

Small Museum Websites

The best way to see common problems in a small museum website is to do a walkthrough. I chose literally the first Australian small museum I came across in Collections Australia. (Nothing personal, guys. Let me know when you fix your site, OK?)

Come on a tour of the **Age of Fishes Museum**, Canowindra, NSW...

<http://www.ageoffishes.org.au> (as of November 2007)

Three full-time staff plus two dozen volunteers. A new building constructed in 2001, and the site established shortly after, although it's hard to tell. There's also a description at Collections Australia: <http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/org/810/about/>

Splash screen

- Splash screens are a bit passé: why ask your visitors to sit through a picture or an animation?
- The grubbiness around the graphic shows it's a badly-compressed JPEG.
- The most prominent element on the page encourages you to click to go somewhere else, not into the site. Why is there tourist information on splash screen at all? Let them make their own website. There are 5 links on the page, all sending you somewhere else: how is this a Welcome page? And why does the (not very skilled) web designer get a free plug?
- One shouldn't tell people to go get a bigger screen (and we all have bigger screens than this, anyway); make the layout flexible enough to work for everyone. Uses frames to make the invariant content on later pages—frames are clunky and best avoided. Runs Java “for visual effects”: fancy programming time could have been better spent on basic site functionality. And you need to download Quicktime and Flash (it doesn't check to see if you already have—almost everyone has)
- “Untitled” typo text on bottom: so the site hasn't been proofed since it was erected.
- What is the overall impression created by the “Welcome” page? Does it encourage us to enter the site? Does it give us confidence in the museum's professionalism and scholarship?

Welcome page (again)

- This has a link to the Welcome page (which one? This one, it turns out). Links need to indicate where you are on the site, because visitors can come from anywhere. Pages shouldn't link to themselves. And links should indicate if you've already visited the page—these don't.
- My first visit, I got “Sorry, your browser doesn't support Java” at the top of the screen—this was using Explorer on Windows, a pretty typical setup. On my Mac, the Java box displays but doesn't run. Let the site degrade gracefully, and only show the fancy stuff if the visitor can see it.
- Web text needs particular attention to typography. These are hyphens, not dashes, and the line lengths not controlled, which will look silly on big screens.
- The content is a bit too much “marketing” bumf; the needless verbiage could be cut by half. If the fishes are so beautiful, shouldn't we be looking at one right now? Instead of another cruddy JPEG with shoddy typography. A string of sponsors along the front always looks a bit nasty, and the wrapping around is inelegant.
- What's the logo for Age of Fishes? This fish, the one in the top corner, or the slightly-nicer typography on the previous page?
- The opening hours are incomplete: which public holidays, exactly?

About Us. <--- note superfluous full stop

- Rather small pictures. Why no picture of this unique building?
- More typos; missing apostrophes, incorrect dashes.
- When was this page written? What are the “next few years”? How is the fundraising going, and could museum visitors help? Visitors are reassured by knowing the site is live and constantly updated.
- Inelegant phone info, needlessly duplicated. And no live email? Don't put an email link on your page, but send visitors to a form—this cuts down on spam. But non-working text like this is the worst of both worlds.

Find Us

- Hours on Welcome page, address and contact info on About Us page and a map (and nothing else) on the Find Us page. What would a visitor print out to prepare for a visit? How about a higher-resolution, printer-friendly single page (even better, in US Letter and A4 sizes)?

- Where are the admission charges? \$5.50, \$3.30, and family \$16.50, according to Collections Australia. I presume they take all credit cards—they better say if they don't!
- Find Us has a cruddy map: why not use MapQuest, so visitors can get driving directions? At least show context and distances to cities like Sydney, and some indication of where the museum actually is, like a wee fish.

Life in the Devonian

- Another cruddy map; is this a Devonian map, with Sydney on it? And no caption on the picture. (And when was the Devonian, exactly? Were there dinosaurs?)
- Odd navigation: the link to species goes to the species page. But where are we now? Back to the Species Index sends us to the Discovery page (not the expected Species Index page). No “breadcrumbs”, no indicators in links list to tell us where we are. Go Back and Back, and the Visited color has been disabled, so we can't see where we've been. There's no link to just See Fishes; they're buried two clicks down. People will not view the pages in the order you want, and they'll come from Google, hopefully. So they have to know where everything is and where they are at all times.

Discovery

- A pointless link to Australian Museum. Don't link for the sake of linking, particularly to a generic welcome page visitors could find on their own.
- Picture is too small, and not annotated. Should be the centerpiece of the page.
- Species descriptions with no info; sending visitors there blind.

Species

- No picture of the special fossils anywhere!
- If there's a person and story associated with a name, show them. Rather than use a label Description, just *say*. Don't need taxonomic levels. More typos: species names should be in italics, freshwater unhyphenated, and paragraphs indented.
- Show this fish in context, and compare with picture of a modern one, or just a scale. Why not use the nice colored pictures as the logo? Can we see all the cool pictures together, to scale? Maybe click on the pictures, instead of just a list of species names? And who painted these, anyway? How do we know the colors? Don't need a Back to Species Index: either give a proper link in the sidebar, or let them use the back button.

Education

- The colour-in doesn't work with Java in Explorer. Why not just make printable PDFs (with a JPEG preview?) And the Secondary section is blank!
- There's good education info. But why no downloadable lesson plans, or masters for photocopying/printing? Why should the museum have to send these out? They're charging teachers for the worksheets, but making them photocopy! If there's a tension between hanging onto proprietary intellectual property, and giving everything away free, just let go.
- Booking form is NOT an online form, just one to fax or post!
- Why a special Back button? In IE, it took two clicks to work!

News and Events. / Downloads

- Blank! Under construction! Why even show them? What could you put here instead?

Links

- Why? Sponsors? Why are we being sent here: because we'd be interested in them, or because they paid money? What about the informational trust relationship? At least send people to the fish collections of these sites.

Virtual tour

- Mostly under construction. When will it be done? When do we check back? Why not just post some photos for now?
- The flash tour works OK; seems to just be exhibit labels in linear tour in a circle, with pictures too small to see. Is the message that visitors should drive to the museum for the “real” experience (and tough luck if you don't live in Oz, mate...)

What are the opportunities wasted here? Since the online visitor numbers will always dwarf the number than can physically come to Canowindra, why not make the site the main attraction? Excellent, high-resolution photos of every fossil. PDFs of every paper published on the fishes. Online discussion groups and even conferences for fish researchers. Make the site part of the network of researchers and fossil enthusiasts worldwide. The very least a museum can do is have tourist info and maybe the visual collection database online, But this is all most do, and so much more is possible. ■