

Project 3: Website Evaluation and Design

Santa Monica Public Library (simpl.org)

San Jose State University - School of Information

INFO 202

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Executive Summary

The Santa Monica Public Library's (SMPL) mission is to provide resources, services, and a place to encourage the community to read, connect, relax, and learn (Santa Monica Public Library, n.d.-b). However, when navigating the library's website, accessing these resources and services is difficult and frustrating. Our report pulls from data collected via card sorting, interviews, and site map analysis to propose actionable steps the SMPL can take to redesign its website. We suggest reorganizing and renaming the website's categories to decrease repetition and confusion when navigating the website. Such as adding a new category, "Browse our Collection", to consolidate many of the library's resources into one category and updating the "Reopening" category to a more relevant title, "Location and Hours". In addition, rearranging the categories so that certain services the library's patrons search for most, like accessibility, are more readily available. Finally, based on our user research findings, our report suggests that the SMPL would benefit from conducting user testing on real and current library patrons. These changes discussed further in our report, will help to simplify the website to be more user-friendly and encourage more community engagement with the SMPL system.

Introduction

The Santa Monica Public Library system is a vital community resource located in Southern California. The library system serves a residential population of "90,223 (2012) in an 8.3-mile square area" of the city of Santa Monica, California (Santa Monica Public Library, 2014). It consists of one main branch and four neighborhood branches. In the fiscal year of 2015-2016, all five locations served a total of 1,184,130 patrons (Santa Monica Public Library, n.d.-a). Its mission is to "encourage the community to read, connect, relax, and learn" (Santa Monica

Public Library, n.d.-b). Collection materials are available in multiple languages, programs foster lifelong learning and literacy, and annual technology reviews ensure that the library provides the latest technology to their patrons (Santa Monica Public Library, n.d.-c).

The library system's website is an extension of its vast list of services. This report analyzes its current design and proposes a redesign of their website in order to enhance usability and increase engagement with library services. The redesign offers suggestions that reflect the strategic plan and mission of the Santa Monica Public Library. The new layout hopes to meet the needs of the users and fulfill the library system's core services that emphasize equitable access to an extensive collection of books, technology for life-long learning, programming for all ages, digital resources, and more. The report concludes with suggestions on user testing to further identify areas for improvement.

Site Map of Existing Site and Discussion

At first glance, the website does not have a "homepage" organizational group. The user must click on the Santa Monica Library logo at the top of the webpage for this information. While this is a common practice on other websites, it may not be immediately intuitive for all users.

Further, the link for "Book,Music,Movies" under several groups, when clicked on, does not have any hyperlinks regarding movies and music. Without any hyperlinks, it can be confusing for users to determine where to click next on the website. Users gain access through the Hoopla app for movies and music for digital media, yet this is located under "Ebooks and Apps". Some patrons may not know what Hoopla is and its content, thus it is unclear for users to access media content under a category which best describes the type of applications. Another

instance for confusion is searching for “ Computers and Printing services”. The user must search deep within “Services”. It is located under the tertiary category “Technology” which makes it less apparent for the user and requires many clicks.

A common issue of the website is the repetitiveness of the sub-groups under organizational groupings. Each sub-group has an image functioning as a descriptive indication for the target user. Upon observation, the groups did not follow a consistent organizational structure as the authority control on terms is confusing. There is one instance of an audience group with “Kid and Teens” mixed in with topic groups like “Reopening” and “Programs” , therefore the library’s choice reflects “more ambiguous” groupings with choosing variable organizations (Weedman, 2023, p. 398). As a result, the website is large and extensive with repetitive subgroups. Each page seems to be cluttered with these subgroups that take you to other areas of the website a user may not want to visit. For example, when a user clicks on the "Kids and Teens" section, they are presented with the "Book Groups" subgroup. Unfortunately, clicking on that subgroup directs the user to the general "Book Groups" page, which does not offer any information about book groups for kids and teens. The current setup is unproductive and unhelpful when it comes to guiding users towards the programs they are interested in. Instead, the deep and broad nature of the website overwhelms the user when browsing and clicking the links as there is too much information present (Weedman, 2023, p. 398).

Redesign Site Map and Discussion

Based on the above, the site needs to be redesigned and the group has provided a proposed site map in Figure 2. The group applied card sorting and interviewing to a small cadre of test users to see if they agreed with some of the proposed redesign decisions. It was observed that the majority of the test users struggled with the secondary and tertiary categories within the

categories while the repetitive nature of many of the categories and the subcategories caused confusion and the feeling of being overwhelmed by the choices. The test users' findings fully illustrated the need for organizations (and companies) with a web presence, especially when focusing on services, to be as Krug (2013) highlighted “self-evident. Obvious. Self-explanatory” (p. 11).

The group’s first suggestion is that the page should be organized for the audience. We felt the categories: adult services, teen services, children’s services, multilingual services and collections would be more appropriate yet when we tried organizing the current materials in this way it was found the representative documents were lacking. It was then decided to condense and reorganize some of the previous categories and to move some of the secondary categories into primary level categories while also deleting many of the repetitive pages. Using Krug’s principles of web usability, the group also decided to relabel the categories in the proposed site map redesign to make each more explicit for the users and to “get rid of the question marks” (Krug, 2013, p. 13).

The group also decided on this redesign considering most library patrons want certain services to be more readily available. For instance, on the original site “Accessibility” was buried under “Services” and would require many clicks which is not valuable for someone who needs accessibility accommodations. Using ADA best practices, it was decided that a quick link needs to be created that automatically would open the accessibility features which should be placed on the bottom left side of the homepage according to standard practice in web design especially for public institutions.

Although the “Reopening” category was no doubt a welcome sign after the pandemic for library patrons, a more appropriate button would be to have a labeled “Homepage” or according

to our test users a more explicit category of “Library Locations and Hours.” Our redesign now features general information on holiday closures, followed by a dedicated webpage for each of the five branches. This allows patrons to access more specific information about their respective home branch. In the strategic plan of the SMPL, creating a space for digital resources was important and would help “connect the community to electronic resources, online training, and instruction” (Santa Monica Public Library, n.d.-c, p.8) yet previously this tab was just a link to the catalog with a repetition of the same eight pages found on five of the other pages which led to user frustration and confusion.

One further suggestion is to create a new category “Browse our Collection” which allows for a more tailored search for library patrons. Our redesign of the website now separates information on the collection into seven distinct categories, including valuable materials such as Ebooks and Digital Media, Books and Magazines, and World Languages. This structure allows us to better highlight each category. Additionally, we thought this would be a more suitable location for reader's advisory information, such as Recommended Reads and NoveList Plus. Furthermore, library patrons looking to use the computers or printing services at SMPL may find the category "Technology" too vague. To make it easier for individuals to find the technology services, SMPL should consider changing the category name so that it is more explicit. It is now labeled “Computer and Printing Services” with a subcategory of “Technology.” This relabeling makes it easier for customers to find exactly what they are looking for and ensures that they are not confused by vague terms. Instead, it uses language they are familiar with and clearly defines the scope of their offerings.

Recommendation and User Testing

It is our recommendation that, based on the user testing that we conducted in the course of this project, that SMPL clarify and simplify their site navigation, broadening and shallowing the hierarchy of their page in the process. There is still the capacity for multiple layers of navigation without redirecting to the same few pages each time. Santa Monica Public Library would do well to sample real and current patrons of the facility, and this is evident in the user testing that was completed by our group.

Our research indicates that User One (U1) favored a closed card sort over an open sort due to their frustration with the website's original menu. User One also found that there were several cards they felt did not fit with any other cards. We were able to make some adjustments to our redesign based on this feedback to ensure that these cards were better integrated. User Two (U2), on the other hand, maintained all the constraints and was happy to use the categories provided, but put items in unexpected places at times, such as the “Kids and Teens” category. In one instance, this category was isolated with nothing underneath it during U2’s card sort, as if the user were unsure what benefits were provided to children and young adults at SMPL in the first place. In the Denver Public Library system, for example, there is an advisory panel for teens that curates specifically for that age group, and makes recommendations based on current happenings at their local libraries, particularly specific branches where they serve a high number of this subset of the population (Work Day, 2023). This result is a clear endorsement for card sorting as one of the simple and effective user tests that a public library system such as SMPL can potentially use to inform their decision making.

Furthermore, User Three (U3) of this test set was frustrated and questioned the hierarchy within a submenu, such as which items should appear first under the main menu tabs. During the card sorting activity, other participants echoed the user's sentiment. The group collectively voiced their frustration with the current state of the SMPL website. A number of participants had not visited a library in quite some time and this experience made them more hesitant to visit the public library. Santa Monica Public Library may be missing out on potential users, as well as stands to lose current users, via the alienation of its patrons.

Spencer and Warfel (2020) contend that while card sorting is not a panacea for every problem that a website design might face, even a few users participating in a quick card sort will reveal striking disadvantages that can thus be more easily repaired as a result of their comparative obviousness. Collecting feedback from library users can prove to be extremely beneficial for SMPL. It will help ensure that the website redesign meets the needs of its diverse patrons. In addition, it would make it easier for patrons to access information through logical access points. Lastly, a redesign would help showcase the library system's core services and increase awareness of its programs.

Figure 1

Figure 1 (see supplementary submission in Canvas)

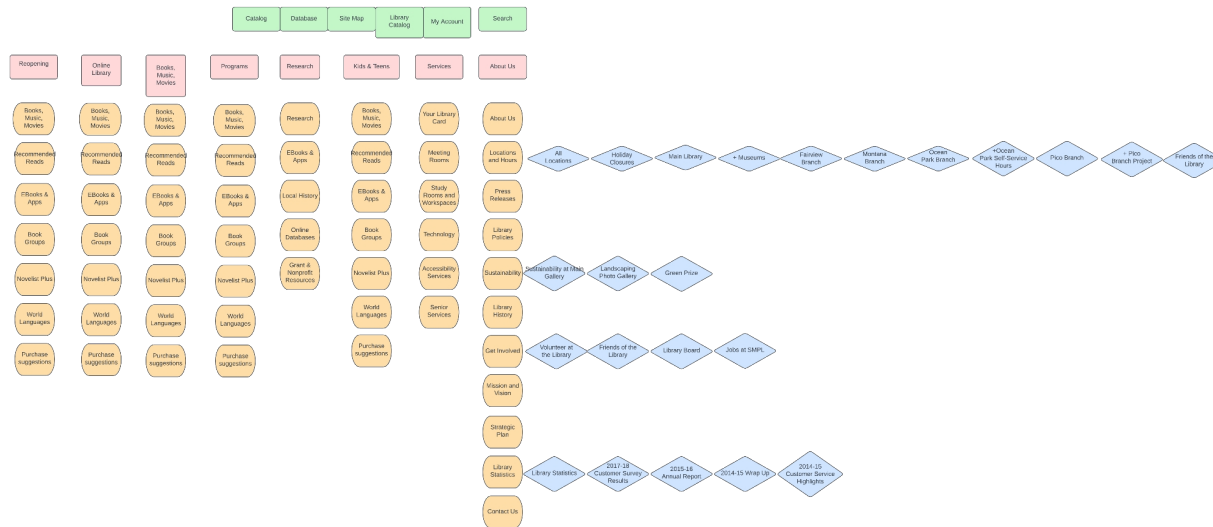
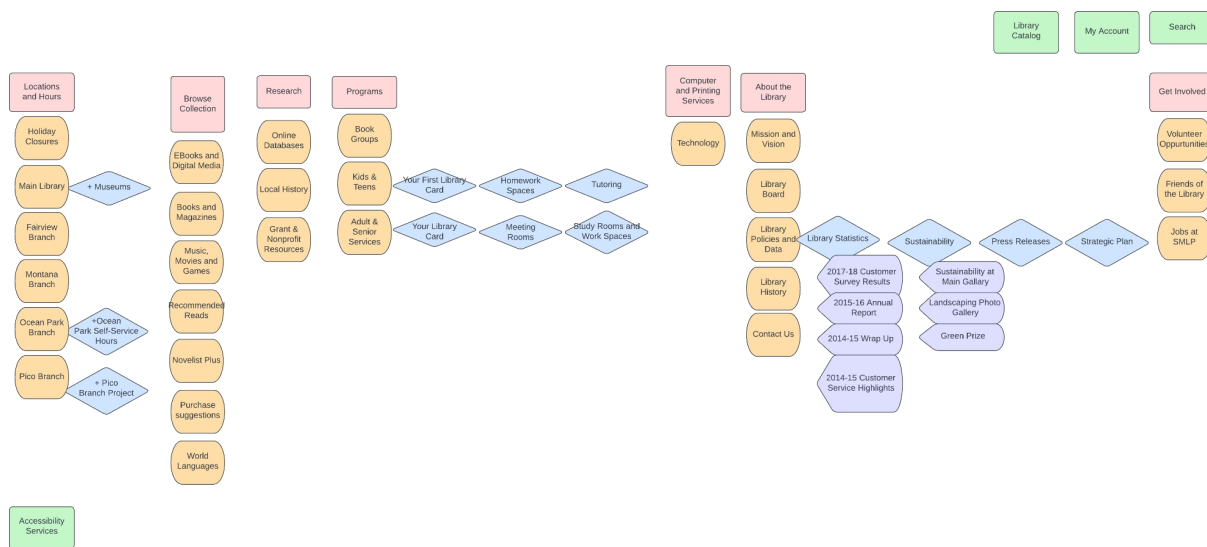


Figure 2

Figure 2 (see supplementary submission in Canvas)



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