

Library's Website: a Marketing Instrument in the Public District Libraries in Romania

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to determine whether the Romanian public district libraries use their websites as marketing instruments. It is based on a study conducted during February-March 2006. The study consists of the analysis of a questionnaire that was completed by 20 of the 26 district libraries that owned a website at the time and offers information about the evolution of the number of libraries that developed their own website, the users they target, the services they promote online, their plans for developing the websites and the advantages they have for the library and its users.

Keywords: *Library, Website, Marketing*

Although Internet is the newest media for information exchange, studies show that it represents the media with the highest rate of development in history. Nowadays, it is estimated that over 694 millions of people over 15 years old are using Internet, that is approximately 14% of world's population in this age group. (1) In 1993 the number of websites was about 600 and later, by middle 2000, the number reached over 15 000 000. (2)

In recent years, libraries have started to realize the potential of development that new technologies offer. More libraries have developed websites and are now trying to reach not only their active users, but also their potential users or non-users, those who prefer to satisfy their information needs by themselves, by simply using one of the search engines that are available on the Internet.

The website can be a very useful marketing instrument, helping them to address directly to the users; they can easily gather data about who the

users are and what their expectations are. By using this data, they can improve their services in order to adapt much better to the information needs of different categories of users.

The main advantage of the Internet is that it gives the possibility of direct communication between the one who perform a service and the beneficiary of the service, since a good communication is vital for every marketing activity.

In Romania, using the website as a marketing instrument is barely in a beginning phase for the majority of district libraries. Only 26 of all 42 district libraries, approximately 62% (figure 1) (including the “Mihail Sadoveanu” Metropolitan Library in Bucharest, which functions as the district library for Ilfov district) have a website of their own.

Although more than half of the libraries have their own webpage, the percent seems too small if we consider that the implementation of information technology has been representing for years one of the major objectives for public libraries.

The other 12 district libraries are not visible on the Internet: the district libraries from Alba, Arad, Bistrița - Năsăud, Botoșani, Călărași, Caraș - Severin, Giurgiu, Gorj, Ilfov (the Metropolitan Library is unfolding a project for developing a complete website, which will offer access to a large digital library), Mehedinți and Teleorman.

The present tendency indicates the fact that public district libraries are more opened to the idea of interacting with their public over the Internet, that is why in the next period most of them might develop their own website or improve the one that already exist, by transforming it from a simple information source into an interactive instrument capable of attracting new users, to promote their products and services and to offer special services for distance users, using only the webpage.

The webpage is library's best instrument for on-line marketing. The webpage represents the link between the library and its users, through text and image.

Public district libraries are different of other libraries because of their public, way of organization and functions. In recent years, informatisation programs have been developed, it has been tried to create a network of district libraries, many investments have been done to modernize them and to increase their collections. Although a lot of these district libraries have had a webpage of their own for many years, only now they start to understand how important those homepages are for promoting their service. The webpage doesn't represent a simple information instrument anymore, an on-line version of the library's presentation booklet.

Competition and new communication and information technologies are more appreciated, that is why libraries have to adapt modern marketing instruments, that address to a young public, who is used to the Internet and wants to find the information easier, at a low cost (expressed by the efforts and the time spent to find it).

The research method applied for this study was a questionnaire distributed by e-mail. It was an efficient method to test if a potential user has the possibility to contact the library by using the webpage and if a feedback really exists. I collected the information during February-March 2006, when I sent questionnaires by e-mail to all Romanian district libraries that have web pages. The answers I received were sent by e-mail, as well.

I sent the questionnaires by e-mail because this method has some very important advantages (3): low cost, speed (in a few hours I succeeded in sending over 20 text personalized e-mails for every district library), large area coverage (I could communicate with all district libraries, without traveling), answering rate (those who get this kind of questionnaires are more willing to answer).

The first step in the study's procedure consisted of identifying all Romanian district libraries that have a webpage of their own.

After I had done that I made a questionnaire which includes 10 open questions, trying to find out how the district libraries use their webpage as a marketing instrument. Then, I sent a questionnaire to the e-mail addresses I had found on the website.

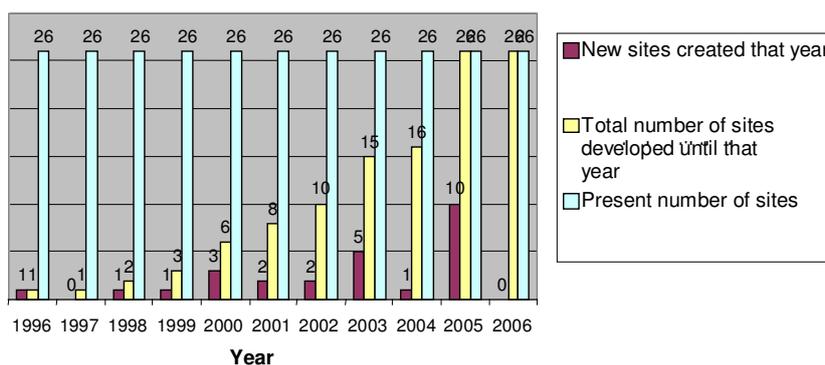
I intended to send questionnaires to 26 district libraries, but I realized that three of the contact addresses on the website weren't available (so, I can say that the interactivity is very low and potential users can't find the information they look for): the District Library of Covasna, the "Ștefan Bănuțescu" District Library of Ialomița and the District Library of Bacău (its website was still under construction at the time).

20 of the 32 libraries that I contacted e-mailed back their answers to the questionnaire, so the feedback was very good (87%). Three libraries didn't answer my questionnaire: "Panait Istrati" District Library of Brăila, "Vasile Voiculescu" District Library of Buzău and "Nicolae Iorga" District Library of Prahova.

Because the questionnaire I used was an opened one, the data I collected cannot be easily interpreted from a quantitative, statistical perspective, except for the first two questions. The other answers are more suitable for a qualitative interpretation, based on the opinions that those who answered the questions expressed.

Question 1. When did you launch the webpage of your library?

As shown by the answers I received, the first public library's website was developed in 1996 (a version of the site of the District Library from Cluj). The number of websites started to increase gradually, so that it reached 6 in 2000, and nowadays it has reached 26. The most important increase was in the year 2005, when 9 new websites were developed.



Evolution of the number of district libraries that have websites

The websites of the districts' public libraries proved to be dynamic marketing instruments, that adapted very rapidly to the changes of the field and to users' demands. Many of these websites are presented nowadays in their second version. It's the case of the public district libraries' homepages in Argeş, Dolj, Iaşi, Mureş and Timişoara, which upgraded both the graphic design and the services that are available online.

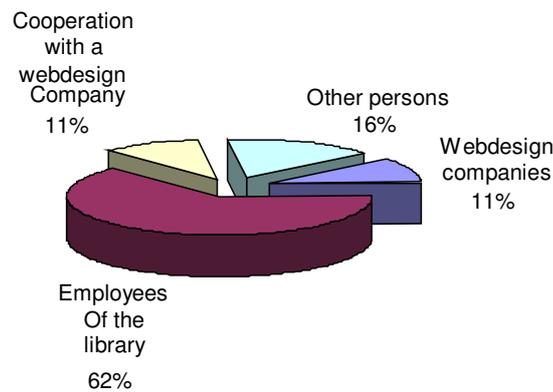
Question 2. Who is in charge of developing/updating the website? Did you work with a webdesign company or is this the task of a specific department/employee?

The answers I got show that there are four major tendencies concerning the responsibility of developing and updating the library's webpage:

- a) the webpage is developed and updated by employees of the library, especially those who work in the Informatics Department (62%)
- b) the library hires a webdesign company (although it is obvious that the company must co-operate with the library), which develops and updates the website as specified in the contract. This means that the library has to pay a certain fee for the services performed by the company (11%)
- c) the library cooperates with outside companies or persons to develop the website, but it is updated by the employees of the library; this

way, it is more convenient and the money invested is less, because in most cases the cooperation is due to a good relationship that the library and that company or person share. This way, the costs involved are reduced.

- d) The task of developing the website is incumbent on a person who neither works in the library, nor is hired for this specific task; it's the case of the websites of Sălaj, Suceava and Vrancea district public libraries.



The responsibility of developing the website

Question 3. Which is the approximate cost of developing/ updating the website and what funds cover these costs?

None of those who answered the questionnaire tried to highlight exactly the costs subsequent to developing/maintaining a website. In most cases, as shown by the answers I got, the costs strictly related to developing and updating the website tend to 0, because the websites are hosted on free servers, and they are updated by library employees.

Some of those who answered the questionnaire, mentioned among these costs the wages of those who are in charge of updating the site (although they have many other tasks to complete), the cost of electricity, the cost implied by the acquisition and maintenance of the technological equipment.

Liviu Iulian Dediu, the assistant director of “V.A. Urechia” Public District Library of Galați includes “the costs of some operations that cannot be evaluated, such as : taking digital pictures during important events that take place in the library and processing them in order to post them on the website, the costs of converting the library’s collections in electronic format, writing the news for the webpage, which is done by other persons,

the costs of the cooperation with other public libraries in the district, which give us quantitative data, the costs of developing and updating the “Resources” section, which is permanently updated by the Reference Service, the cost of answering the questions we receive by e-mail for our Electronic Reference Service, the cost of offering acces to our databese.”

The website of the Harghita District Library was developed by a webdesign company, which implied other costs: the designing of the webpage costed aproximety 800RON and the fee for updating it is around 150 RON/an, if the site is updated only once a year.

The “G.T. Kirileanu” District Library in Neamț pays an annual fee of 15 \$ to www.domreg.ro for hosting their site and the Vaslui District Library mentioned the cost of buying the domain: approximately 200 RON.

All costs are covered from libraries’ own funds, public funds that are allocated by the institutions that libraries are subordinated to: the District Councils.

Question 4. What segment of users represents the main target of your website?

The answers we got reveal the fact that the majority of district library are not very interested with market segmentation.

About 55% of those questionned, that is 11 district library, said that the target they wish to reach consists of all categories of users. An argument in favour of this approach is the fact that “by its nature (public library), the library must pay attentions to all uses, no matter how old they are or what their profession is, considers Dan Păun (“ASTRA” District Library of Sibiu).

Other libraries suggest different segmentation models. The target of the Piatra Neamț District Library is represented by the potential users, “those who we try to convince to visit our library” (Cristina Catană, the Marketing Departament).

The target of the website of Harghita District Library includes the local community, but also “other libraries from Romania and from abroad, especially from Hungary, because we want to improve the interlibrary loan with the help of our online catalogue.” (Kis Eva)

The target of “Alex and Aristia Aman” District Library of Dolj is represented especially by “the younger users, who are more familiar with using the Internet” (Vasilica Anghel, system engineer).

The webpage of the District Library of Argeș targets mainly the “active users and the potential ones, but we don’t intend to target a rigorously defined segment of users. We intend to attract more users aged 5 to 12 through our new webpage.”(Mihaela Voinicu, Assistant Director)

The district libraries do not design their websites as marketing instruments that should target well defined segments of users. Starting with a minimum segmentation they could determine much better what their clients want and they could improve their image on the Internet, as well as the services they offer. Libraries can collect important data if they use services for monitoring the traffic on the Internet (hit counters). The fact that the websites of public district libraries in Romania are accessed from countries such as U.S.A, Great Britain, Egypt, France, Spain, Israel, Germany, Canada, Australia, Hungary, Italy etc. shows that potential users of the website are not only the members of the community that the library serves. The library should develop special services, available online, for these virtual users, who visit the library's homepage, but who cannot go directly to the library. Such services could increase the notoriety of the library and could make it more visible at a higher level, not only locally. These users could be engaged through services like Electronic Reference Services (available not only in Romanian, but also in other languages), access to online databases or periodicals, links to other websites, the possibility of accessing digital books, translation services or even tutorials.

Question 5. How many users visit the website daily/weekly/monthly?

The monitoring of the traffic (number of hits) is an efficient evaluation instrument of the impact that the website has among the users and an indicator of the efficiency of the website as a marketing instrument.

The data collected like this can indicate how often the site was viewed daily, weekly, monthly or even annually, which pages were most viewed (which indicate what services are preferred by users, what kind of information they look for), how many users visited the website again, the referrer or how the users got to the site (directly, by entering the address in the address bar of the browser, by searching with a search engine, by following a link from another website), the country where the user opened the site from.

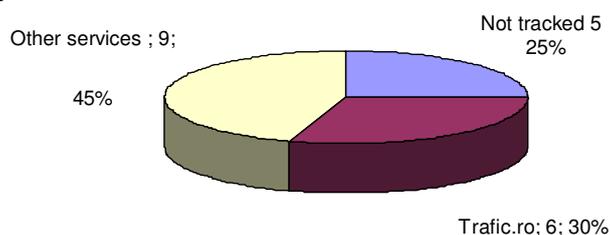
The district libraries that answered the questionnaire monitor the traffic on their website differently:

a) 6 of them (Argeş, Braşov, Dolj, Maramureş, Neamţ, Vâlcea) are registered on trafic.ro, a service that provides an analysis of the websites from the perspective of the number of displays, which consists of 2 sections: Ranking - which orders the sites based on how many visitors they had and Tracking (or Counter) - which analyses the traffic, the profile of the users

(the countries they are from, what browsers they're using etc.) and the way the website is promoted (the referrer analysis).

b) 9 libraries (Cluj, Dâmbovița, Galați, Harghita, Mureș, Sălaj, Satu Mare, Suceava, Vrancea) use other free traffic monitoring services (Webalizer, Free Hit Counter, Statcounter)

c) 5 district libraries (Constanța, Iași, Sibiu, Timișoara, Vaslui) do not monitor the traffic on their website, and the number of users that visit the webpage is only estimated.



Traffic tracking on district libraries' homepages

Monitoring the traffic on similar webpages (other libraries' webpages) can be a valuable indicator for the marketing activity of a library. It's obvious that, if the traffic on a library's websites has decreased, the users are no longer satisfied and the site is no longer updated or the quality of the services or information are no more relevant to them.

Question 6. Which library services do you intend to promote on the website?

The services that are promoted on the websites of the district libraries are:

1. Traditional services - the majority of the libraries mentioned them;
2. Information about the cultural events that take place in the library;
3. General information about opening hours, collections and information of local interest;
4. New services, available in the virtual environment : e-mail reference, links, databases;
5. Online catalogue;
6. The list of new acquisitions.

Except for these services, promoted by the majority of libraries, there are some other original services. The Harghita District Library wants to promote on its webpage the interlibrary loan and its online catalogue will contain data from the catalogues of other public libraries in the district.

Also, they take into consideration the possibility of making reservations or even loaning books online. This service is already functional on the website of the District Library of Cluj, where they intend to offer the user some more options: the possibility to view his or her personal identification record, the history of the loans one makes or the possibility to send informations about a certain book by e-mail.

The webpage of the Neamț District Library promotes the “Gheorghe Iacomi” Touring Information Centre because “we consider that we should emphasize the distinctive resources of our region and the way we can make them available.”(Cristina Catană)

The websites of the district libraries still have an informative purpose because they focus on presenting their traditional services, their collections and they are less interactive, dynamic, client-oriented. That’s why the number of services available only online is so small.

Question 7. Which of the services that are available online are most frequently used?

Most answers (55 %) show that the most frequently used service on the website is searching in the online catalogue. The possibility to access the online catalogue directly on the homepage reduces some costs like the effort one makes to look up in the traditional catalogue, and this makes the library services more accessible.

The most frequently used service on the webpage of the Cluj District Library is the one that offers access to external resources. On the homepage of Dâmbovița District Library users prefer the service that offers access to normative documents (legislation). On the Galați District Library’s website the most frequently used services are: the Questions and Answers Section, the Internet Resources Section, the database and the Info-Guide (factual informations - addresses, telephone numbers - from the main localities in the district).

Question 8. How often is the information on your website updated?

The answers show the fact that, generally, the district libraries update their homepage only when there is something new to announce to their users. But they do not specify what they mean by these news. There are some libraries that show a constant interest for updating their homepage, even daily or weekly.

The district libraries of Constanța, Galați, Iași and Mureș update the homepage daily, those in Brașov, Dolj and Neamț weekly and the website of the Argeș district library is updated monthly. In Vrancea, the website is

updated quarterly and in Harghita and Vâlcea half-yearly. In Sălaj, the website is updated annually.

The old homepage of the Timișoara district library is no longer updated because a new version was under construction at the time I conducted the study.

Question 9. Do you have a long/medium term project to develop the homepage of your library?

It's not enough to develop a webpage because other libraries have already done it. For the site to reach its maximum potential to promote the library it has to be permanently updated, especially because the information technology is extremely dynamic. What seemed to be the latest service or graphic design, could be obsolete only few months later.

90% of the district libraries that answered the questionnaire (18 of 20) say that they do not have long or medium term projects for developing their website. Only 2 libraries ("G. T. Kirileanu" District Library of Neamț and "Antim Ivireanul" district library of Vâlcea) do not have such projects, but their arguments are different.

Cristina Catană from the Neamț district library said they do not have such strategy because "the field has such an impressive dynamics that any project done now could seem ridiculous three years from now on. Our strategy is to keep up with anything that's new." In Vâlcea, this situation is caused by lack of funds.

The Argeș district library wishes to insert new modules in the homepage, so that users can contact them easier and to promote new, interesting services to attract users.

In Cluj, the project of developing the site is planned for a medium period "because the technology changes very quickly and a long term strategy would be totally out-dated." (Sorina Stanca)

The Dâmbovița District Library has a long term plan to develop their website, which includes the possibility to view the bibliographic record in an online catalogue, static or dynamic.

The plan to develop the homepage of the Dolj District Library includes:

- developing the online catalogue;
- developing the online service "Ask a librarian";
- online reservation of documents;
- posting electronic resources on the homepage;
- online local and european information;
- developing a catalogue of local personalities.

The plans to develop the website of the Maramureş district library include the possibility that the user could visit the library virtually and the improvement of existing services. The Mureş district library wants to promote the library's cultural activities, the e-mail reference service and to develop versions of the site in Hungarian and English.

The project to develop the website of the Harghita district library includes making a collective online catalogue. At the moment, the catalogue contains only data from the district library of Harghita, that covers the period between 2003 and 2005, but they want to develop their database and upgrade it with records from other public libraries in the district.

The plans of the Timiş district library, whose homepage is still under construction, include:

- Developing a forum;
- Developing a virtual library: at the moment, they're working to convert some old newspapers in electronic format, which will be available online soon. They're also converting books published by the bibliographic department and some books whose copyright owners have agreed to make them available online;
- Online access to the catalogue;
- Developind an Art Section, where the users could download or listen to music from the library's collections online.

Question 10. How useful do you think the website is for the marketing activity and what are the advantages it offers to the library and its users?

Victor Petrescu, the director of the "Ion Heliade Radulescu" District Library of Dâmboviţa considers the homepage " a useful instrument to increase the number of users and to improve the circulation of documents."

"It's very useful in combination with other instruments of promotion", considers Sorina Stanca (Cluj district library). The website is only one way to bring the library to the public's attention, but it has to be associated with other instruments.

Vasilica Anghel (Dolj District Library) considers that the homepage represents a "fast, modern and efficient way to promote the activity of the library. Along with the other new electronic services, the website is an important way to inform the users and communicate with them. It offers the possibility to inform the users about the events in the library and the new acquisitions."

Other opinions highlight the fact that "the presence on the Internet is almost compulsory in the present context. Nowadays, if you're not on the

Internet you don't exist. The homepage is very important for promoting the library. The advantage is that you it can be visited any time and, practically, from any place, but, in order to achieve this, you must have a good homepage, which should contain the most recent information. We try to reach this level.”(Kis Eva, Harghita District Library)

“Because of the progress of the web/multimedia technology, the libraries must synchronize with it. The majority of libraries have started to develop their own websites, so it has become almost “fashionable”, thinks Alexandru Iovanovici (Timiș District Library).

The importance of the webpage is considered “vital” by Dan Păun (Sibiu District Library) “if we think about the database and the fact that in the next period the online catalogue will be the only resource to look for the bibliographic record of a book, because the traditional catalogue won't be used anymore.”

Liviu Iulian Dediu (District Library of Galați) considers that some of the advantages of a webpage are: “it is a way to improve the internal communication and to increase the transparency in implementing the policies and the decisions of the library, delivering services that are more convenient for our users, implementing new services which expand the capacity of delivering traditional services (like interlibrary loan).”

Cristina Catana (Neamț District Library) links the advantages of using the webpage as a marketing instrument to the fact that libraries are starting to feel the pressure of a competitive market: “Developing a homepage is as useful as any other way to promote our services in a more and more competitive environment - the information supply services. As long as we realize that we mustn't keep on acting as if we were the supplier on this market, we must do what any other actor on this market would do. The webpage is only partially useful for our users. It will be more useful when library's catalogue will be available online.”

“The homepage of an institution is a visiting card of the library. I consider the existence of a website that presents and promotes our services essential because it is a convenient means of communication, available 24 hours a day; it is a channel of communication, opened to information delivery and efficient dialogue; its costs are relatively low compared to other means of promotion. From the user's point of view, I consider that they save time and can get information that is relevant to them (it brings a certain growth of the “quality of life”), considers Mihaela Voinicu, assistant director of the Argeș district library.

As a conclusion, Valentin Smedescu from Vâlcea district library says that: “the promotion of a library's activity on one or more websites it'a

not only useful, it's ESSENTIAL. It's so important that I consider it should be mandatory by the Law of Libraries. Those libraries that do not have webpages, practically, don't exist, they're only "players" in the "district league" of the libraries."

Notes

- (1) <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=849/> accesat 2 februarie 2006
- (2) <http://www.jhemans.powerup.com.au/webdesigns/default.htm> / accesat 2 februarie 2006
- (3) HAIG, Matt. Manual de e-marketing. București: Rentrop&Straton, 2005, p. 27