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More of What You Love: Using Data to Connect Customers to their Next Great Library Experience

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More of What You Love: Using Data to Connect Customers to their Next Great Library Experience

Abstract

When the need for a new website aligned with the opportunity to develop an open source event management application, Richland Library (SC) dove right in. Freed from the limitations of proprietary software, the development team designed an entirely new web experience to help Richland County residents discover and attend events. Called Intercept, this application pushes event recommendations to customers based on their activity, gets direct feedback from customers, and enable staff to better plan for future programs.

Keywords

public libraries, events, open source, website development

Introduction

Richland County residents have seen some changes over the years. Like libraries all over the world, Richland Library has been reimagining what it means to be a library today. Starting with a vision statement to “improve the quality of life for our entire community,” the library has been transforming the way we do business by offering an increasingly diverse lineup of programs, services and resources to our customers.

More than a makeover

In 2013, the library received funding—thanks to a \$59 million bond referendum—to transform our buildings and spaces to better reflect our evolving priorities and vision. Richland Library was getting a makeover. Over the next several years, we renovated 11 locations and built two new ones from the ground up. In these new and stunning spaces, we now had a teaching kitchen, art studio, woodworking shop, theater and production stage. Three of our locations had gardens. Two had recording studios. Eight had a makerspace.

Like our spaces, our organizational structure was shifting as well. Positions opened up for staff to curate our art gallery, manage our meeting rooms, instruct sewing classes, and offer resume critiques. We started residencies for authors, artists and entrepreneurs.

As we made these changes to our buildings, staffing, and programs, our Marketing team launched a campaign to share what we were cooking up. The word started to spread.

Thanks to audience engagement and staff involvement, traffic to our website surged. The number of new users visiting the site went up by over 35% in less than two years.

Suddenly, our website was the largest “location” in our system.

“We were losing them”

Just like getting a new couch makes your coffee table look a little shabby, our stunning new buildings made our old website seem lackluster. “The more information we learned about how our site was performing and what these new customers were thinking about the online experience,” says Phillip Higgins, Marketing & Digital Strategy Director, “a bit of an analytical bummer emerged...we were losing them.”

Looking at our site’s analytics, we saw that we weren’t meeting the expectations of our new online customers. Many of them were looking to reserve rooms at these new library locations, and even more of them were trying to find and register for events happening in our new buildings. We saw new users arriving at the site, then dropping off and giving up. We realized there was one last renovation we needed to tackle—our website.

It's time to check in

Meanwhile, a small team of staff—led by Sarah Sawicki, Planning & Projects Director—were working on a project to develop a customer loyalty program for customers attending classes and events. We called the project Intercept—the last four letters standing for “customer engagement and participation tracking.” Plus, it had a nice ring to it.

We quickly tabled that concept when we realized that there were some big questions we needed to answer first. Who was coming to our library programs? If they loved it, how could we tell them about similar events? Who wasn’t there who should have been, and how could we get them there?

After talking to staff who led programs, we could see how the gaps in our data affected their decision-making. For each of them, the most common metric of success for a program was how many people attended. Otherwise, they relied on anecdotal feedback from customers to make decisions about

other programs to offer. Without a mechanism for sharing this qualitative feedback, the input stayed with each individual facilitator.

We saw that while our library programs had grown and changed, the systems and processes supporting them had not. The tools we were using didn't give staff much help making programming decisions.

At the same time, broader trends of personalization and leveraging user data have changed the way our customers expect to find information. The customizations available using Amazon or Facebook have made it feel jarring when a website doesn't provide suggestions based on our browsing history.

The feedback we got in customer interviews backed this up. One customer told us, "I've already come to three crochet classes. Why wouldn't you tell me when there's another one coming up?"

Through customer interviews and brainstorming methods, the team's concept evolved to an exciting prospect: What if a customer could "check in" at a program using their library card just like they "checked out" books? And then, what if we could somehow tell them about other events they might like?

More of what you love

We developed a set of "experience principles," an exercise in Human-Centered Design that captures the key ways you know your project is successful, based on the customer's perspective. Among our experience principles was the phrase, "More of what you love," which became a catchphrase as we advanced in our work.

We piloted a scanning experience using an inexpensive barcode scanning app and assistance from our on-staff web developer. Our team selected a variety of events and classes, ranging from storytime at a neighborhood branch to a small business workshop at our urban flagship location. The customer feedback we received confirmed our basic assumptions about the value this might bring to our

users, but our progress slowed as we started searching for a long-term software solution. Try as we might, we could not find an out-of-the-box solution that could scan a library card and link it to a customer's record in our ILS. Commercial barcode scanning software was designed for point-of-sale or warehouse applications; responses to queries on library listservs nearly came back as, "That's a great idea. Let us know when you figure it out."

If we wanted to make this work, we were going to have to build it ourselves.

All hands on deck

By this time, the wheels were in motion for the library to get a new website. It was the perfect opportunity to shed the proprietary room and event management software we were using and create a seamless web experience for our customers. We decided to develop an entirely new calendaring, event management and room reservation software that not only scans in customers but also fully integrates with our ILS in order to make personalized recommendations. And if we were going to build all that, we thought, we might as well make it open source so other libraries can get answers to their programming questions too.

But building a website is one thing; creating a brand-new piece of software from scratch was another. We were going to need help.

We had already validated our concept and assumptions in our pilot; we knew this would work. Proof of concept in hand, we pursued grants for the full development cost of the application and found a willing partner in the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which awarded us \$247,000 for the development. We sent out an RFP for a development shop that could handle the job in conjunction with the redevelopment of our website (RichlandLibrary.com). We found a fabulous partner in Aten Design Group out of Denver, CO, with the development chops to engineer a service-focused application, the

design acumen to make it a beautiful experience, and the commitment to making it available to any interested library.

Fifteen months, thousands of development hours, and dozens of staff trainings later, we launched the new RichlandLibrary.com in November 2018.

What next?

In Intercept, Richland Library finally has the software to connect our customers with their next great library experience. Not only that, we also continue to add features and functionality with monthly development sprints.

Building a website and an open source software solution together didn't faze us. If anything, it's made us even more passionate about building a community to sustain and improve Intercept. We are excited to welcome Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS) and its 1,300 academic, public, school and special library agencies, which will be using Intercept in its own website redesign this year.

To anyone interested in learning more, or just following along on our journey, sign up to get updates at LibraryIntercept.com, or don't hesitate to contact anyone on our team.