Revisioning the Chicago Website

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Our revision of the Chicago website went live in February and began what seems like eons ago—the spring of 2009. It was—and is—a project for the Press as whole—all three divisions of the Press: Books, Journals, and Distribution. But the greatest revision was to the Books Division site and that will be my primary focus.

There were a number of high level goals we had for the revision including

(1) Greater integration of the three divisions. Bring everyone under one virtual roof.

(2) Apply a consistent, professional design throughout the site as a whole: it’s still an ongoing project to apply the design to all three divisions. It’s been completely rolled out only in the Books Division.

(3) Create easier navigation and increased functionality for the Books Division site. The Books site grew up organically and needed reshaping and restructuring. To put it charitably.

(4) As much a means as an end: Move all the content for the site into a Content Management System (we use Magnolia) and create processes to keep the site’s bibliographic data in sync with our authoritative data in the Title Management System.

The steps in the project path basically looked like this:

Gathering ideas, requirements, and wishlists from each department of the Press.

Consolidating and honing all of these (collectively, business requirements) to a lengthy but manageable list.

Evaluating the business requirements for priority and technical feasibility. (What we can’t do goes into the parking lot.)

Reviewing the requirements to decide what we would implement in the site revision.

At a place as large as Chicago, and a place crawling with ideas, that process took months. But there is a great value in bringing people from throughout the organization to the planning table. You surface as many ideas as possible, but you also convey a sense of ownership and responsibility for the site out where it really belongs.
Business requirements honed, we engaged an outside consultant to help with the site architecture and the basic design. But really we didn’t get a site architecture or basic design from the consultant. What we got was a process by which we arrived at the architecture and design. People from the Press contributed a great deal to working out the architecture and specifying the design. More than we anticipated really, and the process was sometimes frustrating.

In the end, I think the most significant thing we bought by bringing in an outside consultant—and I don’t mean to belittle their role, I just want to be accurate about the role individuals at the Press played—the significant thing we bought was urgency. You pay someone a fixed fee and they have a financial stake in getting the project done expeditiously. They concentrate attention. They also have a reputational stake in delivering an end product—however arrived at—that the client is happy with.

Then, with site architecture and basic design in hand the IT team and our in-house design staff carried it out. And everyone else basically stood around and shouted advice: “Larger! Smaller! Not that font! Love that color! Hate that color! I know that’s what we said we wanted, but we were wrong. It doesn’t work. Well, OK, but it doesn’t work in Firefox. On the PC. 3.1.”

And then after you go live you start on Phase Two.

That’s the process. For the remainder of my time I want to talk about some of the premises, concepts, and rationales that ended up guiding what we did as far as the functionality and architecture of the site goes.

Motivated by our consultant, we thought and talked a lot about the different sorts of people who use our website (or who we want to use our website) and the way their individual goals shape where they enter the site and what they do when they get there.

▼ Somewhat in the tradition of the Chicago school of sociology I suppose, we evolved a typology. Four kinds of visitors.

Knowledge Seeker

Book Seeker

Service Seeker

Service User

▼ Knowledge Seeker

The Knowledge Seeker is interested in a general subject or something more detailed than that (for example, the Chicago heat wave of 1995). They want knowledge whether it’s in a book or
not. They get to our site via a search engine query or via some link out there (maybe from a Wikipedia article) to a piece of content or to a book product page. In the best case scenario, they decide based on the page on our website that they want to read the book and they get it from us, from a bookseller, or at a library. In many more cases, they decide that the information (much less the book) that we have is not exactly what they were looking for. At this point this person is almost always going to leave our site, because there is little on the book product page to compel them to look at anything else—there is nothing similar, there is just navigation.

Some examples of Knowledge Seekers:

   Anyone exploring an interest
   A student researching a paper topic
   An academic carrying out research
   A journalist researching a story

Knowledge Seekers are unlikely to enter on or visit the homepage, they have little motivation to seek out further info via site search or navigation. Our interest in this user is to convert their knowledge interest to book interest for sale or publicity. There is nothing but upside for the Knowledge Seeker. But our old site did not serve the Knowledge Seeker as well as it could.

▼ Book Seeker

The Book Seeker knows (or strongly suspects) that the subject of their interest is instantiated in a book. ▼ They may have the title of a book (they are a Book Title Seeker), which they use as a search engine query, or find in a weblink. However, a Book Seeker who already has a title in mind is more likely to go to Amazon or some other bookseller, to a library site, or to Google Book Search. If they do get to our site, they will enter on the book product page. They may have the name of an author, perhaps because they are interested in that author’s work as a whole (they are a Book Author Seeker). If they come to our site, they are likely to enter on a book product page or on an author page.

Examples of Book Seekers:

   Reader, student, or academic with book title or an author in mind
   Professor looking for a book to use in a course
   Book reviewer looking for specific book, author, or subject
   Librarian looking for detailed info on a book, books in a series, or books
in a subject

Bookseller looking for detailed info on a specific book or author

Foreign publisher looking for specific book, author, or subject for translation

Book Seekers are unlikely to enter on or visit the homepage, but they have some motivation to seek out further info via site search or navigation. Our interest in this user is to provide plentiful, high quality information. To reinforce their interest and encourage a transaction. Our old site presented reasonably rich book product pages but those pages were essentially in one silo and informational pages were in another silo with little crossover between them. So, we were not serving Book Seekers as well as we could.

▼ Service Seeker

The Service Seeker has a task to complete. ▼ The Service Seeker wants to be associated with us and is seeking information about a service we can provide. The Service Seeker already knows we exist and likely knows something about us. They are coming to find out more, to add details to their current impressions, or to find out how to contact us in order to associate themselves with us.

Examples of Service Seekers:

Prospective author

Prospective distributed publisher

Professor or departmental assistant looking for a desk copy of already adopted course book

Customer wanting to place order from a printed direct mail piece

Prospective foreign publisher looking for contact information

Non-press Author (or other agent) looking for reprint permissions

Disability officer looking for electronic file on behalf of a student using a UCP book in a class

Service Seekers are likely to come to our homepage from a search engine. They have quite a bit of motivation to seek out further info via site search or navigation. Our interest in this user is to
provide enough information for the prospect to judge if we are a good fit for them and how they can proceed in associating themselves with us. On our old site our information pages were antiquated and painful to use, not to mention look at. We were making it too hard for the Service Seekers to accomplish the task they had before them.

▼ Service User

The Service User is already associated with us. ▼ They come to our site looking for specific information useful to further carrying out some task relevant to our association, or they simply want to see how their association with us is represented on our website. They are likely to have a specific task and be highly motivated to complete it.

Examples of Service Users:

- Current author needing contact information, instructions for manuscript, index, or art preparation, wanting to get copies of their book, etc.
- Current distributed publisher checking on how we present their books
- Or, maybe the worst case scenario, a University of Chicago administrator looking into what the Press is doing.

Service Users are likely to come to our homepage from a search engine, or even a bookmark. They have high motivation to seek out further info via site search or navigation. Our interest in this user is to do right by them. Like the service seekers, we made our information too difficult to find for this group. We also knew that with the growth in our business of marketing and selling books from other publishers, including them in our catalog, that we could do much more to carry through the identity of these publishers on the Chicago website.

These four types of visitors are like different lenses to put on when you view your website. How well does your homepage, or a book product page, or your “About the Press” or information pages serve the different types of visitors and how can you improve their experience?

▼ There are also lessons to be learned—and then applied—from looking at our web traffic stats. These are just four points that are relevant for what follows.
Web traffic analysis suggests to us that only 10 to 15% of visitors see our homepage at any point during the visit. The web is not vertical. Every page of a website has to sometimes function as an entryway into the site as a whole.

More people enter our site on a book product page than any other type of page. So that class of pages has to do a lot of work.

The number one site search phrase on the old site was “desk copies.” Clearly, we had made it too difficult to find information for this task. Which meant that we had undoubtedly made it too difficult to complete most other service tasks.

We had lots of lists of books on our old site. Too many. But one type that stood out was our lists of newly released books by subject. So that was something we wanted to preserve.

▼ The book product page is where many visitors enter the site. It’s where the Knowledge Seekers and the Book Seekers are likely to enter the site. Our old site basically gave the user three choices on the book product page: buy the book, use the standard navigation links, or use the search utility to go to some other page of the site. We wanted to open up our list and our content more to the user than that. Exhibit some of the other things we had available.

So we created an algorithm to find books related to the book on the page. It is based on the Library of Congress Classification Number, also known as the Call Number. We pick up the LCC# programmatically from the Library of Congress site and store it in our bibliographic data.

▼ Imagine all of Chicago’s books on one long shelf, arranged by LCC#. Find this book on that shelf and the related books ▼ are the two books to the left and the two books to the right. A perfect algorithm? No, but it scales across 5,000 titles (or however many we have by now . . . )

▼ The Library of Congress Classification is of course also a Subject Category system. And unlike the multiple subject areas that most of our books are routinely assigned to, the LCC# picks out a single subject, and because it is a shelf location, the specificity is even greater: a location within a broader subject. The book *Academically Adrift* is in Education. We correlate the LCC Subjects with a ▼ standard list of subjects that we use as categories elsewhere: on our blog for instance.

On the right side of the book product page then we have subject driven functionality. ▼ We match the subject of the book to the blog subject category and display the three most recent blog posting in the book’s subject: Education. Since we have excerpts and other book features for hundreds of books and the excerpts are also coded with the same subject scheme, we display links to those excerpts—along with the book author and title—that are in Education. We also display author events—in this case the one event that is subject coded as Education.
For some of the users I called Book Seekers we have links just for them in the lefthand navigation: Instructors looking for an exam or desk copy; Librarians looking for information on buying or e-book options; Media people looking for a review copy; Publishers or others needing rights or permissions info.

We vastly simplified the number of book lists that we had on the old site by creating filtering buttons for all our subject listings. Users can select just the new books, just e-books, books from only Chicago or from the other publishers we carry in our catalog, and also select just general interest—or trade discounted—titles. Or combinations of these filters.

The book product pages of our marketed clients have functionality that reflects their own identity and publishing program. We display their most recent books. We display the blog postings from our distributed publishers blog that are tagged with their name.

To best address the groups of users who are Service Seekers or Service Users and the wide variety of their needs, we opted for a consolidated Info and Services page—an index of all the services across the three divisions. This was actually a reasonably controversial move, especially in what the page would be named. Can we as a university press just say “info”? It is intended to meet the diverse needs of most anyone be they an author, prospective author, bookseller anywhere in the world, instructor, librarian, a publisher looking for translation rights, or reprint permission, or a publisher looking for distribution. We hope that the comprehensiveness of the index could even lead to synergy: as when an academic comes looking for a desk copy, but is also shopping a journal article, completing a book proposal, and also sits on the board of a publisher who needs distribution. Surely someone fits that description.

This page seems to work and it is the revision that I recommend most unequivocally. Searches for “desk copy” have plummeted.

We created a very visual homepage for the Books Division. In the righthand column here we have default, non-subject related links. We feature a subject, we feature trade books, and we feature a frequently updated list of frontlist bestseller.

The homepage for the Press, finally, brings the three divisions of the Press into virtual proximity.