.darienlibrary.org/), and Conway Public Library (http://conwaypubliclibrary.org/). These websites demonstrate effective use of information architecture principles for the public library website genre.

Navigation is essential to the success of a public library website. Maintaining a broad navigation header supports the efficacy and delivery of a site’s taxonomy, grouping related content together (Wilson, P.A., 2004, p. 22). The headers on each of the evaluated sites include “terms that are familiar to the actual user” (Aitta, M., Kaleva, S., & Kortelainen, T., 2008, p.42) and bridge the gap between the online library and the real-world, physical library (Nielsen, J., 1995). Using the physical layout of the library as a guide for designing the navigation taxonomy and hierarchy assists the user in quick understanding and retrieval of information (Bates, M. J., 1989, p.15). For example, “Kids”, “Teens”, “Services”, “My Account” and “Events” were used in all four websites’ header indicating different sections of the physical library and things people seek out when at the library. Three of the four library websites included scroll over, cascading sub-menus of content found within each broad topic in the header. “By making the hierarchy visible, navigation tells us what the site contains… it reveals content” (Krug, S., 2005, The
overlooked purposes of navigation). The use of broad headers and cascading sub-menus allows the pages to remain uncluttered and efficient while avoiding overwhelming users.

In addition to a header, the site’s navigation should include a site index, site map and search bar (Wilson, P.A., 2004, p. 22). These features allow the user freedom to choose between browsing and searching the site for specific information (Krug, 2005, Web Navigation 101). All of the websites evaluated provided a search bar on the homepage for both searching the website and the library’s catalog. The site search feature does not only include a search bar, users should have assistance in order to self-correct and handle errors (Nielsen, J., 1995; Wilson, A.P., 2004, p. 33). Three of the four evaluated websites’ search feature offered a “did you mean…” and a list of related results when a keyword was not found because of misspelling or unfound matches. One of the websites also offered suggestions when no results were found, like spell checking and Boolean operators. In addition, the library websites offered a “quick links” or “how do I?” drop down menu to quickly access popular topics or frequently asked questions, which provides users an accelerated path to these pages within the site (Aitta, M., Kaleva, S., & Kortelainen, T., 2008, p. 42). If the aforementioned features are unsuccessful in assisting the user, he/she can access the site map or index, which provides an outline of hyperlinked pages within the website, providing an overview and hierarchy of all webpages (Wilson, A.P., 2004, p. 24-26).

Once users begin utilizing the site’s navigation, they need to know where they are within the site at all times, and feel in control of the navigation mechanism without having any prior knowledge of the library field (Aitta, M., Kaleva, S., & Kortelainen, T., 2008, p. 42). The user-friendly header terms make the user feel comfortable and guide the user to desired information. After navigating from the homepage, its essential to provide uniform layouts and breadcrumbs under the header give the user a reference point to their location in relation to the homepage (Krug, S., 2005, Breadcrumbs). Maintaining uniformity and consistency in the location of the site’s name, navigation bar, logo, language and terminology allow the user to predict outcomes of their actions making them feel comfortable and in control (Aitta, M., Kaleva, S., & Kortelainen, T., 2008, p. 43, Neilsen, J., 1995). All of the evaluated websites maintain consistent page layout among the webpages within the site. The header remains in the same location with the same content and with page titles, highlighted headers, or color coding, the user knows their location within the site at all times. For example, the Boston Public Library places brackets
around the current page in the header, as well as a clear page title. Each page also maintains an index of information down the left side of the page, giving the user an overview of the page’s content. These features are especially helpful when for a site with a large amount of content.

Writing for the web is another important principle implemented in the evaluated library websites. Each site typically displays information in bulleted lists with subtitles and appropriate highlighting including bolded, italicized or colored text (Aitta, M., Kaleva, S., & Kortelainen, T., 2008, p. 43). Patrons scan pages for information and look to these features to find chunks of relevant information and quick facts (Wilson, A.P., 2004, p. 31). Users frequently tend to “satisfice” (Simon, H., 1957) and read or choose the first “best” thing on the page, leaving the information architects and designers to create easy-to-use and simple-to-read web pages (Krug, S., 2005, Fact of life #2). All of the websites evaluated included this type of writing and presentation style on the homepage and other pages within the site. All of the homepages included news and events either scrolling below the header, or listed on the side bars with a highlighted event name/title, one line description, date, time and location. Some listings included relevant images or icons to appeal to the user and help make connections.

Accessibility is an extremely important and potential legal principle for public library websites. Although Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act does not mandate that states require all public service websites to comply with accessibility guidelines, it is and will continue to be an issue public libraries will need to address (Fulton, C., 2011). Public libraries are institutions which are meant to serve all members of the community and the web has made accessibility and services farther reaching than in the past. For example, patrons with mobility constraints can now access the digital collection by downloading ebooks and audiobooks. With this in mind, the public library website could technically be viewed as a “service” delivering content and additional services to patrons. Using the WAVE web accessibility tool, I evaluated the four library websites. On average each homepage maintained an average of five errors and five separate warnings, which is not ideal, but manageable (http://wave.webaim.org/). Most errors were simple fixes of adding <alt> tags to images and buttons. Although ensuring accessibility to all users can be challenging at times, it is something all public libraries should work toward rectifying within their websites.
In addition to creating accessible websites to users with disabilities, public libraries should maintain mobile websites (Schmidt, A., Etches, A., 2012, p. 85). With the boom in popularity of smartphones and mobile devices public libraries should be developing mobile websites, again to serve all patrons. The majority of students and adults use mobile devices to access the web (Bridges, L., Rempel, H. G., Griggs, K., 2010, p. 312-313). Understanding patrons’ use of certain mobile devices is a key factor in developing mobile sites to ensure accessibility on the technical end (Bridges, L., Rempel, H. G., Griggs, K., 2010, p. 310-311). “To effectively plan a mobile library site, librarians need to be aware of the different components that make up the library web site to create a strategy for making the different pieces mobile compatible” (Bridges, L., Rempel, H. G., Griggs, K., 2010, p. 313). Although mobile sites are becoming a near necessity, only two of the four sites offered a mobile service. The Boston Public Library offers a mobile catalog via an app available for iPhone and Android, while the Monroe Country Public Library offers a mobile catalog via a web browser.
References:


PLAISTOW PUBLIC LIBRARY

Cara Marsh
02.12.2014

Summary:
This document describes the redesign of the Plaistow Public Library website. The home page, kids page and contact page are featured, along with a sitemap, user flow for a keyword search, and a mobile app home screen design.
Contents

Page 1. Title
Page 2. Contents and Changelog
Page 3. Sitemap
Page 4. Home Page
Page 5. Kids Page
Page 6. Contact Page
Page 7. User Flow
Page 8. Mobile App Home Screen

Changelog

02/12/2014. Document created
02/13/2014. Added Sitemap
02/13/2014. Added Home Page
02/13/2014. Added Kids Page
02/13/2014. Added Contact Page
02/14/2014. Added User Flow – Keyword Search
02/14/2014. Added Mobile App Home Screen
This screen shows the Kids page of the Plaistow Public Library website.

1. Page Header
   - Logo, onClick: navigate to Home page
2. Menu Links
   - Home, onClick: navigate to Home page
   - About, Hover: cascade sub-menu
   - Services, Hover: cascade sub-menu
   - Electronic Resources, Hover: cascade sub-menu
   - Calendar, onClick: navigate to Calendar page
3. Catalog/My Account
   - OnClick: Navigate to external page – open in new link
4. Follow Us
   - Facebook, OnClick: Navigate to external page – open in new tab
   - Twitter, OnClick: Navigate to external page – open in new tab
5. Breadcrumb & Menu Links
   - Home, OnClick: Navigate to Home page
   - Kids, OnClick: Navigate to Kids page
   - Contact, OnClick: Navigate to Kids Contact page
   - Programs/Calendar, OnClick: Navigate to Programs/Kids Calendar page
   - Homework HELP, OnClick: Navigate to Homework HELP page
   - Online Fun, OnClick: Navigate to Online Fun page
8. Search Site
   - Search by keyword/subject – Navigate to search results page
9. Quick Links – Drop down menu
   - OnClick: Navigate to page within site
10. Today’s Events
    - OnClick: Navigate to Programs/Kids Calendar page
11. Footer
    - Home, onClick: navigate to homepage
    - Site Map, onClick: navigate to Site Map page
    - Contact, onClick: navigate to Contact page
    - Last Updated: Shows date of last edit
User Flow – Keyword Search

Home

User has query.

Search Bar

Search Site

User types keyword.

Keyword matches found.

Results List

Search strategy suggestions & library contact info.

No Results Found

No keyword matches found.

Did you mean?

List similar keyword results.

Similar keyword matches found.
Mobile App Home Screen

This screen shows the home screen of the Plaistow Public Library mobile app.

1. Page Header
2. Catalog
   - OnClick: Open library catalog search interface.
3. My Account
   - OnClick: Log in pop up
   - After log in list account information
     - Check outs
     - Holds
     - Fines
     - Registered events
4. Book Look
   - After scanning, list results of library catalog.
5. E-Books & Audiobooks
   - OnClick: Open OverDrive search interface.
6. Events
   - OnClick: Open events interface
   - Choice of Calendar view or list view.
7. Ask Us
   - OnClick: Open contact page
     - Phone
     - E-mail
     - Address

Plaistow Public Library

Catalog
Search the library's catalog.

My Account
Log in and manage your account.

Book Look
Scan a book and search the catalog.

E-Books & Audiobooks
OverDrive - Downloadable materials.

Events
Calendar of events and programs.

Ask Us
Call, e-mail, visit us.