
WWW: What do Researchers Want?

Summary of 44 Responses to an E-mail Survey February-March, 1995

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Introduction

During February, 1995, I distributed a brief survey, "WWW: What do Researchers Want?", to approximately thirty history and other listserves. Others were approached, but not all allow non-subscribers to use their lists. A single "reminder" e-mailing was sent in March. Each distribution generated just over 20 responses, for a total of 46. All responses were received electronically.

In brief, researchers want clear guides to collections, supplementary information about the institution and its mission, and access information: rules for copying; mail, phone, e-mail information. They are far less interested in "cute" sample images (the olde map or photo) or sample text of selected collections. Parochial items such as organizational structure or exhibits and upcoming events are clearly the lowest priorities among those listed.

Researchers most highly value "subject oriented keywords pointing to related collections," and "detailed descriptions" and "finding aids" for major collections. Next, they want to know the ways and means of access: rules about the cost and availability of copies, both traditional (mail, phone) and e-mail contact information.

After the basics, and to get a view of the institution's possibilities, researchers want 1) listings of collections by genre, 2) lists of guides, pamphlets, and other publications, supported by 3) reference room hours and procedures, and 4) a general description of the institution's holdings and mission. Following closely are interactive needs: the ability to leave messages for the staff and to find out "What's new?"

While given "some importance," image databases of photos and maps were deemed slightly less useful than the proposed textual databases, which also were not highly sought after. Selected sample items, by both typical content and format, were viewed unfavorably by one-third of the respondents.

Internal and local items characterized by "organizational structure" and "upcoming events" received rather negative reviews. Current research listserv members find little interest in genealogical holdings, but this may say more about the respondents and the current availability of technology than about the potential broad interest in this information.

The Detailed Responses: an Analysis

Respondents were asked to rank the proposed features as *Very Important* (V), *Important* (I), *Some Value* (S), *Not Important* (N), or *Forget it* (F). The first three columns at the right below display the percentage of responses to the two lowest ratings (FN), the middle (S), and the highest ratings (IV). (Rounded percents may not add to 100.)

The next column reflects the average of all responses, with *Very Important* coded as 4; *Important*, 3; *Some Value*, 2; *Not Important*, 1; and *Forget it* as 0. The ranking of average scores sometimes differs from the order of the highest ratings because of 1) the varying portion of respondents choosing "*Very Important*, *Important*, etc. as their selections, and 2) the fact that a few respondents did not respond to all items.

The final column notes the standard deviation from the mean of all responses. The lower the number, the greater cohesion among respondents, with a tendency to cluster about one of the five choices. Standard deviations ranged from .68 to 1.11.

Highest Rated Features

The most desirable features center around three themes: collections level descriptions, availability of copies, and contact information. While "subject oriented keywords" were most valuable, "detailed descriptions" and "finding aids" of major collections were highly regarded. Rules concerning the cost and availability of copies ranked second overall, while requirements to have both traditional (mail, phone) and e-mail contact information were equally valued as high priorities. All features in this group had average scores tightly clustered from 3.2 through 3.4. Except for the "mailing, location," item, they also had relatively low standard deviations. Basically, these features are highly rated, with over 80% endorsement as

Important or *Very Important*, and represent the relatively uniform opinion of researcher respondents.

Proposed Feature	Percent				
	FN	S	IV	Av	SD
9. Subject oriented keywords pointing to related collections	2	9	89	3.2	.78
4. Availability, cost, restrictions regarding copies of records	0	12	88	3.3	.68
8. Detailed description of major collections	2	11	86	3.4	.69
19. Finding aids for major collections	7	7	86	3.3	.79
2. E-mail addresses of site and key staff/departments	2	16	82	3.4	.75
1. Mailing address, location, telephone number of the site	2	16	82	3.3	.95

Table 1

Majority Supported Features

After a fairly clear break of 15 percent in the *Important/Very Important* ratings, the following appear to be “helpful, supplemental” features. These features all rank from 3.0 (*Important*) to 2.5 (*Important/Some Value*).

To get a view of the institution’s possibilities, researchers want 1) listings of collections by genre, 2) lists of guides, pamphlets, and other publications, supported by 3) reference room hours and procedures, and 4) a general description of the institution’s holdings and mission. At 3.0 and 2.9, these essentially rate *Important* on average.

Following closely are interactive needs: the ability to leave messages for the staff and to find out “What’s new?”

Rather lower in this group’s ranking (and close in content and rank to the first two features in the next section) are requests for textual databases describing photographic and cartographic holdings publications articulate a cluster of desirable features.

Proposed Feature	Percent				
	FN	S	IV	Av	SD
21. List of collections by genre: text, map, photo, video, audio	9	23	67	3.0	.93
6. List of guides, pamphlets and other publications	0	34	66	3.0	.85
14. Ability to leave message for archives staff	5	30	65	2.8	.81
20. What New? (acquisitions, finding aids)	9	29	64	2.8	.95
5. Reference Room hours, procedures, rules	16	18	66	2.9	1.02
7. General description of holdings and mission - 1-2 pages	5	36	59	2.9	.99
15. Database of textual description of photographs	20	25	55	2.5	.96
16. Database of textual description of maps	20	25	55	2.5	.96

Table 2

Lowest Rated Features

The final six features had no majority expression of combined *Important/Very Important* responses. All rank below 2.5 on average and cluster around the *Some Value* rating of 2.0.

Image databases of photos and maps were deemed slightly less useful than the proposed textual databases in the previous section, though some comments indicated a “nice, but utopian” view of the proposition. Selected sample items, by both typical content and format, were viewed unfavorably by a third of the respondents.

Internal and local items characterized by “organizational structure” and “upcoming events” received rather negative reviews. Interestingly, while the overall ranking of these two items is similar, the standard deviation reveals virtual consensus (SD=.68) on the limited value of “exhibits, upcoming events,” but a wide disparity of views (SD=1.11) on the value of organizational structure information.

Current research listserv members find little interest in genealogical holdings, but this may say more about the respondents and the current availability of technology than about the potential broad interest in this information.

Proposed Feature	Percent				
	FN	S	IV	Av	SD
17. Image database of photographs	20	34	45	2.4	.87
18. Image database of maps	20	39	41	2.4	.87
3. Description of organizational structure.	32	30	39	2.2	1.11
10. Selected sample items, major collections, typical content	32	43	25	1.9	.91
12. Genealogy holdings summary	32	43	25	2.0	.87
11. Selected sample items, major collections, typical format	34	43	23	1.9	.91
13. Exhibits, upcoming events	27	64	9	1.8	.73

Table 3

Ranking by Average Rating

In yet another arrangement of responses, this time by average rating, similar conclusions may be drawn.

3.5	<i>Important to Very Important</i>	
3.4		Detailed descriptions / E-mail addresses
3.3		Info about copies/Major finding aids/Postal mail, location, phone
3.2		Subject oriented keyword searches
3.1		
3.0	<i>Important</i>	List of guides, publications / List of collections by genre
2.9		Reference room hours, rules / General holdings, mission
2.8		Leave messages for staff / What's new?
2.7		
2.6		
2.5	<i>Some Value to Important</i>	Databases of textual description: photographs and maps
2.4		Image databases of photographs and maps
2.3		
2.2		Description of organizational structure
2.1		
2.0	<i>Some Value</i>	Genealogy holdings: summary
1.9		Selected sample items indicating typical format and content
1.8		Exhibits, upcoming events
1.7		
1.6		
1.5	<i>Not Important to Some Value</i>	

Table 4

The Survey as Sent

Sorry for duplications. This survey has been posted to over 30 history lists. I have not posted to lists focusing on non-North American history. Feel free to post to other lists you think appropriate. Please respond by February 24th. Thanks.

WHAT DO RESEARCHERS WANT TO KNOW FROM ARCHIVAL SITES ESPECIALLY REGARDING WWW DESIGN?

The Maine State Archives is about to establish a WWW site and series of "pages." The last few months have seen an explosion in this area. While we have reviewed many of the new sites, we wonder "What do researchers want to know?" Here's your chance! I will post this survey's results on the Archives Listserv and anywhere else it may be helpful. Your responses may apply to GOPHER design as well. Keep in mind that not all wishes are granted - if everything is "very important" then

Please reply to ME - hendersn@saturn.caps.maine.edu -and NOT to the list on which this is posted!

Archives WWW Design Survey

How important are the following in an archival electronic information site?

(V)ery important (I)mportant (S)ome value (N)ot important (F)orget it!

1. Mailing address, location, telephone number of the site
2. E-mail addresses of site and key staff/departments
3. Description of organizational structure.
4. Availability, cost, restrictions regarding copies of records
5. Reference Room hours, procedures, rules
6. List of guides, pamphlets and other publications by the site, including ordering info
7. General description of holdings and mission - 1-2 pages
8. Detailed description of major collections: title, inclusive dates, summary, scope
9. Subject oriented keywords pointing to related collections
10. Selected sample items from major collections indicating typical content
11. Selected sample items from major collections showing typical format through displayed images
12. Genealogy holdings summary
13. Exhibits, upcoming events
14. Ability to leave message for archives staff
15. Database of textual description of photographs
16. Database of textual description of maps
17. Image database of photographs
18. Image database of maps
20. Finding aids for major collections
21. What New? (acquisitions, finding aids)
22. List of collections by genre: text, maps, photographs, video, audio

Places you have been (virtually), like, and why: _____

Additional comments, suggestions: _____

THANKS. PLEASE RESPOND BY FEBRUARY 24 (later MARCH) TO hendersn@saturn.caps.maine.edu

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Comments from Respondents:

Places you have been (virtually), like, and why:

I use Congress and related gophers to collect data and the text of documents and bills as well as information of votes. Some servers provide campaign expenditure data which is useful to me. I sometimes connect with electronic collections (e.g. Guttenburg project). So the availability of raw and secondary data is useful to scholars like myself. A second useful area involves access to catalogues and directories. Often, it is sufficient to know that a document exists and what the source is without actually viewing the document. Similarly, directories of various types are useful.

Still exploring, but I liked the Oregon State University Site WPA Exhibit, the Cornell exhibit, and see incredible value to the Johns Hopkins Gopher site.

U. of Michigan MLInk (gopher://mlink.hh.lib.umich.edu/) - lots of information and links to other sources, sensibly arranged and easily accessed.

UKANS- HISTORY research

Thomas, because you can go back and forth in your searches — nice menuing. The Star Trek site at Paramount has some nice moving around tools, too:

Places with a good, thought out design, graphics that transfer quickly or very few graphics at all.

Additional Comments - Planning:

I think it will be important to think through the various audiences you want to reach—not only now, but in the future. [Perhaps a review of the site's (organization's) mission statement would be helpful.] The site should be designed with that (those) audience(s) in mind, and people need to recognize that one structure may not meet the needs of all audiences or users. Having said that, let me add that collecting survey information from somewhat experienced web users is one good source of information. Another source might be focus groups with intended users. Also, if funds permit, you could draft a basic design, set up some pilot tests with various groups of intended users (librarians, teachers, students, others). Then watch what they do. See what they like and don't like. What's confusing and what seems to flow more naturally, etc. Then debrief through focus group interviews

The reason I think images have only limited importance is a) some people are still using text-based readers, b) images take a really long time to load, c) even at their best, you can't always tell if an image is what you want. This is especially true for maps. Also, if you are going to have messaging for staff, you need to have a really reliable system of responding. An explanation of the searching tools would be nice.

I would say that indexing and maybe full text of various state publications, periodicals, newsletters, and even local newspapers would be very helpful to many researchers. If full text is available I would say that indexing is unnecessary. Including local newspapers would be extremely helpful as I am sure you know that national newspapers tend to not cover Maine very much or very thoroughly. This would provide a gold mine for people who are doing research on Maine.

Search & preview capabilities should be maximized.

15-18. I am a bit confused on this. If you mean all photographs and maps, then that would be wonderful. Many researchers then would not even need to travel to a particular site. But that would also be a massive task for the people at a given site and could demand immense computer memory.

If, on the other hand, you mean only certain photographs and maps, would that be any different from what you mean in #10 and 11?

Or, do you mean detailed descriptions of the "collections" of photographs and maps in a given archival site, and if so, would that be much different from what you mean in #8?

Tourist information—hours, locations, costs, restrictions—are not necessary to me as a research scholar. I do need to know what you have. I may need to search your holdings by any word or combination of words in order to know whether I need to ask about hours and restrictions. Even more wonderful, would be the ability to scan texts to determine the value of documents.