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Personalized information clients: short answers to simple questions about “my library” services

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Abstract: Recent advancements in technology have inspired libraries to develop creatively customized services, or personalized information clients, allowing users to organize and manage Web sites for their personal interests and needs. One example of this customer orientation is the “my library” service, described in this series of questions and answers.

Keywords: Information, Management, Library services, Technological innovation, Customization

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Personalized information clients: short answers to simple questions about “my library” services

Leveraging library technology to enhance and expand library services is, of course, nothing new. In the past several years, one of the most striking advances and creative strategies for leveraging this technology comes in the form of the “my library” service[1]. Today, as illustrated by the selective list of libraries that is appended to this article, many libraries of all types (academic, medical, public, school) and sizes (small to large) are implementing “my library” services, eager to join their peers in offering their users a “personalized” library experience[2].

Definitions

Personalized information clients, often called “my library” by librarians, allow users to customize Web sites for their personal needs. By so doing, these clients help users more efficiently to find, organize, and ultimately manage, not only information resources, but also services, through a single access point. Put simply, these services help users filter and retrieve information according to the users’ own specifications and desires, reflecting individual personal interests and/or research needs. These portals, or gateways, are customer focused and of benefit to both the local and the distant learner (Buchanan, 2001).

Some libraries also provide access via a username and password, permitting individuals the ability to gain quick access to their favorite library resources and Web sites in their “my library” account from any computer connected to the Internet.

Questions and answers (Q/A)

The following questions and answers originated in a meeting of the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) heads of public service discussion group held at the American Library Association’s annual conference in San Francisco in June 2001. The topic of the discussion focused on personalized information clients[3]. Because of the level and quality of the questions and answers, including the key points covered in the discussion, the information is being shared here.

The “my library” service at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, which began in 1998, serves as the reference point for the following information. Dan Ream, head of the education and outreach services at VCU, and Jimmy Ghaphery, instructional technology librarian at the university are to be credited with the vision for seeing that the personalized library might serve as a new business model for academic library services in any locale.

Functionality

Q1. What does “my library” do?

My library strives to place needed information and services as close to the user as possible. In the context of VCU’s “my library”, this means creating a personal Web page where there are links to the user’s favorite databases and services. As such, “my library” eliminates the need for the user to remember where their favorite library resources may be located within the library Web site.

Q2. What advantages does my library offer for the average Web searcher? For the advanced Web searcher?

The creators of “my library” thought that it would be a “friend to the masses”. Usage statistics reveal something different – it appears that only a small percentage of the total Web traffic is funneled through “my library”. Instead, “my library” users seem to be those researchers who have a greater need for a specialized research portal than the average library user.

Q3. Can “my library” also serve as a screen saver?

Yes, through the use of cookies, it is possible to configure “my library” as a default home page.

Q4. How does “my library” differ from “my Excite”, “my iWon”, “my Netscape”, “my Yahoo”, and other personalized information clients?

The primary difference between “my library” and other clients is that the “my library” content is drawn from licensed research databases not available to businesses and services, such as “my Excite”. This provides “my library” users with unique information, but since the library typically licenses only the rights to link to the content of those resources, users do not see some of the features associated with various dot.com commercial enterprises. This may be part of the vision for a next generation “my library” in which users may actually retrieve their own articles pushed onto their personal portals. Although this functionality may be occurring through e-mail services at the vendor level, to date the lack of appropriate standards makes it difficult to consolidate all content at the “article level” into a single portal.

One can also envision a learning environment in which the portal might offer recommendations and comments:

Good morning, the book you checked out last month has recently been reviewed in The New York Times and cited in three articles.

Aside from programming the requisite technology to provide this functionality, libraries would need to consider carefully privacy issues associated with such services. In a real sense, the more personalization that is offered, the less privacy is available. That is, users are rarely, if ever, anonymous browsers.

Q5. To what extent is “my library” integrated with other digital library efforts, including, and especially, with other digital library services, some of which may not be personalized?

At the VCU libraries, we are right in the middle of this struggle, and have not been able to integrate “my library” fully with many of the emerging personalized services. At best, users can link to other digital library services through their personal bookmarks.

We are highlighting all of our personalization services on a single page:

- borrowing records;
- ability to renew materials;
- automatic e-mail notices announcing new books;
- journal article alerts; and

- interlibrary loan services,

but have not integrated them into a single login. One of the complicating factors is the sheer number of different systems that do not easily “talk” to each other. Furthermore, in the academic library context, there is a clear advantage to integrating such services with customized services at the university level.

Q6. To what extent is “my library” backward compatible with other, more traditional, services?

One of the biggest successes with “my library” has been traditional instructional services, since staff can quickly set up a “my library” page for a class of students. Usage logs indicate that these pages are heavily used after the instructional session. This is an area where the digital service has made a definite impact on the traditional service, both in terms of delivery efficiency (librarian preparation time) and the level of service capable of being provided.

Personalization architecture

Q7. How is information arranged in “my library”? How did you determine what services and/or information would appear on the opening screen of “my library”?

In setting up “my library”, high value was placed on both ease of use and limiting the presentation of content to one page. The most customizable sections (personal bookmarks of any Web sites) were placed at the top of the user’s page, and the most prominent space was reserved for full-text resources.

Q8. To what extent can users customize the layout of “my library”?

In the current model, there is not much flexibility to do this.

Technical requirements

Q9. What is the architecture for “my library”?

The architecture for VCU’s “my library” is simple. All of the user passwords, logins, and e-mail addresses are stored in a single text file. Each user has a corresponding text file that lists choices.

A single Perl script is used to register users, generate “my library” pages from the user’s profile, and to allow the user to edit the profile. “My library” runs on an IBM RS/6000 AIX Unix server with 256MB of RAM memory (Ghaphery and Ream, 2000).

This is not the only hardware which can support such services. By contract, “my UCLA” runs on an Intel Pentium based multi-processor Hewlett Packard server running Microsoft Windows NT.

Web services are provided by Microsoft’s Internet Information Server 4.0 using Microsoft Active Server Page technology. After authentication is achieved using ActiveX components that wrap socket calls to the UCLA administrative information services authentication server, page content is dynamically generated from information queried from Microsoft SQL servers located in the UCLA College of Letters and Science, and Office of the Registrar offices. Web content is secured with a SecureSockets Layer (SSL) certified by Verisign (MyUCLA, 2001).

Q10. How labor intensive was it to create “my library?” How labor intensive is it to maintain?

“My library” was created during the summer of 1998. Development was very quick. The idea was so exciting and infectious that it snowballed into a usable product by the fall of 1998. Since then,

maintenance has been minimal, consisting primarily of bi-annual purges of stale accounts that are no longer active.

Q11. How labor intensive is it to further enhance the service?

Vendor commitment to open standards, such as Z39.50, could enrich and enhance the environment for customization clients.

Promotion

Q12. How has “my library” been marketed to the user?

Traditional print advertisements have helped to launch and promote the service; but a link directly on the library homepage has been the best marketing tool.

Access

Q13. How does a user access his or her “my library page” – from inside the library or remotely from outside of the library?

Access is from any place at any time, as long as there is a Web browser.

Q14. To what extent is the use of “my library” restricted? Can alumni and other groups, such as community borrowers, access this service?

Use is restricted by the licensing agreements established with each database producer or vendor. While an alumnus might be able to set up a page, he/she would not be able to access the resources themselves from off-campus unless this privilege was explicitly granted in the database licensing agreement.

Q15. Is guest access provided for testing?

Yes, guest access is provided for testing the interface from the following Website:
<http://www.library.vcu.edu/mylibrary/test.html>. New users may create a test library page.

Usage

Q16. How difficult is it for users to modify their pages once they have been created?

Pages can easily be edited. Also, each page has a “what’s new” feature that lists selected new databases which can be added to any page.

Q17. How has “my library” been incorporated into library instruction? Into more advanced course-related instruction?

Librarians show users the services, and can create specific pages for class instructional sessions.

Q18. Is my library a must-have for busy students?

“My university” with a “my library” component promises to be more than a “must have”: the service can provide a single login to a student’s:

- class schedule;
- course Web sites;

- e-mail account; and, of course
- favorite or most frequently used library resources.

Assessment

Q19. Has usage data been collected? How has the service been evaluated? To what extent are “my library” users repeat visitors? Has the use of “my library” influenced the students’ information-seeking behavior?

Usage data have been consistently collected and serve as the primary method of evaluation (Ghaphery and Ream, 2000).

In short, a small percentage of total users account for the majority of the current logins. This pattern is leading faculty members to believe that in its current state, the VCU “my library” client is more of a tool for the power user, than for the average user.

Data show that 9 percent of all of the “my library” users account for 44 per cent of the total use of the service. Conversely, almost half of the “my library” users do not revisit their pages with any frequency.

Q20. To what extent does “my library” aid the user in making choices about which information resources to use? To what extent does “my library” preserve the personal touch of library services?

Good examples of each are found in the North Carolina State University model where users declare an area of interest when setting up a “my library” account (Morgan, 1998, 2000; Pace, 2001). Based on that area of interest, the user’s page has pre-defined selections including links to subject-specialist librarians. When considering additional features, it is important to recognize that there are underlying tensions between complexity and ease of use, as well as personalization and privacy.

Beyond “my library”

Make no mistake – real-time online reference service has significantly and, the authors would suggest, permanently altered the landscape of reference service in library settings of all types. With the growth of real-time online reference service and such cooperative ventures as the QandAcafe project in northern California (Khank, 2001), the 24-7 project in southern California (Coffman and McGlamery, 2000) or the Library of Congress’ Cooperative Digital Reference Services (CDRS, 2001; Langlois, 2001), the opportunity exists for researchers to access global information that lies beyond the holdings of either a single institution or a single consortium.

The QandA cafe project, CDRS and other virtual reference services (LiveRef, 2001) function to keep the library, and librarians, relevant. They also function, albeit perhaps indirectly, to promote information competence; by so doing they serve to underscore the potential importance of personalized information clients such as “my library”. Indeed, what better way for library users to find, organize and ultimately manage the wealth of information available to them?

Whereas “my library” allows users to package resources in a way that fits their personal needs, one might wonder if there a place for pre-packaged Webpages for particular groups of users, such as undergraduates who may not have a continuing need to access a personalized view of the library’s Website? For the researcher, SFX is an emerging standard that provides easy linkages and seamless integration for users between various scholarly databases. Increasingly available are a variety of

personalized alerting services based on a user's interest profiles, such as the Amazon.com model in which relevant resources or information on new acquisitions are pushed to the user.

Although the direction that personalized clients and services will take is unclear, there are one or two things we know for certain:

- that the impacts of personalized information clients on both librarians and library users are multiple, significant, and different;
- as the demonstrated success of the first wave of these services has shown, personalized information clients have already begun to reshape the way in which information is exchanged within the higher education setting.

In two recent publications librarians have been challenged to take up the gauntlet of portal development (Rockman, 2001; Zemon, 2001). The authors of these pieces recognize that librarians bring unique perspectives and skills to the development of portals in their institutions. We wholeheartedly agree – librarians are indeed uniquely suited to plan, develop and implement increasingly sophisticated and increasingly relevant personalized information clients. It is safe to say that the potential of these services has yet to be realized.

Notes

1 “My library” services exist under a variety of names and formats. Several of the more popular sites are listed at the Other My Library Projects Web site, available from <http://www.library.vcu.edu/mylibrary/cil99.htm>

2 Homework-help-and-Web-companion type services such as www.brarydog.net (a service from the Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County in Virginia) represent a variation on the “my library” theme. These resources serve a different purpose than the personalized information clients that are the focus of this article, and are, therefore, not profiled in depth.

3 The original discussion topic, “personalized services for reference”, was suggested by Martin Kesselman at the January 2001 Midwinter meeting of the ACRL Heads of Public Services Discussion Group. At the June 2001 American Library Association conference, invited facilitators Kesselman and Sarah Barbara Watstein chose to narrow the topic, and to focus specifically on “personalized information clients”. John A. Elswiler Jr, head of reference services at Utah State University, convened the discussion group.

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