

Library 2.0

Service for the next-generation library

By Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk -- Library Journal, 09/01/2006

Libraries are changing. Funding limits and customer demands are transforming staffing levels, service models, access to resources, and services to the public. Administrators and taxpayers are seeking more efficient ways of delivering services to achieve greater returns on financial investments.

Enter Library 2.0. This new model for library service is being discussed online, at conferences, in administrative offices, and at the reference desk. If you and your library staff are not among those already talking 2.0, pay attention; Library 2.0 could revitalize the way we serve and interact with our customers.

The heart of Library 2.0 is user-centered change. It is a model for library service that encourages constant and purposeful change, inviting user participation in the creation of both the physical and the virtual services they want, supported by consistently evaluating services. It also attempts to reach new users and better serve current ones through improved customer-driven offerings. Each component by itself is a step toward better serving our users; however, it is through the combined implementation of all of these that we can reach Library 2.0.

While not required, technology can help libraries create a customer-driven, 2.0 environment. Web 2.0 technologies have played a significant role in our ability to keep up with the changing needs of library users. Technological advances in the past several years have enabled libraries to create new services that before were not possible, such as virtual reference, personalized OPAC interfaces, or downloadable media that library customers can use in the comfort of their own homes. This increase in available technologies gives libraries the ability to offer improved, customer-driven service opportunities.

Tapping new users through the “long tail”

In the current library world—particularly in public institutions—we are accustomed to focusing our services on those customers we already reach. Michael Stephens explains on ALA TechSource, “As we reach out to users, we must remember all of the folks we serve.” Libraries are in the habit of providing the same services and the same programs to the same groups. We grow comfortable with our provisions and we fail to change. When thinking about this new model for library service, Stephens believes that “Library 2.0 will be a meeting place, online or in the physical world, where [library users'] needs will be fulfilled through entertainment, information, and the ability to create [their] own stuff to contribute to the ocean of content out there.”

No matter how hard we try, many of the services we offer are not being used by a majority of our population. It's never been easy to reach this group with physical services, because libraries are constrained by space and money and cannot carry every item that every user desires. Many public libraries now try to offer a hit-driven collection plan, putting forth popular materials that many of their existing customers request.

This keeps some traditional customers satisfied, but non-users might be better served if librarians consider what's called the long tail. Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of *Wired*, who coined the phrase in an article of the same name in 2004, argues that the demand for movies or books that are not hits far outnumbers the demand for those that are hits. Match those nonhits with the people

who are interested in seeing them, and suddenly you have a group of constituents equal to or greater than those who want to see and read the hits. (For more on libraries and the long tail, see Katherine Mossman's "[Serving the Niche](#)," *LJ* 7/06, p. 38–40.)

Going after the diverse long tail requires a combination of physical and virtual services, a move underway in many libraries, with efforts such as interlibrary loan (ILL) purchase-on-demand from online used-book retailers, home delivery of books to customers who otherwise never visit libraries, and by offering more electronic texts. Tim O'Reilly, in his seminal essay "What Is Web 2.0," discusses the concept of harnessing the collective intelligence of everyone who uses a product. In an online environment, this takes the form of feedback, user reviews, and user-crafted social networks. Sites as diverse as Amazon, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, and Wikipedia (see "[2.0 Resources](#)," p. 42) all depend on high levels of user participation to expand the value of the product.

Blogs and wikis are other ways to engage customers and push fresh content to users. Temple University Library, Philadelphia, uses its blog to provide a place for "news, events, and discussion." Ann Arbor District Library (AADL), MI, went a step further and turned its homepage into a blog—an opportunity to build community and also quickly respond to feedback. The resourceful librarians at the Saint Joseph County Public Library in South Bend, IN, used open source wiki software to create a successful subject guide that facilitates customer feedback.

Customer as collaborator

At its most basic level, the Library 2.0 model gives library users a participatory role in the services libraries offer and the way they are used. Customers, should they desire, will be able to tailor library services to best meet their own needs. This can be done electronically, such as through the personalization of library web pages, or physically through new service options such as allowing customers to call impromptu book talks or discussion groups. Such collaborative efforts require librarians to develop a more intensive routine of soliciting customer response and regularly evaluating and updating services.

To increase both your library's appeal and value to users, consider implementing customizable and participatory services. The Library 2.0 model seeks to harness our customer's knowledge to supplement and improve library services. User comments, tags, and ratings feed user-created content back into these web sites. Ultimately, this creates a more informative product for subsequent users. Your library customers have favorite titles, authors, and genres. Allowing them to comment, write reviews, create their own tags and ratings, and share them with others through a more versatile OPAC interface will enhance your catalog. Customers want to know what their neighbors are reading, listening to, and watching. Hennepin County Library, MN, has taken this step by allowing users to comment in the catalog.

When creating customizable services you should also consider customer privacy. Libraries should remain as vigilant with protecting customer privacy with technology-based services as they are with traditional, physical library services. There are ways to preserve privacy, such as by allowing anonymous comments and tagging within the catalog. Library users should not be required to identify themselves publicly in order to participate in virtual services.

While a lot of the discussion about Library 2.0 involves technology, libraries with limited technology funding or in communities affected by the digital divide can still work toward Library 2.0. If technology options are limited, consider physical functions that will better serve current customers as well as bring in new ones. You can develop ideas for new, affordable offerings,

including physical services, from other libraries, staff feedback, and by surveying both current and potential customers.

Handling the technology

The openness of Library 2.0 extends to the software and hardware that libraries use, including integrated library systems (ILS). Modifiable automation systems and catalogs are preferable to proprietary, closed systems. An excellent example of this is the Evergreen ILS project that is being developed by the Georgia Public Library Service for use by the Georgia Library PINES Program.

Some librarians, such as John Blyberg, Ann Arbor's network administrator, are concerned that ILS vendors, in an attempt to capitalize on the changes brought about by Library 2.0, will design proprietary interfaces to link library catalog data with our users. Blyberg has responded with a call for open standards. His proposed "ILS Customer Bill of Rights" charges libraries with the need to have usable access to the data that they own in their databases and the ability to create service applications that use that data in new and creative ways. [For another AADL innovation from Blyberg, see "[Baker's Smudges](#)," p. 30.]

Not every library system can employ programmers or maintain a large IT staff. "I'd say the problem (not the excuse) is that a typical library webmaster is very part-time," observes Steve Lawson, humanities liaison librarian for Tutt Library at Colorado College, Colorado Springs. "I would love to implement some of these Web 2.0 ideas, but with reference, instruction, and collection development responsibilities, I don't have the time to innovate constantly. In my own case, I'm hoping I can leverage free sites like Flickr and PBWiki and APIs [an application program interface, the end result of which is often referred to as a mashup] like Google Maps to create a Web 2.0–friendly environment for the library web site."

In other libraries, applying 2.0 is a question of awareness. "Ask yourself if your library is ready for this type of shift [in technology], because, overwhelmingly, the answer is no," writes Jenny Levine of the Shifted Librarian blog and the American Library Association. "Librarians just aren't thinking like this yet, and we need to change this. It's at the very core of the whole 'Library 2.0' discussion, and this is why it's so critical. If we keep our content locked up on our own web sites and don't get it out there for people to use as they want to use it, then our content will fall by the wayside."

For many, a realistic start means embracing some inexpensive, even free new technologies. Libraries currently offering word processing may want to move away from locally installed and administered applications and instead point customers to such wonderful online tools as Writely and Writeboard, which both offer word processing applications that run in the web browser. Michael Arrington, of the blog TechCrunch, says, "Writely is no longer a toy—it is fast becoming a legitimate alternative to Word."

These online tools offer valuable collaborative functions. Two writers can simultaneously work on Writely, crafting changes visible to the other writer, no matter their physical distance. Many other Microsoft Office–style applications exist online. 37signals offers several useful online tools that range from its powerful project management application Basecamp to the personal information organizer Backpack and sharable to-do lists called Ta-da Lists—all of which are available in free, fully optioned versions. Also, Microsoft has recently announced online productivity tools to come from Microsoft Office Live.

2.0, all the time

What makes a service Library 2.0? Any service, physical or virtual, that successfully reaches users, is evaluated frequently, and makes use of customer input is a Library 2.0 service. Even older, traditional services can be Library 2.0 if criteria are met. Similarly, being new is not enough to make a service Library 2.0.

Many libraries have made encouraging advances in their electronic offerings by providing access to top-quality databases, downloadable audiobooks and music, and instant messaging reference services. Our own Gwinnett County Public Library (GCPL) in Lawrenceville, GA, has launched a successful downloadable music, video, and audiobook service. South Huntington Public Library, Huntington Station, NY, has already created an iPod Shuffle loan program. Some libraries have expanded physical services by creating specific areas for teen and community activities, reflecting the public's desire for a civic space and exciting new programs. The Cecil County Public Library in Elkton, MD, offers Teen Game Nights. GCPL held a very successful teen band competition in 2005 as part of its Year of the Teen.

Currently, libraries have a tendency to plan, implement, and forget. Library 2.0 attempts to change this by encouraging the development of a schedule that includes regularly soliciting customer feedback and evaluating and updating services. Both new and existing library services should be revisited routinely to ensure that they are still meeting expected goals. Even older, traditional library services should be reviewed with a fresh eye to determine if any aspect needs updating.

When thinking about ways to work toward Library 2.0, consider what services your library already offers that could be improved as well as new things that can be added. This includes both technology-based and nontechnology services. Also consider applications that are presented virtually, such as virtual reference, and those offered in the branches, such as your ILL system. Libraries have to evolve continuously to keep up with the changing needs of their users. You can help keep your service offerings fresh by always looking for new ideas and reevaluating old ones.

The Public Library Association's (PLA) Planning for Results is an example of a tool that can be used to evaluate library services. Planning for Results offers a starting point for measuring the worth of current services and system procedures. No matter which tool your library chooses to use, be it contracted consulting or an internally created plan, it is essential to create a schedule of regular evaluations for new and existing services and seek both staff and customer input. Be sure to survey both current and potential customers, as well as staff from all levels. A wide range of commentary will provide balanced feedback on the success of or demand for a service.

Your library may already offer some services that can be considered Library 2.0. If your organization combines these Library 2.0 options with a framework for continual change and customer input integrated into other operations within your library, it will be well on its way to becoming Library 2.0.

Many tools and ideas will come from the world of Web 2.0, and many will have nothing to do with technology. The specifics of the Library 2.0 model will be different for each library system. Every library has a different starting point. Through collaboration between staff and users, you will be able to develop a clear idea of how this model will work for your organization.

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