Banners Catch and Teach

By Michael Whang, Web & Internet Services

MU's 21st century library must assure that electronic resources and services are always available—anytime and anywhere for the University community. Without question, today's technology is the foundation for access to high quality content readily linked from the University Libraries' home page at www.wmich.edu/library. But, how can this particular academic library position its licensed databases and catalogs against tough public Internet competitors such as Google, Scirus, Vivissimo, and numerous other search engines? How can we position OUR Web site as the first stop on the road to quality research, teaching, and learning?

Marketing is Essential

In a recent Gatherings article, "To Market, to Market: Selling Libraries," Brad Dennis, then Chair of the Libraries' Marketing Committee, presented a shift in thinking that many libraries have not fully embraced. Dennis says "selling libraries has become not only a goal, but also an essential key to survival in the 21st century world" (Gatherings, No. 38, Summer 2006, p. 4). In recent years, the staff of the University Libraries has identified strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities. Out of their brainstorming efforts has come a new theme, to wit: the discovery and awareness of the Libraries' materials and collections by the community that it serves.

In 2003, an initial survey of users taught the Marketing Committee that shotgun newspaper notices and general articles were not effective at reaching target audiences. Another piece of information came from a more recent survey of students. According to 79% of the population surveyed, students preferred to visit the Libraries' homepage to learn about new information or services available to them.

In response to this information, the Libraries' Web Office decided that online banner advertisements, displayed prominently on the Libraries' Web site, should feature library collections and services. The concept behind the development and implementation of our online banner ads is simple: promote "discovery and awareness" of the Libraries by using banner ads to tell our story. And, as a secondary benefit, the banner ads do a lot of the marketing and behind-the-scenes data gathering for us; we know who is looking at our ads and how they follow through. Moreover, data are collected 24/7 and help us measure success.

Discovery and Awareness

Because electronic resources and services provide patrons with 24/7 access to library materials found nowhere else on the Internet, the Collection Development Committee selected outstanding databases and indexes that are available online from the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities to serve as the prototypes for the new campaign. Several popular library services were added to the campaign including the Ask a Librarian online reference service, renewing books online, recommending items for purchase (books and DVDs), and screening casts, which are described in an article, "Beyond Library Walls," found on page 4 in this issue of Gatherings. For each resource and service being promoted, a banner ad and a landing page, reached by clicking on "Details," were created to help tell the library story and promote the resource being "bannered."

A valuable first banner is a database called Scopus. This is a citation and abstracting database that has great appeal to students, researchers, and faculty alike. Scopus provides extensive interdisciplinary access to 14,000 peer-reviewed titles from more than 4,000 international publishers covering the life, health, physical, and social sciences. To catch the student's eye, a colorful banner ad was created for Scopus on the Libraries home page, and when clicked, the Web site visitor is presented with a landing page that highlights the benefits of using Scopus. Web site visitors are also shown a snapshot of what the database looks like when opened. This graphic brands the database and provides a visual landmark for Web site visitors to identify when they return to search again. Selected landing pages have a link to a librarian-authored screen cast and, in this case, demonstrates how to use Scopus quickly and easily. Also, on every landing page, there is a link that is intended to produce a call to action from the user. Each banner ad and landing page is designed to funnel Web site visitors into clicking through to the promoted resource or service, a subtle call to action. We want patrons to become curious enough about Scopus that they do some exploring on their own—take Scopus for a test drive at its licensed Web site: http://www.wmich.edu/library/content/107/scopus.php.

Hold on, there's more. Among the key "discover" databases is ProQuest Research Library, one of our general databases [http://www.wmich.edu/library/content/407/proquestRL.php]. This interdisciplinary index and abstracting resource also has a relatively easy to use search screen, but is often lost to our users among hundreds of other searchable databases available on our home page. As such, it was a prime candidate for a teachable moment, a banner ad. We used many of the same components that we used with Scopus—highlighting benefits of the ProQuest Research Library, a snapshot of the database, and a direct link to the database—but, we then added a couple of things to help bubble our content up to the surface.

First, we included a heading "Where is it on the Web site?" We like to think of the banner ads as the Web site visitor's Sherpa, guiding people visually to the resource quickly and easily. Second, we compared ProQuest Research Library and Google, differentiating the breadth and depth of results by searching the two search engines. Under the heading "Why ProQuest instead of Google?" we actually do a search for "search engines and fraud" in ProQuest Research Library and then in Google. We show that ProQuest retrieves 43 articles and citations from a variety of high-quality trade publications, popular magazines, newspapers, and scholarly journals. On the other hand, Google retrieves over 1,250,000 items which means patrons will spend a lot more time surfing and wondering what to select instead of completing an assignment or moving on to their next task.

Positioning the Libraries

By marketing and promoting our collection and services, we are really doing is bubbling all of our high quality collections and services up to the surface, making our content discoverable, usable, and accessible. Our goal is simple: provide the WMU community with subject content that facilitates quality teaching, research, and, ultimately, responsible, educated citizens of the world. To do this, we must market ourselves and our collections and position them against the giant data and information purveyors that dominate the public Internet without providing ways to, as was once noted, "separate the wheat from the chaff."

The University Libraries can provide the "wheat," but we must first "catch" the attention of and "teach" our community of learners and researchers.