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Building Catalogs in the Sand

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For the past four years, the Coastal Resource Sharing Network (CRSN) has had an evolving public interface for their Beachbooks library catalog in pursuit of a better search experience for patrons. CRSN, serving a population of 70,000 in Tillamook and Lincoln counties, includes six member library systems, two community colleges, 13 library buildings, and one bookmobile. CRSN's current annual circulation stands at 850,000, with a collection size of 400,000 items. This article shares some of the ideas behind their evolving catalog design.

Finding the catalog

Users can find a library catalog one of two ways: by doing a Web search, or by entering the catalog's address in their browsers. Prior to 2005, the CRSN catalog address, www.crsn.lib.or.us, was difficult to market and hard to remember. So, during an ILS migration in early 2005, CRSN switched to the much friendlier www.beachbooks.org. Such addresses double as great search terms to help patrons find the catalog online. For example, a Google search for "beachbooks" puts the CRSN catalog at the top of the resulting hit list.

Media coverage

In 2008, patrons of the Beachbooks catalog used the search term DVD more than any other and three times as often as the next most commonly used term. CRSN patrons also searched for VHS often enough to put it in the top 20 search terms used. Clearly, Beachbooks patrons want to use the catalog to find media. Following the lead of other Oregon libraries like Deschutes Public Library, CRSN has tried to incorporate media-friendly features in the Beachbooks catalog, including:

- The ability to search within broad A/V groups (movies, music, audiobooks)

- The ability to browse specific item types (DVD, music CD, audiobook CD)

- The ability to browse movies and TV shows by genre and show title

One popular new feature has been the addition of a "Movies and TV" page that allows patrons to browse movies by genre (adventure, Disney, historical, etc.), and to browse TV shows by title. While CRSN did not add this feature until June 2008, some of its associated searches still reached the top 50 most popular searches for the entire year.

Providing relevant labeling for media searching is another good idea CRSN is pursuing. Librarians know that when searching music, an "author" search equates to a search for a composer or performer, or that "publisher" equals a music label, like Blue Note. The average user does not necessarily think that way. Labeling media searches with relevant terms like "director/performer," "composer/artist" and "title/track" is a simple way to improve media discoverability.

Cover to cover

CRSN began providing cover art and reviews on Beachbooks in late 2004. Like many libraries, CRSN purchases enriched content through its ILS vendor, with the content originating from Syndetic Solutions, now part of Bowker Publishing. While CRSN cannot measure its impact, they do quickly hear from patrons if the content goes offline or loads slowly. The downside to this enriched content has been its cost and the lack of content for media like movies and music. However, some lower-cost alternatives for enriched content are starting to appear. Baker & Taylor now offers an enriched content solution called "Content Café," which includes content for music and movies in addition to books. Another vendor, Book-

Letters, offers dynamic book-related content for newsletters and Web pages that can be leveraged for in-catalog delivery.

CRSN has also experimented with using their content stream in creative ways. For example, one of the CRSN catalogers suggested last year that they try to mimic the display of featured books on the Barnes & Noble Web site. Based on that suggestion, CRSN leveraged its subscription to Syndetic Solutions content to create a dynamically-updated display of recently added titles that appears on the Beachbooks front page. Using the same technique, Newport Public Library, one of the CRSN member libraries, displays recent staff picks from the Beachbooks catalog on their Web site.

Database integration

For some patron needs, subscription databases are the perfect tool. In relation to the catalog, though, where do they go and what are they called? For EBSCOHost, the predominant CRSN database, CRSN has sidestepped those issues by implementing a search box that allows patrons to search EBSCOHost directly from the front page of the catalog. Patrons simply enter their search query and click "Search." Libraries subscribing to EBSCOHost can easily create such a search box using the new Search Box Builder tool provided by EbscoHOST.

CRSN also integrates its database list directly into the catalog. Embedding the database page directly in the catalog has the disadvantage of relying on the dynamic, session-oriented nature of catalog URLs. To counteract this, CRSN offers direct navigation to the database page via the URL http://www.beachbooks.org/databases, which can be bookmarked and linked.

Undergoing analysis

Usage statistics can help guide catalog design. For the Beachbooks catalog, CRSN uses two freely available tools for analyzing

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Web traffic, Google Analytics and AW-STATS. Google Analytics is by far the easier tool to implement and within the capabilities of casual techies.

Google Analytics provides interesting and useful information about catalog traffic, browser screen resolutions, and connection speed. It also provides usage data such as most common entry points, number of visits and unique visitors, average session length, and most visited pages

This data helps CRSN decide which screen resolutions to test most thoroughly with the catalog. For example, 4 years ago 800 x 600 was still a common screen resolution, but today only 10 percent of Beachbooks users use a screen resolution of 800 x 600 or lower. Google Analytics also shows that despite growing sales of Apple computers, over 91 percent of Beachbooks users still run Windows, and the use of Linux among patrons remains below one percent. Although still a very small subset of total use, mobile devices are also starting to make an appearance in the list of OSes—a trend worth watching.

To use Google Analytics, libraries can set up an account at www.google.com/analytics, and follow the instructions for adding a simple HTML snippet to the footer of the catalog. After a few days, data is available on the Google Analytics dashboard.

Miscellany

Between major revisions, CRSN continues to add smaller features to our catalog as
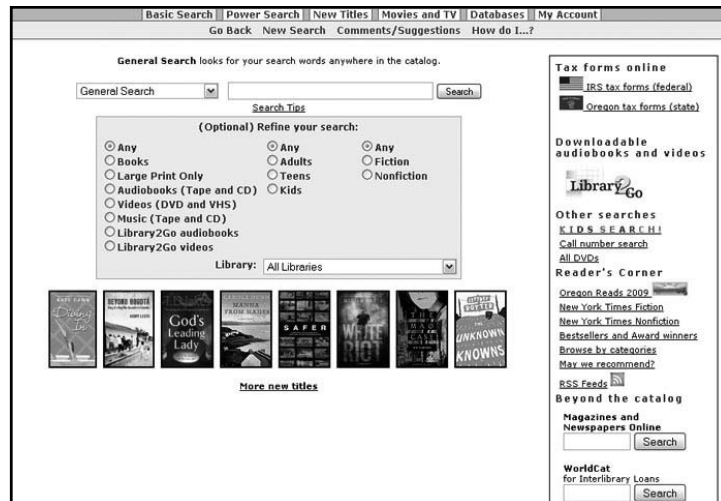
new needs and opportunities arise.

Recommend it!—The "Recommend It!" feature allows patrons to e-mail a link to a single item in the catalog to a friend. A minor success, patrons use this feature about 20 times per month.

Comments Submission—CRSN tries to make it easy for patrons to contact member libraries directly through the catalog by including links to comment forms within the catalog. Patrons use this feature regularly, with several new messages arriving each day. Most of the comments involve specific account questions ("What's my PIN?" or "How to I renew?"), but patrons also make purchase recommendations and the occasional design suggestion.

Direct navigation—Amazon and other commercial sites have successfully taught users about direct site navigation with URLs such as amazon.com/movies and amazon.com/music. CRSN offers similar URLs for some pages within the catalog to help with navigation, as well as with bookmarking and direct linking. Such URLs include beachbooks.org/databases, beachbooks.org/movies, and beachbooks.org/library2go.

No results found—Rather than simply display a "no results found" message in response to an unsuccessful search, our catalog now provides a number of search tips and links to similar searches.

Constant testing

To keep the catalog moving forward, CRSN likes to test it regularly. Gordon and West (2008) listed three use cases they apply as a quick litmus test of the usability of any catalog they encounter. To paraphrase their tests:

- Can a patron easily find a title such as "She's not there" that includes Boolean terms?

- Can a patron easily list all DVDs in the catalog?

- Can a patron easily find titles from the New York Times bestseller lists that the library owns?

To those tests, CRSN would add some others:

- Can a patron quickly find the catalog via search engines like Google?

- Can a patron quickly limit a search to fiction or nonfiction?

- Can a patron easily search by media type?

CRSN also looks to other catalogs for new ideas. CRSN visits other SirsiDynix catalogs to find out what other libraries are accomplishing on the platform. For broader inspiration and trend watching, CRSN looks to catalogs of prominent Northwest libraries, especially those active in catalog development. Those include Seattle Public Library, Multnomah County Library, Deschutes Public Library, and Corvallis-Benton County Public Library. Looking even more broadly, WorldCat and OCLC FictionFinder incorporate new and interesting catalog features on a regular basis.

Conclusion

Looking back over the last four years, the Beachbooks catalog has benefited greatly from the input of staff and patrons, as well as the anonymous contributions made by those whose work they have copied. Looking forward, the Beachbooks catalog continues to evolve. This coming year, CRSN will likely implement saved reading lists for patrons, with help from new ILS features. CRSN might also need to adapt the catalog for use on increasingly prevalent mobile devices like smart phones and incorporate new media types, as they did recently with downloadable content and Netlibrary E-books. Whatever happens, one thing is sure: the Beachbooks catalog will continue to evolve. ✿

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