
by Christopher Winn Huff

Anyone who spends time on the Web will recognize a need for more Web design practices that embrace the idea of usability. Web sites that are cluttered, slow-loading, and confusing are the rule rather than the exception. In this book, John Cato offers techniques for designing a Web site with the users' needs foremost in mind. Cato covers Web site design from the earliest stages of discovering what one is seeking to provide via the Web site, to the latest stages of testing a finished Web site product.

The book includes no details of coding, scripting, image editing, server management, or any of the other nuts-and-bolts aspects of creating and maintaining Web sites. Rather, Cato is concerned with showing some techniques for entering into and accomplishing the design process of defining Web site actions, information, and display -- as the back cover description puts it, the book is about "project management and design." A major portion of this process, as described by Cato, is the involvement of users from the project's outset. Usability testing, how to do it and how to measure its results, is covered toward the end of the book.
The book is organized into three main sections: discovery, design, and use. Throughout the book, Cato describes the use of three models which underlie his design techniques: the Awareness, Understanding, Action (AUA) model; the Role, Action, Object (RAO) model; and, in the chapter on visual design, Cato introduces the WebKen, which is a rectangular dimension based upon Japanese floor mats -- the dimension modified by Cato because the original ken does not fit with typical Web display dimensions. He demonstrates using the WebKen to divide a Web page into a grid of rectangles to aid in analysis. The discovery section presents techniques for defining a Web site's underlying purpose with the help of the site's future and/or current owners, designers, and users. There is lengthy discussion of using the RAO model to help arrive at an understanding of the site's users, use, and information. Cato provides a fairly good picture of how to get started with initial planning meetings. He includes examples of how to mock up early iterations of a Web site with storyboarding and Post It notes. His suggestions for how to conduct usability testing appear insightful, especially the discussion of how to conduct such tests on storyboard iterations. But despite his advice on testing in an environment representative of the typical user's, Cato does not emphasize the need to have the tests conducted via a modem when appropriate. Neglecting to test via modem is probably a significant oversight of most usability testing, since excessive download times persist as a too frequent usability issue.

In the chapter on visual design, Cato provides analysis of a few particular Web sites. Providing no usability testing results as support, he gives the impression that these observations are simply subjective. And there is contradiction and a lack of logic to some of the analysis. For example, Cato is surprised when his analysis shows that Amazon's opening page contains a mere 18 percent content, far less than the content provided by comparative online book stores. Cato observes, "Interestingly, Amazon is the most used internet [sic] book site and has the least immediately obvious content" (p. 117). Then, evidencing a partiality to Amazon, Cato concocts a lesson to legitimize this lack of content: "The lesson here is that with a large number of items available for the user's interest, you must give a high degree of space for finding those items, but still retain some hook in terms of content" (p. 117-118). A few pages later, Cato notes that Blackwell's main page has more content than navigation and he decides, "It is worth noticing they [Blackwell] have taken the opposite strategy to Amazon, and they are less successful in business terms" (p. 123). Given Cato's evidence, it is far from convincing that Amazon's high number of hits is due to an excellent Web design worth modeling and that Blackwell's business success is suffering due to its Web site containing too much content (not to mention how any business can be less successful than Amazon's unbroken record of yearly losses). A few pages later, Cato vacillates from this lesson that favors navigation and decides, "Content is king" (p. 141). It may well be that navigation is content (at times and on the Web, anyway). These kinds of apparently subjective claims, unsupported by any usability data, erode whatever validity may be behind Cato's observations.

The writing is often burdened with too many bulleted lists, lengthy and confusing outlines of lessons and observations, poor layout, editing mistakes, and un instructive graphics. Several of the Web site screen captures are out of focus or too small to be usefully interpreted. There are several images of statements that substitute for what should have been actual Web site screen captures. One appears to be a letter from Fox Online that begins, "Dear John," and goes on to deny permission for the use of the Web site image (p. 114). Another three are simply images containing the URLs for the sites that Cato critiques -- not much use given the likelihood these sites have changed since publication.

Cato tends toward overstatement, as in this description of the user's relationship to a Web site:
As users, we want supporting, involving, satisfying, and delighting. From our point of view, the system is an immersive experience. What we do should be our choice, having control over what we do and how we do it. We arrive, engage, immerse, feel emotions and leave with both physical and emotional outcomes. Our feelings of satisfaction and a desire to return is [sic] determined by how much attention the designers have given to thinking about our needs and us. (p. 70)

And Cato offers a rather draconian opinion of help systems, writing: "If the user needs a help system, or warnings of any kind, you have probably got it wrong" (p. 103). In support of this rule, he asks the reader: "When did you ever need help on how to hold and swing a hammer (and would they put the help text on the handle, perhaps with a phone number to call?) or how to push a child on a swing?" (p. 103). The interaction a user has with most Web sites is and should be fundamentally more complicated and intelligent than simply swinging a hammer or pushing a swing. Advising the avoidance of help systems is poor advice for increasing the usability of a Web site. But, again, Cato contradicts himself on this point when he tells the reader, "Anywhere there could be a question in the user's head, provide a way to answer it" (p. 240).

Too often interspersing cliche and sometimes-nonsensical advice, Cato makes statements like, "For example, if you are squaring timber, then think through the consequences" (p. 190). A summary of key lessons in chapter 6 is an example of the lack of clarity and poor layout. With headings and subheadings that are not clear or consistent, the summary is an eight-page outline using only two heading fonts and no enumeration. Since several of the headings and accompanying explanations are repeated, the intended organization of the outline is not clear and makes the overall meaning of the lessons confusing. This type of confusing layout is repeated throughout the book and makes the book an unnecessarily difficult read.

As Cato himself observes, "Get anything wrong, and the user will assume other things may be wrong also" (p. 146). There may be much that is useful in this book. However, that which is clearly wrong calls the rest into question.

For better choices of books on usability, check the bibliographies provided on these sites:


Christopher Winn Huff is Systems Librarian at Ingram Library at State University of West Georgia.

Copyright (c) 2002 by Christopher Winn Huff. This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for noncommercial, educational, or scientific purposes, provided that the preceding copyright statement and source are clearly acknowledged. All other rights are reserved. For permission to reproduce or adapt this document or any part of it for commercial distribution, address requests to the author at chuff@westga.edu (mailto:chuff@westga.edu).

by Brian K. Yost

Instant Web Forms and Surveys for Public Libraries is intended for public libraries that would like to add forms to their Web sites, but lack the in-house technical expertise or staff resources to create them. The included CD-ROM contains 24 HTML forms and corresponding Perl scripts. The book includes descriptions of each of the forms, introductions to HTML forms and Perl, and instructions for customizing, installing, and testing the forms and scripts. The complete HTML and Perl code for the forms and scripts is also included in the manual. The forms included are:
Reference Forms
Ask a Reference Question Form
Research Help Request Form
Internet Search Help Form

Library Instruction Forms / Surveys
Meet with a Librarian Form
Find a Class Form
Program / Training Survey

Library Computer Forms / Surveys
Reserve a Library Computer Form
Library Web User Survey
Remote Web User Survey

Library Web Site Forms / Surveys
Suggest a New Web Link Form
Report a Broken Link or Problem Form
Sign Our Guest Book Form
Web Site Survey

Collection Development Forms / Surveys
Library Purchase Request Form
Reading Interests Survey

Interlibrary Loan Forms
Interlibrary Loan Request Form
Interlibrary Loan Renewal Form

Circulation Forms
Library Card Application Form
Hold / Recall / Renew Form
Missing Item Report Form

Miscellaneous Forms / Surveys
Reserve a Meeting Room Form
Incident Report Form
Library Use Survey
Comments, Suggestions Form


Several of the same types of forms and surveys appear in all editions of the title, but there are also some unique to each title.

Section 1 of the book, "How to Use the CD-ROM," provides the instructions for selecting, configuring, customizing, testing, and uploading the forms and scripts. Because the real utility of this title depends on whether the forms and scripts can be easily configured for local use and installed on the institution's Web server, I selected a form and went through the process. Following the instructions in the book, I found the process mostly problem-free.

The first step is to preview and select a form or survey on the CD-ROM. The files that are used to select a form and customize it are all in HTML, eliminating cross-platform issues. I selected the Library Purchase Request Form. There is a tutorial on the CD-ROM that walks you through the procedure of selecting and making minor customizations to the forms. The tutorial provides the option to select the font (serif or sans serif) and colors (black, blue, red, or white) used on the form. One problem I encountered in this process was that when the font or color is previewed, the form selected is not shown. Instead the "Reserve a Library Computer" form is always shown. This is not a major issue once the quirk is recognized, but the first time through the tutorial I thought I had selected the wrong form and went back a step to reselect the form I wanted. I suspect many other users will do the same.

After selecting the desired form and script with the font and color choice, transfer the form HTML file and the Perl script file to your local computer. The files initially have rather nondescript names (e.g., pa1.html and pa1.pl) but they can be renamed.

The next steps are to determine if your Web server has Perl installed and determine the paths to the Perl interpreter and server e-mail program. The instructions for doing this on Unix are appropriate (which perl and which sendmail) as is the instruction for determining if Perl is installed on an NT server (dir /s perl.exe). However, the instruction for locating the e-mail program on an NT server is inadequate: "Just open up Windows NT Explorer and browse through the menu structure until you locate your server's e-mail program...." (p. 18). It would have been better to provide more in-depth instructions for determining the SMTP server to use, provide an alternate mailing method for NT (e.g., the ActiveState Perl Net::SMTP module), or to simply state to check with the server's administrator. The e-mail functionality of the scripts was clearly written from a UNIX perspective. NT users will have to do quite a bit more investigation, and possibly greater customization, to get the scripts to run.

The next part of the process requires you to complete the necessary form information including: linking the script to the form, adding a link back to your library from the form, specifying the e-mail address of the person who will receive the form information, adding a URL to the form, and adding a "mailto" link. The manual provides instructions for making these modifications and they will be easy for anyone with some HTML knowledge. The HTML coding used in the forms is well done. Tags are lower case, properly nested, and attribute values are in quotes. The HTML used is quite basic. For example, "font" tags are used for formatting rather than styles. If style sheets had been used, it would be much easier to make changes to the appearance of the forms by modifying just a few lines of code. However, the benefit of the rudimentary HTML used is that the forms will work fine with nearly any Web browser.

The next steps explain what to do before uploading the form and script to your server including: testing the form and script, creating directories on the server, and setting up your computer to view the forms.
After following all these steps, my form and script didn't work. There is some troubleshooting information provided in the book, but it mostly suggests verifying the modifications that you make to the files. In my case, I found that the server (a Sun running Solaris with Netscape Enterprise Web server) that I was testing the form on required scripts to have a .cgi extension rather than .pl. Unfortunately, there is no information included on troubleshooting these kinds of issues. Another common error not mentioned in the manual is file permissions on the scripts. There should be a mention of using the "chmod 755" command on Unix servers to ensure that the script can be executed. I realize that extensive CGI troubleshooting can't be included in the book, but a checklist of common errors such as file permissions, extensions, etc. would be very useful.

Because the content of the CD-ROM is intended to be used on a library's public Web site, it is important to consider the licensing terms of the included forms and scripts. According to a statement in the manual, purchase of the "book/CD-ROM entitles the purchaser and/or his institution to use, modify, and upload to one institution's Web server, the HTML forms, Perl scripts, and graphic files contained on the CD-ROM" (p. ii). What about the issue of borrowing the book from a library? Does the stipulation that only the "purchaser" may use the CD-ROM content prevent a library borrower from making use of the forms and scripts on his or her institution's Web server? The license also requires that copyright and bibliographic credit to the publication needs to be visible somewhere on the purchaser's Web site. This requirement may be unacceptable to some libraries. Does credit in the source code satisfy the requirement that credit be given and is visible?

Although the book and CD-ROM have a list price of $75.00, the staff time required to write the scripts from scratch, or even to modify a more general script available for free download on the Internet, would almost certainly be more costly. And if the institution doesn't have the in-house expertise to create the scripts, hiring a consultant to write these scripts would be much more expensive than the cost of this title and the time spent configuring and installing the scripts. With HTML knowledge and some Perl understanding, the included forms and scripts can be easily modified to a greater extent than is covered in the manual.

Although there are some problems with the instructions for configuring the scripts and the licensing terms are somewhat restrictive, many libraries will find this title and the others in the series very useful. All in all, I recommend this title for any library that would like to add forms to its Web site, but does not have the in-house technical expertise or staff resources to do the programming.

Brian K. Yost (yostb@hope.edu) is Systems Librarian and Associate Professor at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

Copyright (c) 2002 by Brian K. Yost. This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for noncommercial, educational, or scientific purposes, provided that the preceding copyright statement and source are clearly acknowledged. All other rights are reserved. For permission to reproduce or adapt this document or any part of it for commercial distribution, address requests to the author at yostb@hope.edu.


by Dan Kissane
The Evolving Virtual Library II: Practical and Philosophical Perspectives provides an insightful collection of essays on various aspects of online library services. Neatly organized with chapter subheadings, this ambitious work appears to be intended as supplemental reading for library science students, academic and public library directors, and school librarians. Additionally, computer management professionals who suddenly find the library under their control (of which there are many with the latest wave of telecommunications/academic computing/teaching and technology center mergers) could use this as an introduction to their new duties.

The book's editor, Laverna M. Saunders, Ed.D, begins with her piece on "The Virtual Library: Reflections on an Evolutionary Process," which covers "definitions, users' expectations, job skills, transformed organizations, techno stress, ergonomics, issues regarding children, and recognizing the dark side." This essay serves well as a set of introductory materials that could provide the impetus for further research in many areas, such as user privacy, the Communications Decency Act, organizational structure and culture, and collection development issues in the electronic world.

Chapter 2 has Judith Field writing "Mining Information Networks: Intranets and Extranets at Work." She provides a brief introduction to the main issues in developing Intranets and Extranets based on their purposes, users, and uses. Covered topics include firewalls, employee productivity, intellectual capital, and proactive dissemination of information. This piece successfully introduces a number of terms and service concepts that could be useful for the novice librarian.

"Building a Digital Library: The Stories of the Making of America" by Maria Bonn, Ph.D., follows with a well written, well conceived essay on the outstanding virtual library with the same title "The Making of America" (MOA). This summary of the MOA project would serve well as background reading for anyone conceptualizing a virtual library collection from materials in their own library. Bonn covers the entire process from selection of materials, intended users, searching advantages, technical conversion issues and strategies through scalability and sustainability, access, and the future direction of the project.

Another write-up of an actual virtual library implementation, "Managing Digital Content: The Scholarly Communications Project," by Gail McMillan, covers The Scholarly Communications Project (SCP) from conception to its current state. The SCP, established in 1989, is demonstrated as a living, evolving entity reflecting academic online scholarship practices that continually changes to meet the demands, and exercise the power of newer electronic formats. The author stresses the importance of moving forward with indexing and delivery of content created electronically as opposed to the arduous task of going backward and attempting to deliver electronic content originally created in print. McMillan adeptly covers electronic journal creation, electronic theses and dissertation delivery, electronic reserves system creation and development (including copyright awareness), and online news. Also addressed are the creation and maintenance of networked images, archiving, security, staffing, and evaluation.

Tore Brattli's essay "Library-Generated Databases" focuses on actual library-created databases with obvious practical uses. Truly powerful personal computing uses creatively written databases that interact with the user on an individual level. Brattli demonstrates this power within the realm of the library. Included are sections on publishing library-related information on the Web, static vs. dynamic Web documents, external vs. internal databases, adaptability and integration with other services, and server/platform issues.

Don Napoli details the Saint Joseph County (South Bend, Indiana) Public Library's foray into Internet-based services in the next section, "A Public Library in Transition." This reviewer remembers the Saint Joseph County Public Library's (SJCPL) Internet presence well, from the time period of 1995-1998 where it was upheld as the premier example of user-oriented online services provided by public libraries in the United
States. The case history of the SJCPL's emergence to the forefront of online libraries makes interesting reading in this well written section.

A positive piece on school librarianship and the impact of the Internet follows in the essay "School Libraries Meet the Tornadoes: The Transformational Impact of School Reform and the Web" by Joyce Kasman Valenza. Framed within the parameters of school reform and technology, Valenza aptly points to the proper direction for school libraries to head, in order to survive the changing topology of public education without being left by the wayside. She encourages readers to know who their students are in a cultural sense, while also being aware of the pros and cons of the technologies being offered to schools. A sample Web site evaluation is offered as a tool for technology beginners to help in assessing Web sites. Through asking a great number of transcendent questions of the reader, the author provides intellectual stimulation for any school librarian.

"Extending the Library to Remote Users, by Vicky York, follows. A rigorous approach to this topic includes fundamentally sound principles such as justifications, guidelines, standards, model programs, access models, and assessments. Somehow in the face of rapid change, these issues are often lost. It is a relief to know they are still applicable.

A section on "Understanding Networks and Telecommunications Infrastructure," by George Mahovec, fleshes out this collection of essays with a summary of various telecommunications terms that are valuable to the beginning library manager with no knowledge of current telecommunications practices.

The final essay is by Marshall Keys, Ph.D. Keys covers basic virtual library concepts such as metadata, information aggregators, and consortia in a fluid manner. He includes information regarding integrated library systems and their inherent strengths and weaknesses.

Overall, The Evolving Virtual Library II makes a useful supplemental text to a variety of information courses such as library science and information management. This book could strengthen the holdings of academic and public libraries collecting in the areas of education, information science, technology, and telecommunications.

Dan Kissane is a Reference and Instruction Librarian/Composition Instructor at the State University of New York College at Oneonta.

Copyright (c) 2002 by Dan Kissane. This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for noncommercial, educational, or scientific purposes, provided that the preceding copyright statement and source are clearly acknowledged. All other rights are reserved. For permission to reproduce or adapt this document or any part of it for commercial distribution, address requests to the author at kissandf@snyoneva.cc.oneonta.edu (mailto:kissandf@snyoneva.cc.oneonta.edu).

About TER

Editor is Adriene Lim, Wayne State University (ab7155@wayne.edu (mailto:ab7155@wayne.edu)). Editorial Board Members are: Paul J. Bracke, University of Arizona Library (brackep@u.library.arizona.edu (mailto:brackep@u.library.arizona.edu)); Marshall Breeding, Vanderbilt University (Breeding@library.vanderbilt.edu (mailto:Breeding@library.vanderbilt.edu)); Shawn Collins, University of Tennessee, Knoxville (scollins@utk.edu (mailto:scollins@utk.edu)); Brad Eden, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (beden@ccmail.nevada.edu (mailto:beden@ccmail.nevada.edu)); Kathlene Hanson, California State
University Monterey Bay (kathlene_hanson@csumb.edu); Tona Henderson, Rochester Institute of Technology (tahics@rit.edu); Scott P. Muir, DALNET (ag1648@wayne.edu); Leo Papa, University of Detroit Mercy (papala@udmercy.edu); and Andrew Wohrley, Auburn University Libraries (wohrlaj@lib.auburn.edu).