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# Library Minisites: Organization & Effective Implementation

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## Library Minisites: Organization & Effective Implementation

By Dana Haugh, Stony Brook University

A minisite, as the name suggests, refers to a site that is miniature in size relative to its parent site. A minisite is generally a constituent of a larger website in that it exists as a supplementary element highlighting one specific aspect of a company or organization. Minisites can share a subdomain (e.g., <http://minisite.parent.com>), or a subdirectory (e.g., <http://parent.com/minisite>). For minisites that exist *outside* of their parent site, such as a digital exhibit or a freestanding product, there may not be a common domain, but the minisite likely links back to its parent. The term has its roots in the marketing industry, where large companies are known to employ minisites in order to target brands to specific demographics. This enables a company to maintain a centralized “parent” brand while customizing child brands for a product's intended audience. An example of this tactic can be found in The Nature's Bounty Co., a general wellness company based in New York. As of 2017, the company owns 19 different wellness brands, all with unique target audiences (<http://www.naturesbountyco.com/OurBrands>). The company's child brands cover everything from sports nutrition to family wellness, and their associated minisites are branded accordingly. For instance, their sports nutrition minisite targets male consumers and is replete with dark colors, bold text, and images of muscular men playing sports, while the family wellness brand's minisite is designed with a neutral color scheme and approachable interface. Both products are owned by the same company, but have different intended audiences. Minisites allow marketers the freedom to create a brand independent of the parent organization, one that speaks to specific audiences, which in turn maximizes the likelihood of a successful product. But how, and why, should this concept be applied to library websites?

### Using minisites in libraries

Library websites are notorious for inundating users with information. Institutions are often inclined to pack their websites with content (particularly on the homepage) to ensure users are immediately met with every resource and service available. As [Chow, Bridges, and Commander \(2014, p. 253\)](#) state, “websites have as little as 25–35 seconds to convince users that the information they are looking for is available,” which can create a sense of urgency to offer all options upfront. But flooding users with

resources and services can have adverse effects, particularly if the content is disorganized. Google's success can, in part, be attributed to its simplicity – one place to type and one place to click. “The visual cues offered to a user will explicitly influence what users perceive to be available and a match to what information they are looking for.” ([Chow, Bridges, & Commander, 2014](#), p. 255) A familiar layout, intuitive page structure, and specific calls to action are essential to the success of a library website. Introducing a minisite can help streamline a library website while also ensuring specific features, resources, events, or branches receive the dedicated attention they deserve. Possibly the most familiar type of library minisite is seen with Springshare's LibGuides. LibGuides is a Content Management System (CMS) specifically intended for libraries. Unlike other CMS platforms (Wordpress, Drupal, etc.), LibGuides is designed to support library features such as A-Z Database lists, librarian profiles, and FAQ databases. This makes the LibGuides platform a natural fit for libraries – some even use it as their website (for examples, see LibGuides Community: CMS as Website, <http://community.libguides.com/?action=5#/tab=site&filter=cms-as-website>). For those that need a more customizable web interface, or for those that must abide by strict template and format restrictions under a university-wide CMS, LibGuides can be used as a supplemental resource. Individual guides are essentially minisites. They generally have a navigation bar, a specific topic or focus, and a target audience. A guide can exist on its own, but makes more sense in relation to the library website. LibGuides offers a way to organize assets and deep-dive on subject resources without monopolizing valuable homepage space. A LibGuide is one of the most accessible types of minisites because almost everyone can create one with very little training (and a subscription to Springshare). Even without a Springshare subscription or the barriers of limited access or permissions for modifying the library website, there are other ways of exploring and implementing minisites for the library, discussed in the “Projects & Special Events” section below.

## Multiple branches

A library system with multiple branches is a common application for minisites. We often see multiple branch libraries in large university settings with diverse academic and research needs. However, large public library systems comprising dozens of locations, such as those in Brooklyn and Chicago, can also appreciate the advantages of branch-specific minisites.

If one is familiar with these types of aggregate library systems, it is understood that each branch forms its own identity, catering to the needs of the patrons it serves. Just as a child inherits basic traits from its parents, so, too, do minisites inherit similar styles and formats from their parent websites. However, a minisite also acts as a space where a branch can deviate from its parent, solely offering content that is useful to the patrons of that branch. For example, Stony Brook University Libraries' main website (<http://library.stonybrook.edu/>) features a minisite for both the Health Sciences Library (<http://library.stonybrook.edu/healthsciences/>) and the Southampton Library branch (<http://library.stonybrook.edu/southampton-library/>). Each branch serves a patron base with very specific needs. The Health Sciences Library minisite displays only health sciences-related resources and events, something the main library website would not be able to accommodate. Likewise, the Southampton Library minisite displays humanities-related resources, which are best suited to the community's needs. Customizing each minisite to reflect the most heavily used resources at each library ensures patrons are able to quickly locate the resources relevant to them. The main library website isn't able to do this, as it's designed to address the entire academic community and provide a broader scope of resources to suit the general campus's needs.

Though Stony Brook University Libraries minisites mimic their parent site with similar layouts and colors, this does not have to be the case. Cornell University Library allows its branch libraries to create minisites with their own personality, color scheme, and layout. Like Stony Brook University Libraries, Cornell Library's minisites highlight resources specific to those who use each branch. For instance, the Fine Arts Library minisite (<https://finearts.library.cornell.edu/>) displays databases and collections relevant to the Fine Arts, while the Engineering Library (<https://engineering.library.cornell.edu/>) shows only resources relevant to those conducting engineering research. Each of Cornell's 20 library minisites presents an identity unique to the branch and the patrons it serves.

## Projects and special events

Minisites are useful in showcasing projects and special events. Symposiums and other formal occasions may require more than just a landing page to house all of the information associated with the event. A minisite enables a library to create a space that's completely dedicated to the event, while embedding it within the library's overall brand. An example of this is Stony Brook University Libraries' 2016 Open Access Symposium minisite (<http://library.stonybrook.edu/scholarly-communication/open->

[access-symposium-2016/](#)). The symposium minisite is nested within the main library website but has its own logo, color scheme, and navigation menu. By developing a symposium minisite, the librarians were allowed more design freedoms as well as the ability to present a great deal of specific information in one centralized area. The symposium minisite, though nested within the main library website, streamlined event navigation without overcrowding the main website with a surplus of links.

Large-scale projects and programs are also great candidates for minisites. New York Public Library uses minisites for many of its peripheral projects, such as the NYPL Map Warper (<http://maps.nypl.org/warper/maps>). This minisite exists as a free-standing repository and digital alignment tool for thousands of historical maps of the United States. Users navigating to the website for the first time might not even realize the website is affiliated with NYPL were it not for the top banner identifying its NYPL parent. Like most minisites, the Map Warper discreetly links back to its parent site ([NYPL.org](http://nypl.org)), but visitors can navigate the minisite without interference from interlibrary loan buttons or other irrelevant information from the larger library system. This is a great example of how a minisite can specialize on one piece of a library's mission, and build it out in a way that doesn't disrupt the main library website's purpose.

Libraries with digital collections or online exhibitions may also find value in minisites. Harvard Library uses platforms such as Omeka to create minisites for some of its digital collections (<http://library.harvard.edu/digital-collections>). For example, the Colonial North American Project at Harvard University minisite (<http://colonialnorthamerican.library.harvard.edu/>) showcases an on-going digitization project of letters, images, and other documents relating to 17th and 18th century North America. Much like the NYPL Map Warper, the Colonial North American Project links back to its parent site in the top-most navigation bar, but the minisite functions entirely without external interference.

Another example is UNC at Chapel Hill's The Carolina Story virtual museum (<https://museum.unc.edu/intro>). This minisite (also on Omeka) details the university's history through a series of chronological exhibits in text and image format. It is only under "Credits" that we learn the minisite is a "child site" of UNC at Chapel Hill and the University Library websites.

NYPL Map Warper, the Colonial North American Project, and The Carolina Story all exist on their parent site's subdomain, generally in the convention of

[projectname].[parentsitename.edu/org]

which translates to

[subdomain].[domain name]

The Open Access Symposium website, on the other hand, is a subdirectory of the Stony Brook University Libraries website, and exists as a path at the end of the main site's domain name.

[library].[stonybrook.edu]/[scholarly-communication/open-access-symposium-2016/].

which translates to

[subdomain].[domain name]/[path].

(Technically, the SBU Libraries website can be considered a 'minisite' of the Stony Brook University website, though on a much more complex scale than what this article discusses.)

Many prefer the shortness of subdomains because they are easy to remember, while others prefer the simplicity of creating paths.

One can also have a minisite with a URL separate from its parent site. For example, East Hampton Public Library hosts an annual fundraising event called Authors Night; the event has a minisite and unique domain name (<http://authorsnight.org/>). This enables the East Hampton Public Library to create an entirely separate identity for the event, while still maintaining affiliation through promotional material. The scale of the event requires a dedicated minisite, but it still remains a product or 'child' of its maker (the library).

## Intranet

Another common use for minisites is a faculty/staff site. The term "intranet" is probably most familiar, but a dedicated staff website is a type of minisite made private. Again, this area only features content for its intended audience (generally staff or faculty members), eliminating the need to wade through less pertinent information. Oftentimes these minisites are behind login walls, preventing those without proper credentials from accessing sensitive information. Though a library intranet is usually less flashy than a public-facing site, its intent is the same: to deliver specific information to a specific population of users.

## Implementing minisites

The concept of a minisite and how it can augment a library website experience has been established, but there are a few considerations to keep in mind before deciding to utilize one in your own library. First and foremost, just because it's an option doesn't mean there's a need for it. Start by assessing your library's needs, surveying your user base, and determining where a minisite could be useful. The last thing anyone should do is create another barrier to information; sometimes minisites are not the best course of action. Minisites are a way to organize content and present information in a systematic fashion. They are meant to enhance a user's experience, not hinder it. A minisite is not a solution to poor website organization, so only consider implementing one if there's a demonstrated need for it. For instance, if users have trouble locating information, investigate why. Jargon such as "WorldCat" and "ILL" can confuse even the savviest library user, but more explanatory phrases such as "world-wide library catalog" or "request an item" can help patrons find what they need. Organize your main website based on a hierarchy that makes sense to everyone by using appropriate headings and categories (i.e., don't put your Strategic Plan under a tab labeled 'Research Resources'). Recognize the value of structuring and facilitating information retrieval on your main site first, and then dive into developing a specialized smaller site – if you need it. You may find that you don't need a minisite after all, but rather a website redesign.

If you do find an application for a minisite, remember to start small and offer information sparingly. By design, this site is a subset of a larger website, therefore it should include only what's necessary and relevant to the topic it's spotlighting. For instance, a minisite for an event doesn't require a link to your library's database list. Consider your minisite an opportunity to focus on only the most pertinent information; you have the opportunity to design and develop a semi-freestanding web presence without worrying about including *everything* you need on a main library website. Depending on the content, you may choose to stay 'on-brand' with colors, fonts, logos, and layout (similar to the parent site design). Creating a minisite that expands on a particular resource or method of research might warrant a strong connection to the parent site, accomplished through a similar design. For digital collections or branch libraries, you might explore a style that better fits the content. Free CMS platforms such as Weebly, Wordpress, and Drupal make it easy to experiment in a low stakes environment with plenty of templates from which to choose. If you're not sure where to start, take to the web for inspiration on how

other libraries are using minisites. Find what you like and what you dislike, and then develop your own minisite.

Remember to reach out to your patrons for feedback. Reception is a crucial aspect of development, so listen to what faculty, staff, students, and patrons are saying and try to develop your minisite accordingly. You're creating this resource for your patrons, after all, and if they don't find a need for it, they aren't going to use it.

Lastly, remember this powerful advice: "Success can be measured according to the website's purpose: to what extent does the website meet users' needs?" ([Kim, 2011](#), p.101). If you find there's value and an audience for a minisite, consider other areas where minisites might be useful. If the reception is poor, however, chalk it up to an interesting experiment, and move on to pursuing more effective implementations of information delivery.

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