

Maintaining your library's Web page

By Walter Morton

Staffing strategies: The more help you get, the better

You have now finished designing and setting up your library's Web page and it looks great. You have all the links, forms, tables, and lists just the way you want them. You have worked hard on the graphics, background, layout, and even the little buttons that most people will probably never notice. You've checked everything a dozen times and everything works. You've gone from computer to computer to see how it looks on different browsers and monitors. You'll receive many sincere compliments and you can feel justly proud of a job well done. But now the question arises: Where do you go from here?

If your institution is like most, its Web page was designed and created by a small number of people, frequently just one person. That person may be you, but it is lonely at the top and it is also very busy. Now that the page has been unveiled you start remembering all those jobs you put off so you could finish your page. Other things begin to take priority and you spend less and less time actually looking at your page. Parts of it begin to get dated—very quickly. While it is usually difficult to get something to work in the first place, it is even harder to keep it working. Links begin to change and timed notices, bulletins, and information begin to go stale. How can the library keep its page fresh and current without remaining one person's sole responsibility?

Enlist more help

The obvious simple solution is to enlist more people to work on the Web page, but to para-

phrase Clauswitz from another context: it's the simple things that can be the most difficult. How can such a group be organized to provide for the most effective distribution of the maintenance activities? The Rowland Medical Library at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson has been developing such a strategy that we hope will keep our page current without putting an undue burden on anyone.

We first decided it was important that the page be checked on a regular basis, and that this checking could be done by the entire staff. A staff member does not need to know anything about html or CGI scripts to recognize that a piece of information is dated and needs to be made current or corrected. This job could therefore be distributed on a much wider basis than that of the actual editing process.

The administrative staff first went through the Web page section by section and decided on who would be the most logical person to be responsible for each. Most designations were fairly obvious: the circulation librarian would check "Hours and Calendar" and "Circulation Policies"; acquisitions would be responsible for "New Books" and "Purchase Recommendations"; reference would look at "Orientation/Instructional Services" and "Reference Services," etc. Other assignments had to do with who was in charge of the underlying documents that provided the source for each page. For example, our associate director for public services has responsibility for the printed library handbook, so that section and all sections related to it were delegated to her. Likewise, the administrative secretary keeps the staff supplied with updated lists of employees and phone numbers, so that person was assigned to review the "Departments and Staff" section. Everyone was asked

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prints mailing labels, so the cards did not have to be addressed by hand; but the task could be accomplished by a work study student.

Results

The efforts outlined above resulted in full attendance at every class. The few people who were kept from attending at the last minute always called to apologize, and those calls often resulted in appointments to pick up an information packet or receive a quick demonstration at another time. In addition, people who were unable to attend the sessions on the scheduled dates often called for information or a personal appointment. Some saved my letter and called months later to ask about attending a session or to talk to me when they had special research needs.

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to review the section entitled "Bulletins" which consists of very current information related to the library: system related messages ("OVID will be down . . ."), blurbs for new or featured library activities or events ("The library will host a reception in the History of Medicine . . ."), and the like. It was felt that every department might have notices to contribute or suggestions to make in this vein.

Everyone was requested to check their designated section at least every two weeks with some exceptions. Some areas such as the introductory text and the library's mission statement do not change often and do not need to be constantly monitored. Everyone is, of course, welcome to look and comment on all sections of the page, but they will only be held accountable for their assigned areas.

Keeping it current

But someone still has to make the changes to the documents after the reviewers find problems or needed updates. For this purpose, we organized a committee of staff members who expressed an interest in working directly on the Web page. The chair of this committee functions as Webmaster, arbiter hypertextum, and is the coordinator for all editing changes to the page. For the time being, the associate director for technical services and systems acts as chair but this position will eventually be assumed by another staff member. Each person is trained in html if needed, given an html editor, and assigned certain sections of the page as their

While this might seem like a lot of work, it is important to remember that once the system is set up, only minor changes need to be made each semester. Return on investment has been excellent in terms of establishing contact with students, good public relations, and quality service to students. The system can be used to increase attendance at any kind of training or instructional sessions for graduate students and professional programs held on campus. (Similar sessions were offered to new graduate arts and sciences students during the fall 1996 semester with equally good results.) Most important, the success of the classes helped convince administration that library instruction should be required for all new business majors. Such instruction was instituted at both undergraduate and graduate levels in fall 1996. ■

normal editing responsibility. Some basic UNIX command instruction is also usually necessary.

Each committee member has an individual account on the library UNIX server with his or her own subdirectory for library html pages as well as access to the administrative account. As the Web page reviewers find pages that need updating or as new material is added, this information is passed on to the committee which distributes it to the appropriate member. The files are then edited or created on the member's PC and then uploaded via ftp to the member's individual library directory. For security reasons, no one can log on as administrator. In order to get the files to the library's Web directory, members must first log on in a telnet session using their individual logins, change to administrator, and then copy the files from their home directories. The process looks cumbersome on paper but actually flows smoothly in practice, especially with a Windows ftp program. All committee members try to keep an updated set of all library pages in their own UNIX directories and on their PCs. Files can be ftped directly from the library directory to their personal computers without having to have administrative rights.

These procedures allow the library to perform the necessary maintenance to keep its homepage fresh and current without becoming an undue burden on any one person. They also provide the added bonus of having the staff feel more involved in the Web page on a personal level, since most are participating in some way in its development and maintenance. ■