

## Sharing with Users



Grace Agnew  
Rutgers University Libraries

The lasting value for your digital collection depends on its ability to interest and serve your target audience.

A **good** digital collection will meet real information needs and be seen as useful to a majority of the audience it serves.

A **great** digital collection will:

- (1) Have a measurable and ongoing impact on its audience:

Your project should have measurable objectives that define the impact you want to have on your targeted audiences.

As discussed in the next section, you should assess the ongoing impact of your project and be flexible enough to tweak the project or even change course altogether to increase your impact.

- (2) Actively engage its audience in ongoing conversation:

- Internal conversation, as a user discovers a new way to look at the subject or finds herself immersed in a place and time different from her own.
- Community conversation, as users engage with each other to explore topics of interest. Communities may be formal educational groups, such as a teacher assigning activities to students or informal, such as a book club or local history group.
- Conversation between the organization and the audience. A collection website should engage the audience passively through periodic newsletters or emails as well as actively through frequent feedback mechanisms and opportunities to contribute ideas and personal resources, through blogs, Wikis, and other mechanisms.

How do you first interest, then engage and finally have an impact and win the ongoing loyalty of your audience?

Here are nine steps to get you started:



**Step One: Know Your Audience.** A digital collection should build upon the expressed needs and interests of the target audience, which should be identified via surveys, usage statistics, focus groups and other means. A digital project or collection may have several audiences. The New Jersey Digital Highway did extensive planning before embarking on its digital initiative. Four key audiences were identified: the New Jersey citizen and lifelong learner, the K12 educator, the K12 student and the librarian, curator and audience embarking on digital initiatives and (hopefully) participating in the New Jersey Digital Highway.

A survey was sent to museums, libraries and archives to identify their willingness to participate in New Jersey Digital Highway, their needs for information and training about digital initiatives and their perception of the needs of their target audiences for digital information about New Jersey. Currently, an evaluation that targets all four audiences is underway, to test our assumptions, based on the initial audience assessment and to revise New Jersey Digital Highway, based on the results. Knowing Your audience involves closely tying design, collection building and marketing to the feedback and impacts revealed by your evaluation strategy.



**Step Two: Develop Goals and Achievable Outcomes Based on Your Audience.** Identify the mission and goals for your site and develop measurable outcomes that identify results primarily from the user's point of view (e.g., the site meets the user's needs for authoritative information about New Jersey based on...) rather than the organization's point of view (e.g., our site was visited by 2000 visitors on average per month). Evaluation will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

The mission and goals of your for your digital collection and project website should not only be clearly and prominently stated at the site but evident in the resources, information and design of the project, website and collection.

**Example:** The *Do History* site provides an immersive tutorial on piecing together history from contextually relevant primary sources using the diary of an 18<sup>th</sup> century midwife. Although the site immerses you in the life and times of Martha Ballard, the goal of the website is clearly explained from the first page on, with activities, questions and other strategies that teach the user how to engage deeply with primary source artifacts to bring history alive. Even the name, *Do History*, reminds the user of the site's mission:

<http://www.dohistory.org/home.html>



### **Step Three: Provide a wealth of context for your collection.**

As noted in the "Creating Metadata" section of this Roadmap, providing context begins with providing sufficient information about each resource in its accompanying metadata so that the user can understand the context of creation, how the resource represents its time, place and thematic content, and even background biographical and historical information relevant to the subject(s) of the image. Historical information is often inherently interesting, when it represents an interesting historic event or prominent person, but less interesting when it represents one of the many anonymous faces or places lost to time, often as a grainy black and white image or a fading handwritten manuscript. Adding rich information, while time consuming, can expose the wealth of historical fact and meaning behind the simplest artifact.

**Example:** *A Thousand Wheels Are Set in Motion: The Building of Georgia Tech at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1888-1908)* provides a wealth of historical information from secondary contemporary sources to establish each historic building on the Georgia Tech campus in the context of its time and to show the impact on faculty, students and the citizens of Atlanta at the time each building was erected. <http://www.library.gatech.edu/gtbuildings/>



### **Step Four: Provide a design, interface and navigation that doesn't impede the user's exploration of the site**

The website for your project or collection(s) should be uncluttered, intuitive and easy to browse. The user should know where he is at all times and be able to return to a previous step or to the home page without a problem.

The user should be able to reach commonly accessed information in very few steps and should be able to trace her own path backward with ease. The purpose for each page should be clear, using jargon-free text intended to appeal to a wide range of users. Your site should be disability accessible yet also offer appropriate technologies, such as rollovers, that make it easy for the user to understand the site and its contents and to move smoothly and easily from one section of the site to another. The site should be graphically pleasing without being so graphics and animation intensive that the mechanics of the site intrude upon, or overwhelm, the information contained on the site. The site's design should encourage frequent and lengthy visits and thus should be designed not to fatigue or overwhelm the user, during a prolonged visit or a re-visit.

**Example:** The *Luxton Museum of the Plains Indian* provides a simple, intuitive interface based on the different thematic areas of life for the Plains Indian. The resulting interface is simple, intuitive, and yet immersive, encouraging in depth browsing and return visits to explore more areas of interest. <http://collections.ic.gc.ca/luxton/>



**Step Five: Surround the collection with an intuitive, engaging and immersive presence that adds context and value.**

Immersing your audience in the time and place of your collection can be a great way to add understanding and increase the impact of the collection for a wide range of users. Integrating secondary resources that explain and provide a contextual milieu for the primary sources can help insure that users really know what they have found and provide examples for using primary resources in their own research. For students, secondary sources provide important background information that can be studied and cited, even as primary artifacts are used to illustrate their research papers.

**Examples:** *Jazz Greats Digital Exhibits* at the Institute of Jazz Studies, Dana Library, Rutgers University Newark Campus immerse the user in a wealth of audiovisual artifacts and secondary sources that document the life and works of such jazz greats as Fats Waller, Count Basie, Benny Carter and Mary Lou Williams. <http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/main.htm>

*Ad\*Access* from the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History in the Duke Library Special Collections Department provides access to over 7,000 advertising images from U.S. and Canadian newspapers and magazines. Ads can be browsed by subject category, such as Beauty and Hygiene. Each thematic section includes a historical background paper on the category, illustrated with advertising examples from the collection.

A timeline documenting and describing each time period covered by the collection with a focus on advertising developments for each period is also available at the website.

<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess/>



### **Step Six: Make the site an active experience for users**

Studies have consistently shown that users “learn by doing.” A site that creates an active learning experience is more likely to have a lasting impact on its audience and to promote frequent visits to the site. Your audience will also respond to the opportunity to provide feedback and have an impact on the site and to share their opinions and memories. Commercial sites recognize this and place blogs on sites such as political or news sites, entertainment sites, etc. They provide fundamental opportunities for users to share opinions and ideas and also to help others with their own suggestions or responses to questions and concerns. Other ways to add interactivity to a site include quizzes and games and personalization for a site, including the ability to collect digital artifacts into a personal collection.

#### **Examples:**

The *Maine Memory Project* provides a colorful toolbar on the left side of the front page with multiple ways for different audiences to interact with the project, from developing an online photo album with images from the collection, to contributing collections, if they are cultural heritage institutions, to purchasing images or becoming a member of the Maine Historical Society. <http://www.mainememory.net/>

The *Edison National Historic Site* of the National Park Service, includes many interactive elements, including a “mental fitness” test Edison administered to potential employees, a virtual tour of Edison’s home and an interactive audiovisual tour of Edison’s invention factory and the inventing process. This author took the “mental fitness” test and received a score of 70%, a failing score, according to Edison. Can you beat my score? <http://www.nps.gov/archive/edis/home.htm>



### **Step Seven: Maintain a trusted site**

It is important that your site is perceived as trustworthy and as a reputable source for information in the fields of study or areas of information that your collections document. You can demonstrate the reputability of your site in many ways:

- Check links regularly to insure that no links lead to sites that have vanished.
- Provide date of publication and date last updated on your pages, so that your audience knows the currency of information.
- Provide information about your project and participant credentials, so that your audience knows your project is an authoritative or trusted source of information in the areas your project or collection covers.
- Provide information about your collection, including contributing organizations, donor information and a collection development policy.
- If your project is multi-organizational, be sure to attribute each resource to the appropriate owning organization.
- Respect copyright laws, through documenting the rights holder, providing guidelines or requirements for copying, redistribution and reuse of resources, and obtaining permission to use and attributing any images on your site that are not part of your collection to the organization providing the image.
- Provide site policies, including privacy policies for users and recommendations for citing resources from the collection.



### **Step Eight: Keep the site responsive and fresh**

It is important to keep the site up to date with relevant information, and additions to content. If the collection is ongoing, announce new additions to the content, by featuring the content in a “what’s new” section, featuring information about new contributing organizations and their collections, or through virtual exhibits drawn from new collections. Events calendars can be a good way to keep a site up to date. It is important to have a web committee, or at the very least a webmaster, who reviews the website content periodically to determine when material has “aged out” and should be removed or needs updating. Some information is timeless and will not need updating, but some information is event specific, reflects changing laws (such as copyright information) or changing technologies. Each page should be evaluated for frequency of updating needed and assigned to an appropriate person. No page on an evolving site should be without an “owner” responsible for the content on that page.

New additions and changes to the website should be highlighted in a “what’s new” section to make it easy for your audience to find and view updated information.

If a collection represents a discrete, one-time project or collection that will be maintained but not updated, it is important to acknowledge this on the site—either on the home page or in an “about this collection” or “about this site” web page.

It is important to periodically or continuously assess the impact of your collection through an evaluative survey. It is equally important to provide an executive overview or highlights of the recommendations for change that emerge from the evaluation, as well as how the project intends to respond, or has responded, with links to the relevant changes. You might consider giving your audience choices among potential changes that the audience can respond to, to create a sense of both collaboration and ownership among your audience base.



### **Step Nine: Engage your audiences where they live**

While your primary approach to your target audience(s) will be through the website, it is important to engage your users “where they live”—in their daily workflow, where they will engage with the collection, such as in an educational setting, at relevant conferences, both as a presenter and at a booth, at relevant lectures and training opportunities. An event calendar that the site maintains of relevant training, lectures and events can be a good way of identifying places where the project team can engage with users, inform them about the site and any new content and solicit feedback.

*Created: August 28, 2006*

*Last updated: August 28, 2006*