



The Making of My Own

► LINDA W. BRAUN

Café

This is the story of a regional library system that decided to go to the aid of member libraries in order to serve teens better. It's a story in which teens had input into a Web design process. It's a story in which sometimes tough decisions had to be made. It's the story of My Own Café.

More than two years ago, the Southeast Massachusetts Regional Library System (SEMLS) realized that member libraries did not have the financial or staff resources to create Web spaces that meet the needs of teens. They looked at sites such as **Bolt** and **Alloy** and knew that there was no way that their libraries could develop anything of that caliber. They also knew that libraries must create strong Web presences for teens in order to guarantee successful access and use of information resources.

SEMLS decided to apply for a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant to obtain funding for a library teen portal. The portal would be designed by a professional design firm and the content of the site would be determined by a group of teen and librarian advisors.

Funding for the project came through in the fall of 2004. I was hired as project manager. In the winter of 2005, at the first meeting of teen and librarian advisors, everyone talked about all the things that they wanted to have in a portal. Their wish list formed the foundation for both the hiring of a professional design firm and the content of the site. Included in the wish list was everything from personal blog space to online polls, from instant messaging (IM) to a place to trade prom dresses.

It was clear that teens wanted a site where they could

communicate with others who lived nearby. Acknowledging that they could communicate with teens around the world via e-mail, chat, instant messaging, and so on, the teens also said that they wished they had a way to talk with teens online in communities in southeastern Massachusetts. They realized that it was easier to talk online to someone in a faraway town than to someone in the town next door.

At this early meeting, teens made it clear that they wanted to be involved in the maintenance of the site through moderation of discussion boards, adding different pieces of content, and so on. Several mentioned that they already were responsible for moderating discussion forums on other sites.

Because teen participation was a key aspect of this project, SEMLS knew that they needed to involve teens from the advisory group in the hiring of the professional design firm that would create the look, feel, and technology of the site. Along with sending out Requests for Proposals (RFPs) to design companies, SEMLS invited interested firms to attend an informational session. Only one teen was able to attend this meeting, but she participated fully in asking questions of the designers. She also answered their questions about what she thought the site should do and be. This teen representative felt very comfortable with Pixel Bridge, Inc., the firm that was hired. She was certain that she could work with them and they could work with her.

SURVEYING LOCAL TEENS' INTERNET USE

After Pixel Bridge started on the project, SEMLS involved more teens. An online survey about use of the library and the Internet was completed by more than 300 high school students in the area. In most cases, these teens submitted surveys after hearing about it from their school librarians. The survey was an excellent way to check assumptions about teens held by the designers and SEMLS. Its interesting findings include:

- When asked what they most frequently use the Internet for, 45.8 percent of the respondents answered that they talk to others using e-mail, chat, IM, etc. The next highest response was 27 percent of the teens who said they use the 'Net for entertainment purposes such as playing games and listening to music.

- Favorite Web sites included **Live Journal**; **My Space**; and sites related to specific sports (and teams), TV shows, and movies.
- When asked what they would like to see on a library Web site, teens chose downloadable music, instant messaging, games, local information, and college information as most highly desirable.



TOUGH DECISIONS

The next sets of decisions that SEMLS and its advisors had to make were far from simple. Sometimes SEMLS accepted items that the teens said were necessary. Sometimes that just wasn't possible. Decisions had to be made about the logo, the name, the look and feel, and site registration. For example:

- **The site name:** During a brainstorming session with advisors, a list of possible site names was generated. SEMLS invited teens to vote for their favorite names on its Web site. Unfortunately a clear winner never emerged, but there was a sense of consensus around one name, **My Own Café**. When SEMLS discovered that the domain was available, the name was sealed, the domain was purchased, and **My Own Café** was born.

designers submitted several logo options for the site. The librarian advisors all gravitated to one set of choices; the teens preferred another. SEMLS decided to go with the teen choice, a logo with interlocking shapes and the site name in a popular shade of green. It was a smart move. The site's logo works perfectly. Teens knew what made the best design choice for the audience and purpose of the site, and SEMLS listened.

- **The logo design:** The designers submitted several logo options for the site. The librarian advisors all gravitated to one set of choices; the teens preferred another. SEMLS decided to go with the teen choice, a logo with interlocking shapes and the site name in a popular shade of green. It was a smart move. The site's logo works perfectly. Teens knew what made the best design choice for the audience and purpose of the site, and SEMLS listened.
- **Access to the site:** This decision was one of the toughest. From the start, SEMLS wanted teens to register for the site so they could connect easily to catalogs and databases. Their overarching concept was that if a teen enters a library card number to register for **My Own Café**, during future logins that teen is automatically authenticated for use of local and state library resources. Around this goal, policy questions had to be addressed. Should a teen be able to register for the site even if she doesn't have a library card? If she is required to have a library card number in order to register, but doesn't have one, will this requirement turn that teen away from the site forever? Exactly what parts of the site—beyond the databases—would require login? These questions were extremely difficult to answer. They forced the

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project team to go over the purpose and audience for the site again and again.

Also important to consider was the impact of the registration decision on librarians working with teens who would be using and administering the site. SEMLS needed to make sure that once the site was available, librarians would feel comfortable advertising it to teens and working with teens on maintaining the content. After many discussions, SEMLS decided to require all teens to enter a library card number as part of the registration process. For teens who don't have cards, the registration form includes a link to information about how to get a library card.

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• **Teen safety:** The team working on *My Own Café*, along with librarians who heard about the project, wondered repeatedly about teen safety. They were concerned as to whether or not the communications technologies implemented at the site would leave teens open to dangerous situations. Teens can post book and music reviews and local bands can submit music to the site so that other teens can download it. When a teen registers, she can upload an avatar—which can be a personal photo. All these features made librarians nervous about teen safety. They wondered about the implications of uploading personal images and downloading music from independent musicians.

At one virtual meeting with the teen advisors, SEMLS addressed the question of safety. Well aware of the issues, the teens offered useful suggestions for how to handle such concerns. The teens were clear about what constitutes appropriate behavior and even suggested the incorporation of safety tips on the site. SEMLS integrated teens' safety suggestions into *My Own Café*.

• **Site content:** Teens said that they would like the site to incorporate an incredible number of fun, cool, interesting, and useful features. All their ideas were presented to Pixel Bridge. Everyone quickly realized that it wasn't going to be possible to

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include everything from the teen advisors' wish list. There wasn't enough money. There wasn't enough time. The technology doesn't exist for some of the big ideas. Ultimately the teens

understood that content decisions had to be made. They also knew that SEMLS had listened to what they had to say and was able to incorporate many of their ideas into the site. And there is the possibility of a second phase in the project, when some of the teens' recommendations might be reconsidered.

THE TRUE TEST OF SUCCESS

The project worked out in much the way that SEMLS intended, although it was more difficult in some instances than expected. A professionally designed site for teens now exists in southeastern Massachusetts. It provides access to library resources as well as cool stuff. SEMLS expects that the downloadable music from local musicians along with entertainment, sports, and news feeds will be highlights of the site. The music and feeds provide a way that *My Own Café* can be constantly changing without anyone having to create new content.

A major goal of the project was to involve teens in the process. Although teen participation wasn't as high as the library system had hoped, teens were a key part of some major decisions and continue to be involved in the project.

The true test of success came when the teen who was most involved in the site's development recently saw *My Own Café* at a training session about its administrative features, which teens and librarians will use to update and maintain site content. She had been vocal about the types of content that the site should include and what its look and feel should be. When she gave the site a positive review, all the planners cheered their success.

Like teens (or librarians) with local library cards, VOYA readers who use the login below at <http://www.myowncafe.org> can read and submit reviews, download music, and try out this professionally designed site in which teens have a voice and an influence.

User name: voya

Password: myoc ■

Sites Mentioned

Alloy <http://www.alloy.com>

Bolt <http://www.bolt.com>

Live Journal <http://www.livejournal.com>

My Own Café <http://www.myowncafe.org>

My Space <http://www.myspace.com>

Pixel Bridge Inc <http://www.pixelbridge.com>

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