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TECHNOLOGY

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When to Build an FAQ: A Case Study

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FAQS ON THE LIBRARY WEBSITE

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ or FAQs) are used on all kinds of websites and often work alongside a site search or within a virtual chat service. Even in the acronym-heavy world of libraries, one can be fairly certain that a first-time user to a library website will understand the concept of an FAQ (West, 2015). A key feature of an FAQ is that it is more likely to utilize the user's own language. In the article "FAQs Still Deliver Great Value," Susan Farrell tells librarians, "*your* vocabulary and your

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users' vocabulary probably talk past each other. (The 'verbal disagreement phenomenon.')

 (2014). For example, a user is much more likely to search the string "print a poster" or "where can I print a poster?" but traditional website content might use the print center's branded name with the service of poster printing only alluded to with paper size description. Besides the language users choose to search for information on a library website, an FAQ can prevent a user from getting lost in a website's architecture: "Think of a FAQ as a way to assemble diverse pieces of information centered around specific information needs" (West, 2015). This largely positive literature on FAQs from library-focused publications stands in contrast to the divisive opinions FAQs elucidate in the field of content strategy (Gracey, 2010; Roberts, 2018; Wright, 2018). This article highlights why and, as importantly, when a Frequently Asked Question feature can add value to a library website.

As the trend of combining service points continues (the *Journal of Access Services* devoted a whole issue to the subject in 2016), an FAQ can support or supplement the training of student workers, staff, and faculty on the wide variety of services. In their review of literature in the area of single service points, Frederiksen and Wilkinson outline the benefits of cross-training for a single service point: "cross-training allows paraprofessionals and student assistants to develop new skills, become more confident about the range of services and resources available, and increases job satisfaction" (Frederiksen & Wilkinson, 2016). Staff and faculty can be empowered to impact the service experience and future training experiences of other personnel when they have permission to edit and create content inside the FAQ. This responsiveness is key to success: "Make sure your FAQ is a living document, and add and subtract from it as necessary. Have a way to accept questions from the community" (West, 2015). An FAQ can also be used to supplement non-staffed service points. For example, Texas Tech University drafted six frequently asked questions and answers based on service desk statistics to populate an interactive kiosk (Litsey et al., 2015).

The evolution of the multi-tiered support system might shift the conversation about where FAQs fit into the library website and how they are considered a service. In a virtual chat environment, an FAQ can serve as an alternative when the chat is not live (Jones, Kayongo, & Scofield, 2009) or to provide a script when it is (Thompson, 2010). Although not yet popular with libraries, this approach is popular with for-profit companies that provide technical support. One study of a multi-tiered support system involved creating an FAQ for a pancreatic cancer patient/family chat room. Researchers studied whether or not the FAQ changed chat room activity. They concluded that the FAQ was associated with an increase in postings by patients and families seeking information; but, more importantly, the

questions changed in subject. Pre-FAQ questions focused on medical treatment but post-FAQ questions shifted to the more personal and complex subjects of prognosis and end-of-life care (Coleman et al., 2005).

An example of one such multi-tiered support platform is Zendesk. Included in their suite of services is an Online Knowledge Base that “provide(s) free access to it so that customers and users can find the solutions to their problems without contacting customer support” (Zendesk, 2018). The University of Montana subscribes to Zendesk’s chat service Zopim but without any additional features. However, there is concern that it will someday be difficult to subscribe to individual products instead of a fully bundled package of services; this would not only increase the overall cost for the service but also change the model of service on library websites. The goal of these multi-tiered support systems is to decrease direct contact (and therefore save their customers money). Allowing contact with users to be outsourced to an FAQ sets an unsettling precedent. To imply that library users’ complex needs can be answered satisfactorily by a static text resource undermines the very purpose of librarians, library resources, and even libraries as a physical entity. The report “Institute-Wide Task Force on the Future of Libraries” by MIT Libraries emphasizes the complex purpose of a 21st century library: “(we) must operate as a global digital platform while also operating as a space—virtual and physical—where communities of students, scholars, local citizens, and global learners can gather to interact with one another and with scholarly objects and tools” (pp. 7–8). It is important to remember how the missions of for-profit organizations and libraries differ when interacting with platforms built for the former.

In contrast to Zendesk and fears of bundling, Springshare, a key library service provider, has started unbundling key features for individual subscriptions. Until recently, LibAnswers (Springshare’s FAQ service) and LibChat (Springshare’s chat service) were inextricable. LibAnswers is a unique FAQ because of its relation and similarity to Springshare’s ubiquitous research guides. It can serve internal and external functions in a way that is specifically catered to libraries. Questions in the FAQ can be labeled “internal” so logged in staff can utilize content that external users cannot. Now that Springshare offers LibAnswers as an individual service, it is worth considering as a standalone product.

WHY FAQs FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Before delving into the creation of a DIY Wordpress FAQ or its comparison to LibAnswers, it is worth understanding why the University of

Montana's Mansfield Library created an online FAQ. Literature reviewed in the course of writing this article often made the assumption that if staff observed questions often asked then an online FAQ should be created. "Frequently asked questions by visitors about library services identified a need to develop an FAQ page about library services for alumni and nonaffiliated users" (de Groote, Dorsch, Collard, & Scherrer, 2005). By this logic, all library websites should have a visitor FAQ. However, in an environment of dwindling resources for libraries and the "do more with less" mantra, user experience methodology gives the opportunity to challenge that assumption about an FAQ's inevitability. In contrast, specific user behaviors captured through usability testing, two card sorts¹, and page analytics led to the conclusion that an FAQ feature might improve the user experience of the Mansfield Library website.

User data that led the Mansfield Library to build an FAQ showed two similar but distinct patterns. First, users consistently displayed a lack of understanding about the current website's organization. In usability tests, participants are regularly asked which option in the navigation menu they would select to find more information on a particular topic. In one instance, six out of eight participants selected the wrong menu option to find more information on "checking out a book." Another example of data demonstrating this behavior was the popularity of the website's A-Z page. This page (which lists all library web pages alphabetically) is the second most viewed page on the Mansfield Library website. The use of a website's A-Z page can be attributed to poor site architecture and users' lack of understanding of how to find information on the current library website.

The second behavior pattern is more nuanced. Users surveyed lacked a shared understanding of basic vocabulary to describe library services, resources, and spaces. During two card sorts as well as regular usability testing, there was no discernable pattern in how participants (all students) described and grouped particular pages. In the case of card sorts (which were open with participants naming their own groups), no more than two out of the thirteen participants grouped even two cards together in the same way. After those disappointing results, the navigation was not changed, but testing was done to see what users thought each category should contain. In one round of usability testing, eight participants were asked to describe what information they thought they would find if they clicked on each of the navigation menu options on the library home page. Again, no actionable patterns were found. For example, the menu item "Services" received these disparate descriptions:

¹Card sorting is "a method used to help design or evaluate the information architecture of a site. In a card sorting session, participants organize topics into categories that make sense to them and they may also help you label these groups. To conduct a card sort, you can use actual cards, pieces of paper, or one of several online card-sorting software tools" (Card sorting, n.d.).

- Participant one: “tech, things available to check out, reference services, writing center, events”
- Participant two: “room rental (time available), study carrels”
- Participant three: “FAQ, Writing Center hours & how to schedule a writing appointment”
- Participant four: “subcategories of navigational pages to research, citing sources”
- Participant five: “hours, personnel services, location”
- Participant six: “Services that librarians can help with, PawPrint, how to navigate website, renting rooms”
- Participant seven: “Everything we offer (PubMed), PawPrint, would click on ‘Request’ if they knew which service they wanted to request, ‘Services’ if they were unsure”
- Participant eight: “What you can do at the library, who works here and how they can help you, One Button Studio, Lightboard Studio, study carrels”

Although some of these items were useful (a majority of participants listed the print center, called Paw Print, under Services so it was moved there immediately) the overall sense was users had very different ways to understand the term “Services,” and the other broad categories used in the website navigation menu in a library context.

These are not the only user behaviors that could justify the creation of an online FAQ. But lack of any evidence demonstrating that users have difficulty navigating to or searching for information on a library website is cause to reconsider investing time and resources into creating an FAQ, especially for a library with thinly-spread personnel. Content of any value takes time and expertise to create, and some researchers have advocated for hiring content strategists to work on library websites (Blakiston & Mayden, 2015). Additionally, for an FAQ, there is a consistent commitment required to update as well as create new content. If personnel do not have time to devote to creating and maintaining a relevant FAQ, use numbers will decrease and “outdated FAQs are worse than having no FAQs at all” (West, 2015). To monitor use and the commitment of personnel to the success of the Mansfield Library FAQ, the project was pitched as a one-year pilot. After that period of time, it would be removed if deemed under-utilized.

THE WORDPRESS PILOT

A site can be set up using Wordpress in two ways: site-hosted at .com or self-hosted at .org. For this pilot project, it was necessary to use the .org version in order to have access to the plugin library. The .org version of Wordpress requires additional set-up because one must download and host a Wordpress.org site on one’s own server. Extensive directions on how to do so are available on Wordpress’s Github site (How to install

Wordpress on a server, 2018). It is advisable to store the Wordpress files on a library-controlled server so that library technical staff have access at all times without the support of campus IT. If possible, create (or give specific directions to IT staff so they can create) a FAQ URL to build off the file structure of the existing library website in a way that is organic and intuitive to users.

The plugin Ultimate FAQ by Etoile Web Design was the foundation of the FAQ site. It was chosen based on a high number of positive reviews and the frequent updates it underwent. Also, Ultimate FAQ is managed by a company and not an individual developer so there is a built-in support system (Wordpress FAQ Plugin, 2018). There is a free version of Ultimate FAQ but some key features were not available so a one-year, single-site subscription was purchased for \$30. The main feature that was worth paying extra for was the shortcode that dynamically updates a page with the most-viewed questions. “Organization by popularity,” where the most popular FAQs default to auto-populate the FAQ home page, was also a desired feature after seeing it in Springshare’s LibAnswers. Other indispensable plugins for this pilot were “Multiple Themes” by David Gewirtz and “Widget Context” by Presto to help distinguish the FAQ from the rest of the Mansfield Library Wordpress site which housed the library’s blog. Maintaining multiple themes at once and tailoring the widgets to each theme allowed the FAQ and blog to be distinct products. Ultimate FAQ also allows the resulting FAQ database to be exported to PDF or spreadsheet and also allows importing from a spreadsheet.

There are drawbacks to creating an FAQ from scratch, especially with Springshare’s LibAnswers on the market. First, a new distinct interface adds to the cognitive effort required by users who are already clicking through research guides, the website CMS, a discovery layer, the ILL account, and every database or journal website they could possibly use. This interface fatigue can extend to internal users; creating an FAQ in Wordpress means one more username and password to keep track of. The second main drawback is that although a Wordpress FAQ is considerably cheaper it is still not free. The time to put together and maintain the Wordpress site with all its plugins and customizations requires technical expertise that Springshare’s LibAnswers does not.

LibAnswers has an alluring predictability and ease of use to the institution that already uses LibGuides. It is robustly customizable yet works “out of the box.” The main drawback to subscribing to LibAnswers as a stand-alone product is that the internal dashboard is based on the FAQ being bundled with Springshare’s chat and ticketing system. For example, when an internal user selects “Create” from the dropdown answer menu, the resulting page defaults to a ticket form instead of an FAQ entry form. This

is confusing and of concern when attempting to train library faculty and staff how to use the FAQ internally. The dashboard home page is a list of open tickets and will always be empty and unused for account holders who subscribe only to LibAnswers.

For the institution that has determined it needs an FAQ and can afford at least a one-year contract, it is worth trying out LibAnswers. Because its internal analytics are extensive and easy to read (especially compared to the non-existent analytics of Wordpress's FAQ plugin), LibAnswers is an excellent way to determine if an FAQ is right for a library. If the product doesn't meet metric goals after one year, libraries can consider if it is worth the cost and time. LibAnswers lets account holders batch export the FAQ database that has been created but does not allow for a batch import (much to the chagrin of the Wordpress pilot team in this case study who then had to copy and paste all FAQ content into LibAnswers from Wordpress). The Wordpress Ultimate FAQ plugin, by comparison, allows batch imports and exports.

One of the surprising takeaways from this project was library faculty and staff reaction to the FAQ and how they related it to other parts of the Mansfield Library web presence. Dynamic content is of interest but also a source of anxiety for academic library websites due to the time and technical expertise required to implement and maintain (Wilkinson, 2018). Libraries want to showcase topical events, displays, collections, and other information to involve website users and increase resource discovery. In the course of pitching the FAQ to library personnel, faculty immediately asked if questions from the FAQ could be featured on the home page and replace a soon-to-be removed feature that showcased topical content. Springshare offers a customizable widget that will embed a dynamic feed of popular or recent questions, or questions of a certain topic or keyword, into any webpage. Wordpress's Ultimate FAQ plugin has no such widget but such features are possible with the right technical expertise. Library personnel believed the dynamic content of an FAQ was worth featuring in a place as prominent as the library home page. For this pilot, a LibAnswers widget was not implemented and instead "FAQ" was added to the library's main navigation as an additional move to boost visibility and use.

CONCLUSION

It is not clear if the FAQ at the University of Montana's Mansfield Library will be a success after the one-year trial. Its failure to meet the desired metrics will prompt the deletion of the feature or an extreme re-boot. As library web and physical environments re-strategize in the face of decreasing budgets, and a call from administrators to do "less with more," it is

imperative to consider where time and expertise are funneled to meet, and exceed, user needs in a learning-based environment. This case study clearly demonstrates the importance of thoughtful and holistic content strategy and the clear impact of online content on quality of service and the user experience.

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