

Attracting Teens to your Public Library Website - Five Simple Keys

While a Facebook or MySpace presence may help a public library connect with its' teenage audience, these social media are not a replacement for a solid set of teen-oriented pages and features on the library's primary website. Here are just a few of the reasons why:

- Though many teens— perhaps a good majority – use social media sites like Facebook and MySpace, not all do. Some are simply prohibited from the sites by their parents – parents who would welcome a robust library offering for teens.
- Those teens that do use social media sites do so primarily to connect with their close friends, and would be averse to including adults – or institutions associated with adults – into their circles.
- While social media sites provide good commenting and conversation platforms, they lack the flexibility provided by the library's primary site, flexibility that is required if you are presenting library-specific applications.

The bottom line is that a significant portion of the library's teenage patrons will benefit from a well-designed and well-maintained set of teen-specific pages on the library's primary website. With a little bit of up-front thought and effort, those pages can become a preferred destination for teens, attracting and maintaining their interest in both library materials and programs. Below are five key pointers for designing and maintaining a teen presence on your library website:

Key # 1. Give your teen pages a distinctly different design.

- Use different headers or background images and colors. Make it obvious to all visitors that they have entered a section of the site designed uniquely for teens.
- If possible, don't include the full library website navigational menu on these pages. Instead, present a teens-only menu that helps visitors navigate within this teen section only. Include a clearly visible link back to the main library website.
- Less is more...don't go overboard on the design. Take a pointer from Facebook here. You won't find garish colors and huge, puffy fonts on Facebook. Straightforward, to the point, with a little touch of distinctiveness that separates this section from the rest of the site - that's the goal.

Key # 2. Employ basic marketing techniques.

The pointers in (1) above comprise a good first step towards developing a unique 'brand' for your teen web pages – a distinct look and feel that teenagers readily associate with your product or service. You can take this branding a step further by employing a few more basic marketing techniques.

- Transfer the same color and design scheme as your teen web pages to these marketing tools:
 - Bookmarks that are given to teens upon checkout. Include a reference to the teen pages.
 - A prominently-placed graphical link to your teen section on the main home page of your website.
 - Posters or flyers that promote the teen web pages should be placed in the teen area of your library.
- Make a habit of mentioning your teen web pages during teen-oriented library events.
- Mention your teen pages in library newsletters – parents can help get the word out if you give them the information they need.

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Key # 3. Give teens the opportunity to shape website content.

From Facebook to online chat rooms to instant messaging and texting, teens have come to expect the ability to have some input on the content that appears on the screen. Your library site should be no exception.

- Allow teens to submit comments about upcoming or past events. This can be accomplished in a very low-tech way. Ask for comments via e-mail, or provide a comment form on the page that delivers entries via e-mail to library staff. Staff can then review and approve the comments, and enter them on the teen web pages using whatever system is in place for updating the web page.
- Solicit and display short reviews of popular books.
- Ask teens to help you create content for your teen web pages - perhaps a regular weekly column or book review.

4. Include photographs and videos.

There's nothing mysterious here...teens like to see their pictures online. Accommodate this by including a photo album with pictures taken at recent library events, or perhaps pictures taken by teens themselves that are relevant to popular books or themes. *If your policy requires, be sure to obtain the appropriate authorizations to post teen photos on your site.*

If possible, supplement the photo album with a page that embeds or links to online videos. There are a wealth of well-designed online videos that are relevant to teens and books. Go to www.youtube.com and type in the name of any popular teen author or title. You'll find author interviews, readings from books, book trailers, and more. You'll also find some fairly straightforward instructions for linking to or embedding these videos in your own web pages.

5. Less is more.

This advice applies not just to site design (as in number 1, above) – but also to textual content. Teens (and adults too, by the way) don't spend much reading text on your website – they want to scan and click through to their destination as quickly as possible. If your main points aren't highlighted or separated in some way, they'll be lost. Keep it short and simple. You can still provide great information, but dole it out in easy-to-digest, quick-to-click-through bits.

Don't worry about archiving things like blog entries, book reviews and the like – if it's last week's news, or last month's news, it's history.

Not included in the list above, but assumed as a bottom-line requirement for ALL parts of your library website, is the requirement that your content be current and frequently changing. Sites with outdated information or dated stories will quickly fall out of favor with users of all ages. There is so much information that is of interest to teens and is readily available for use on your site, i.e. book reviews, YouTube videos (see #4 above), etc., that finding fresh content is not a daunting task.

With a good mix of a unique design, branding, marketing, digital media and teen input, your public library website can become a frequent stop for all teens, and can greatly extend your reach into this important audience.