The Changing Role of the Museum Webmaster:

Past, Present, and Future

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- 21 Semi-Structured Interviews with "Information Professionals" currently working in museums.

- Qualitative Data Analysis using Grounded Theory Methodologies

- Goal was to Develop a Conceptual Framework for evaluating their "Information Literacy" Skills.

Participant Demographics

- 21 participants from 17 different museums.

- Museums including cultural heritage, science, natural history, art, and children's museums.

- All "information professionals," but varied in technical skills and expertise.

- Ranged from 1½ to 30 years of museum experience.

- 15 of 21 were either webmasters or worked closely with webmasters on a daily basis.

Raised Interesting Questions...

- What skills does the webmaster need?

- How do they keep current with changing technologies?

- Where is the webmaster's place in the museum?

- What does it mean to be a webmaster in a museum today?

Four Main Issues

- New Skills & Responsibilities

- Changes in Attitude & Shifting Job Requirements

- Constantly Changing Expectations & New Demands

- Meeting User Needs as Information Professionals

New Skills/Responsibilities

- "As webmaster I have to manage the flow of information from server to workstation, managing and coordinating the review policies and review committees. I also have to do some development for our museum systems. I have to manage our collections information system as it relates to approved web data from that system. I have to pay attention to administrative tasks, security rules set forth [by the IT office], and I have to do periodic system administration on servers. I have to test products, review products. I sit on several working groups for product assessment [including] digital asset management systems, web content management systems, collections information systems, and those sots of things."

Attitude Shifts

- "You know we really thought in terms of HTML in the beginning, very simple webpages that didn't involve any scripting. They weren't really relying on dynamic content. [Now] we've really stretched that to the point where that same medium is really behaving more like a set of applications. It's gotten far more complex. That was around before, but what needed to happen was an attitude shift. We really needed to start thinking about how can we make this medium really serve the needs of the entire staff."

New Demands/Expectations

- "Five years ago, we went around looking for people to put things on the website, now we have a list that reaches out almost a year [... back then] the time horizon for a new project was about two weeks. Now we're looking at about a year. If you came to me with a brand new idea, and we thought it was a perfectly good idea, we might get to it in a year."

- "Design is becoming less and less of the powerhouse it was in the early days of the web [...] those skills are less important than the overall architecting of the website, which is the much harder skill. And there are not many information architects, unfortunately."

Meeting User Needs

- "You need to be able to receive the requirements given to you and be able to query and find out in more detail what the real requirements are. A lot of time people think they are telling you what they need, but you need to be able to probe it to find out really what's underneath that. I think the requirements gathering for specific needs in the most challenging part of any information job."

So what?

- The Museum Webmaster: Past, Present, and Future

- Changing expectations reflect new needs/demands

- Despite best efforts/studies, no good understanding of needs of online visitors to museum websites.

- This will have disastrous consequences.

So what? (part 2)

- Not knowing user needs means not meeting those needs.

- Projects that don't meet users' needs reflect wasted time, money, and effort.

- Users whose needs are not met will become upset and alienated and angry at the museum.

- What is the solution?

User Advocacy

- The Museum Webmaster is already developing the user advocacy skills & responsibilities necessary to understand the users' needs and argue for the users' best interests.

- The Museum Webmaster needs our support & encouragement to ensure user needs are met.

- The Museum Webmaster must become the user-centered mediator between the museum and its online users.