

Wellington's electronic branch

Opportunities:

Demands of Physical Access to Wellington libraries

The unique features of Wellington city landscape mean that, despite having the highest library branch per capita rate for New Zealand, there are many geographic areas that do not have easy access to a library branch. It was very difficult for some customer groups, for example school children, to visit. Yet, almost all transactions at that time relied on the customer, at some point, needing to visit the library physically.

The Central Library is open 66 hours, 7 days a week but customers' expectations were for longer opening hours.

General Technological Advances

Direct customer access to electronic resources at Wellington City Libraries was limited to a small number of CD ROMs at the Central branch. There were several attempts to network to remote suburban branches in 1996 and 1997, but the response time was so slow as to be unworkable. Technical explanations at the time centred around the terrain. Branch customers account for approximately half the library's usage.

The popularity of the Internet as both a communication conduit and storehouse was increasing both for information providers and searchers. Also, this was matched by a parallel development in electronic publishing trends. The ability of the Internet to facilitate the dissemination of current information, or present different types of information more widely and readily, via the telephone network, suggested itself as a possible solution to Wellington's access concerns.

The Wellington customer community was proving progressive in connecting to the Internet at a very fast rate. In 1998, 47% of adults reported they had searched the Internet in the last two months (Wellington City Council Libraries Monitoring Survey, 1998). This suggested that developing an electronic library resource - where customers and citizens could logically visit and interact with the library service, would increase access for significant numbers of Wellington City Libraries target market.

AIM

These issues and opportunities combined to produce our overall aim -

To build a virtual branch for Wellingtonians - the library that never sleeps

Objectives

- **To increase library access for Wellington City Libraries customers**

The electronic branch development is a key component to deliver Wellington City Council's recreation, economic and social strategies. This is clearly evident in the Libraries Business Plan 1999 where development of the virtual branch supports Council outcomes of ensuring a more equitable distribution of recreation opportunities - to increase the accessibility and affordability of recreation opportunities, to increase access for information for personal development or community participation and provide abundant opportunities for lifelong learning.

Within this context, increasing access refers both to extending the timeframes library based information is accessible (the 'opening hours'), but also to the distribution of access points - via any Internet-enabled PC.

Although hosting a site on the Internet means that we are accessible globally, our primary objective is to our primary target market - Wellingtonians, and this has driven all aspects of our tactics, and site development plans.

Visitors to the Web-site were the primary measure - to have 36,000 library customers visit per annum.

A secondary measure is customer satisfaction with the Web-site access.

- **To bring the Library to our customers**

While our traditional library services (based on expectations of physical visits) do achieve this objective via such devices as mobile libraries or services to housebound customers in a small fashion, the ability to deliver products to customers where **they** are e.g. school, home, business has exponentially increased. This in turn leads to two supporting objectives

- **To increase options for customers to access information themselves without having to contact a library staff member as an agent for individual requests**
- **To develop the Web-site so it is an integral part of the organisation and services - offering all practical existing services and products as well as an enhanced range.**

Achievement of these objectives not only had the advantages of improving delivery time (for example, immediately viewing or printing a magazine article in a school), but also enabling multiple customers to view the same resource at the same time.

Key result areas of these objectives would include

- business volumes of general library products offered via the Website
- the number of times in-library events and information is posted to the Website
- the degree to which new products offered within the library are also available via Web-site contact access
- the level of customer satisfaction with locating information themselves

- the degree to which in-library usage is influenced by Web-site access

Key Strategies And Tactics

Political support was obtained via a proposal for capital expenditure of \$30,000 for initial development of the site. In line with City outcomes of presenting as an attractive recreation and business destination, this budget was primarily for designing a professional presentation to the site and efficient and effective site architecture.

To ensure links were forged between physical and local access options the Website design and development plans encompassed

- Providing staff and site contact information, including maps, parking and bus routes
- Providing pages for individual Branches to promote their identity and services and also events, such as school holiday programmes, to draw in physical visits.
- Enabling OPAC searching. The catalogue is presented offline, but refreshed daily. This ensures round the clock access to timely information.
- Information and services mirroring physical services e.g. reserves, enquiries, searching subject resources, circulation information e.g. how to join, also promotional events, customer feedback facility
- Representing all library teams on the dedicated Web management team, with informational and technical skills to design and enhance the site. This team also ensured Web objectives are not met at expense of other library objectives e.g. revenue targets by our Business Information Service. In fact, the site was used to promote the use of these services.
- Ongoing projects based on in-library services. A current project in development is enabling customers to 'issue' requested collection items remotely via the site, to be delivered to their address.

A strong relationship and problem solving approach with WCC Information Technology providers was established to ensure 24 hour access and streamlined daily updating. This group were also consulted to ensure that the design of our site was consistent with other Council Internet endeavours. Katipo Communications, had also been employed by the Wellington City Council for other sites.

To ensure greatest access to the site was achieved, a design was implemented that encompassed accessibility by older browsers and/or slower modems. Alternative text tags were also utilised to account for users with images "turned off".

Enhanced services

A growing range of information sources and indexes are now available online. Through the use of the website we can now take advantage of electronic publishing to deliver current information in a timely manner e.g. Ebsco Masterfile, Electronic Library Australasia full text periodical and newspaper databases. This has necessitated also implementing an authorisation process to honour the copyright clauses and conditions. Individual Wellington customers are still able to access all part of the site by entering their library card number and password.

An imminent development which has been in progress for some time is making our local history resources index and photographic files resources available via the site.

These tools are but the beginning of the implementation of our web development plan, where we hope to take advantage of advances in web technology, for example the potential inclusion of

sound files in RealAudio and MP3 format.

Promotion

The Website has a programme of promotional events from its inception as an electronic branch. Some of the events are staged physically within the library such as the opening launch. Others may involve demonstrations at customers' places of work or in schools. Brochures and postcards to publicise the tools and increased access have been available in all library sites from the beginning. Each significant new tool is launched with a promotional campaign. All library stationery includes the website address as part of the corporate signature. Search engines and web portals were approached regarding including our website and to date there are 33 links, of which half are portals.

Transferability

Library websites are ubiquitous. However, what we regard as both innovative and transferable to other information providers is the concept of an electronic branch. That is, a website that is not developed in parallel with the physical library services, but totally integrated with them. This design philosophy has underpinned the development plan and contributed in a very real way to the successful results – both quantitatively and qualitatively. This link with physical branches was also evident to reviewer Helen Brownlie in *Library Life* (May, 1999, p. 9) who noted “Congratulations to the Wellington City Libraries – this website has a very modern and alive look and feel about it..... the intended audience, the Wellingtonian, is borne out by both the mission statement on the first page, and the information presented on the site...A person could get to a branch and would know the services available...”

Each organisation has an identity. Multi-site organisations, in particular, may have several. The different suburbs in Wellington have quite different customer profiles. Traditionally these customer preferences and characteristics have been reflected in the physical library service (for example architecture and recruitment strategies). A Web-site is an ideal mechanism to, at one and the same time, present both a unified corporate value set, and individual branch identities.

A by-product is that the site has proved attractive and useful to people who live outside our primary customer catchment boundaries. Customer feedback suggests that this is not limited to the Web-site facilities, but the flavour and culture of the entire Wellington Library network system which has been encapsulated for the site.

Comments gained from the feedback form have been very positive. Several American librarians have commented that the site is a good model for libraries. With the growing range of electronic tools available on our website, it is quite possible that smaller libraries may register for an “out of town electronic tools” subscription, in order to provide this facility to their own borrowers.

Results

On almost every front, the usage and customer feedback has exceeded our expectations!

Meeting our objectives

- **Visits**

Current visitor traffic is 3,500 per month and continuing to increase as more resources available. 3,500 equates to the number of physical visitors of Wellington's smaller branches. This is well within the Business Plan targets of 3,000 per month (36,000 per annum).

- **Enquiries and Requests**

It is difficult to compare physical enquiry rate with online directly. One needs to take into consideration that when customers visit branches physically, many queries are not explicitly made – for example the customer may answer it themselves by glancing at a sign or browsing through a book. Traditionally these have not been collected and quantified. However, the equivalent can be tracked and recorded in minute detail for website requests. We have confined our evaluation to those online statistics that are more directly comparable. Please see Appendix One for graphs which compare website usage to other branches for August, 1999.

Reservations - Current reservations made average 524 per month which is the third highest branch

Catalogue/OPAC enquiries - Current OPAC enquiries place the Website well above the top bracket of larger branches.

Customer Usage – Although customers visiting the website as not as great in number, they are making more reserves and catalogue enquiries per visit, than customers physically visiting the branches.

Requests for Information – Requests made directly to staff for reference information are comparatively low at on average 70 per week, when compared to in-library reference enquiries which average approximately 100 per week for the smaller branches. However, when one considers that there are on average 3050 discrete requests to view pages within the site per week, it suggests that customers are able to answer their information needs directly from the site, and without the need to refer to a staff member. Website pages seek to answer commonly asked questions – ranging from information about opening hours and services, about our collections and subject resources, what's on, as well as how to join and other FAQs.

Customer satisfaction

There is a 92% customer satisfaction rating with the site, (random survey commissioned by Wellington City Libraries, March 1999).

Links to Physical library usage

Customers report the Website has also contributed to increased physical library use and this is borne out quantitatively. For example at March 1999 (the commencement of academic year), Central library issues were 15.7% higher than March 1998. This translates into an increase of more than 20,000 issues/returns for just one month.

Wellington City Libraries' staff have also benefited from the development of the site. For example:

- offline catalogue searching is invaluable when our real-time electronic catalogue is disabled, with staff able to attend to enquiries within the library.
- The website has also become a “one stop shop” for information on our library with the collected information of many of our brochures in one place for easy reference.

- We are also able to use the website to include information that wouldn't otherwise be available collectively, for example, the September school holiday programme. In this instance, each branch organises their own programme, so normally these details are only available from each branch. Collected details are now available on our website both on the 'what's on' page, and also via our online newsletter, with the latter specifically developed in a printable format for easier reading. In this way, our web content is actually leading the way for our hardcopy information.

With growing use by the library of electronic resources, we are increasingly making these available through our website, for example the article search powertools such as *EBSCO Masterfile Premiere and World Magazine Bank*, and *Electric Library Australasia*. This means that instead of staff having to restrict usage by borrowers to short periods of time, borrowers can now be directed to the website, where they can simply authenticate themselves by using their library card number and password. This frees staff time up to attend to other enquiries.

Professional and Critical acclaim

New Zealand has developed a far more Net-literate society which is keen to embrace new information sources. The Wellington City Libraries' website has benefited from this by attracting attention from a media that is keen to assuage this interest in our society, for example the site has won a "Site of the Day" award, - "this is a large site that's easy to get around with much for the visitor – hmmm, just like the library really....". This confirms the connection between the physical and logical library as the positive design factor.

Paul Reynolds commentator on the Nine to Noon (Kim Hill) show and writer for *Infotech Weekly* also commenting that "I also like Wellington City Libraries site – it's really well designed and well thought out, with good background and programming. It's a model – it's well put together. It's not perfect but it's one of the best of its kind".

Business strategy and development – total integration

A key strategy for the Libraries is "develop and grow". To this end, the library is keen to place themselves at the forefront of New Zealand libraries, gaining maximum customer satisfaction. The development of a website has fitted well within this goal, as it has meant that we can better make use of a growing amount of information sources which are available solely in electronic form, and our 24-hour access means that our customers can now access information where they want, when they want.

An excellent example of this is Electric Library Australasia (ELA), which provides access to New Zealand (INL) and overseas newspaper sources, magazine articles, Reuters photos and tv/radio transcripts from around the globe. We are the only library in New Zealand who is providing free access to this tool for its residential customers and the only library website providing access to this tool in Australasia.

ELA and EBSCO are but the beginning of our plans to provide a virtual reference library via electronic database resources and our development plan sees us looking at the possibilities of providing RealAudio sound files from storytime sessions and email mailing lists of new items of interest. We see our website as an integral and important part of our overall strategy to be the "Library that never sleeps".

