

Link+ and Clear Entry Points Through Redesigned Navigation and Search

Sarah Sammis

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Jeremy W. Kemp

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San José State University

Abstract

Many libraries now participate in consortium interlibrary loan services to provide their patrons with greater access to materials. In Northern California and Nevada one of these services is Link+. Users of these interlibrary loan websites report difficulties finding materials. My analysis of the Link+ website found problems with the navigation: inconsistent usage and confusing text sizes, namely in the form of a secondary navigation which looks like primary navigation and primary navigation that is too small and removed from the secondary navigation to be easily seen when scanning the page. To improve the user experience with Link+ through clearer entry points, I created two prototypes that merge the primary and secondary navigation.

Keywords: Usability, Link+, Search, Navigation

Introduction

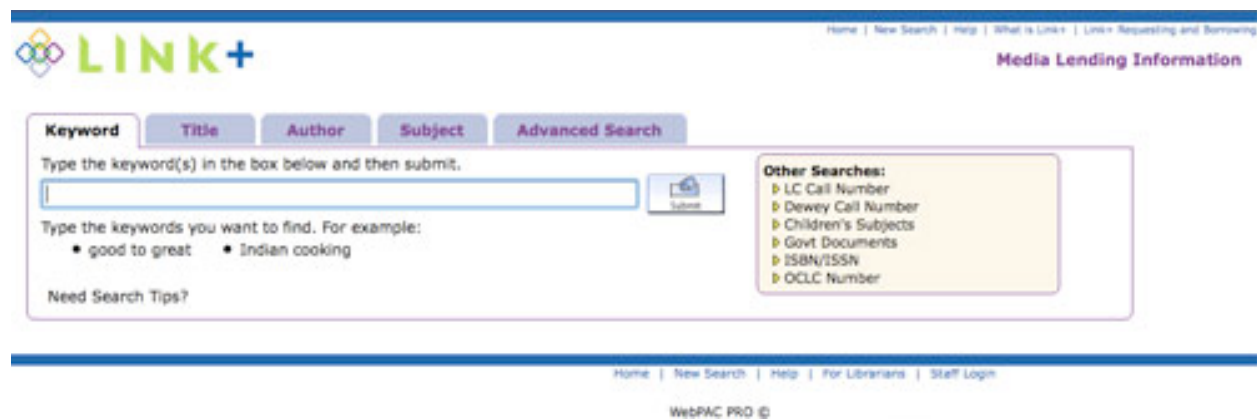
While a public library website can offer many different services, the most basic use is finding information and borrowing materials. For homework three, I proposed a redesign for the navigation in place on the Alameda County website to revamp the site with an activity-centered design that leverages simple language: "find stuff", "find us", "what's up", "help" and "help us" (Saffer, 2010; Sammis, 2011). I chose the library for two reasons: it had been heavily discussed in the first and second seminar; and it is my local library system. My project, though, only addressed the finding of materials in circulation at the Alameda County library. For my final project, therefore, I decided to address the problems with the interlibrary loan website Alameda County library sends users to: Link+.

Link+ is the interlibrary loan service Alameda County participates in. It is a consortium of forty participating libraries, both academic and public, that allows users of one library to borrow materials from other participating libraries if their own library doesn't own the requested materials. The system covers libraries in California and Nevada, although it doesn't include *every* library as it is an opt-in service (Alameda County Library, n.d.; Link+, 2011).

For both projects I first created a hypothesis and then refined that hypothesis with interaction on various social networks, namely, Facebook, Twitter and Google+. For the Link+ project, I began with the idea that borrowing books via an interlibrary loan website would be difficult, especially for first time or infrequent users. I posed the question: "Do any of you use interlibrary loan websites to get books you library doesn't have? If you do... what works and what doesn't about the website?" From those who answered they do use such a website, the

primary concern was "actually finding the title" (Oshkin, 2011, private correspondence via Facebook).

The current Link+ website works in two ways: through direct linking to searches generated by the participating website and by searches begun by users going directly to the site. In both cases, the site defaults to showing users some sort of search.



On entering the site there is no explanation of what Link+ is, how it works or why a user would suddenly be sent to this page. The tabbed navigation below the Link+ logo shows five search options (although the site actually offers six other ways of searching as listed in the yellow box to the right). This tabbed approach along with the placement below the logo gives the appearance of being primary navigation; it is actually secondary navigation. The primary navigation is in a small blue text in the top right corner of the website just below the blue line.

Home | New Search | Help | What is Link+ | Link+ Requesting and Borrowing

Media Lending Information

The current navigation set up suffers from two problems: an inconsistent navigation and size (Tidwell, 2011). The primary navigation is so small that it doesn't look like primary

navigation, nor is it easy to click. As Tidwell explains in the section on Satisficing, "users 'parse' color and form on sight, and they follow these cues more efficiently than labels that must be read" (p. 11). The Link+ layout at first glance betrays the user by giving the wrong impression about the navigational structure.

First Iteration

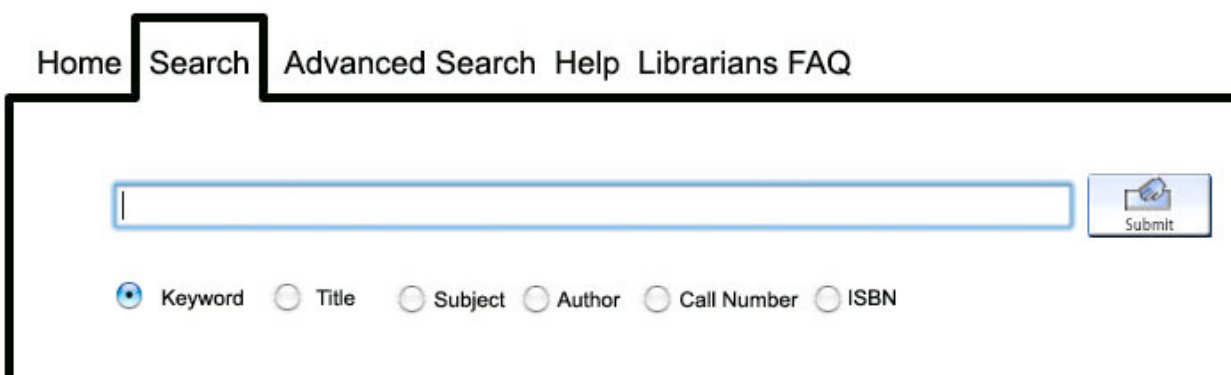
The problems of using Link+: understanding what it is, how to use it, and actually finding the correct materials, could be addressed by simplifying the navigation and repurposing the current second navigation as the primary navigation. The prototype was rapidly sketched in Photoshop and printed on paper.



Link+ has three basic users: library patrons coming to find and request materials, librarians of member libraries, and the Link+ staff. My first concern was to move the non-staff navigation away from the staff login area. I reserved the top right hand corner for the Staff Login. It is where, Tidwell explains, "many people expect such tools to be, so they will often look there" (p. 115). The staff log in is currently in the footer.

Next, I took the original primary navigation and put it in the location of the secondary navigation, essentially doing away with the secondary navigation the website isn't complex enough to warrant two levels.

For the search area, I combined all of the basic searches, currently available as three different tabs, into one search form with radio buttons to select between different types of searching. As the site also includes the option to search by call number and ISBN, I included those in the basic search page. I wanted to make as many basic search options available without requiring drilling down into buried pages. My search design is similar the search options available via sites like Amazon.com and GoodReads.com. The remaining navigation options were Advanced Search, Help and Librarians FAQ. To address the question of *what is Link+*, I created a new default home page which used the copy from the site's "What is Link+" page.



The image shows a navigation bar with the following tabs: Home, Search, Advanced Search, Help, Librarians, and FAQ. The 'Search' tab is highlighted with a black box. Below the navigation bar is a search form consisting of a large text input field and a 'Submit' button with a magnifying glass icon. Below the input field are six radio buttons for search criteria: Keyword (selected), Title, Subject, Author, Call Number, and ISBN.

First Test

I created four questions for my users. Question 1: What is Link+. Question 2: What different ways can you search? Question 3: Pretend you are staff; where do you log in? Question 4: Pretend you are librarian and need help; where do you go?

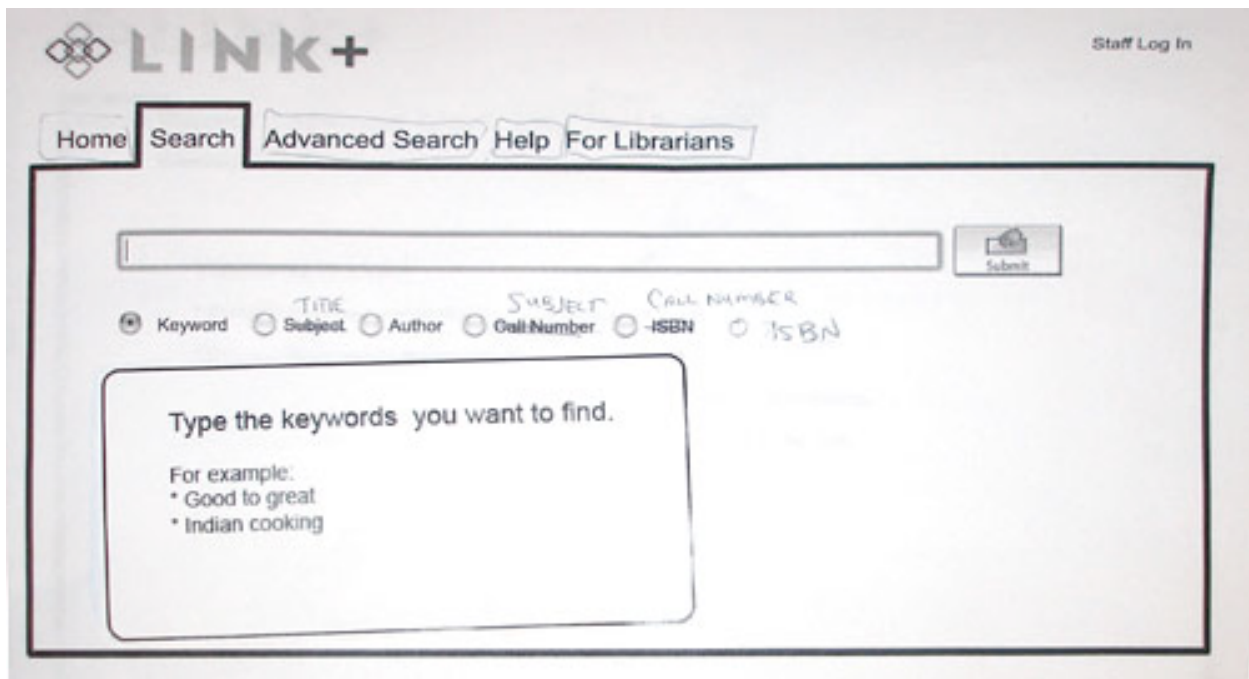
User One: is a 60+ female entrepreneur. She is a regular volunteer at her own library and has used similar interlibrary loan services to Link+.

User One had no trouble completing the tasks. She found the navigation easy and found it very similar to service she currently uses. Her one suggestion was to simplify the text on the home page. The text was the original copy provided by the Link+ website.

User Two is a male 30+ math professor who is a regular library website user and has used a different interlibrary loan website.

User Two had no trouble completing the tasks. He felt the "Librarian FAQ" should be changed back to "For Librarians." He suggested that non-technical librarians would be confused by the jargon.

Second Iteration



The secondary iteration was done at the location of the first paper test, where only a gray scale printer was available. Some other alterations were done in pen. For instance, the tabs were

drawn in and the search options were expanded. The text of the home page was shortened and the "Librarian FAQ" was reverted to "For Librarians."

In both iterations, dynamic help was available below whatever radio button was pushed. These were printed out on small strips of paper and laid below the search box. The text is primarily taken from help currently available on the Link+ search or help pages. None of the users tested felt they needed this extra help but agreed that it would be useful for first time visitors.

User Three is a male 60+ physics professor who has limited experience using an academic interlibrary loan service available through his university.

User Three noticed I had left off the Title option for the basic search page in the second iteration. I fixed it during the test and we continued. Otherwise he said the site was easy to use and very similar to what he has used before.

User Four is a female 60+ high school math teacher with no experiencing using interlibrary loans and limited experience using any sort of public library website.

User Four had some confusion over the purpose of the site. When asked to log in, she went first to the "For Librarians" tab and then found the log in. Otherwise, she found the site simple to use.

Conclusion

Consolidating and moving the primary navigation helped users understand the purpose of the site and to more quickly find their tasks. For first time users, work would need to be done on the copy for the help section and the home page. My primary concern was the functionality of

the website, not the exact text in use. For these tests, no help page prototypes were created; users just had to be able to find the tab that would take them to the help section.

A more robust redesign should also look at the page where users select their participating library, enter their library card number and select the branch where they wish to pick up the requested materials. As my primary research through Facebook, Twitter and Google+ found problems in the search functionality of interlibrary loans and not the process of making a request, I focused on the pieces of the site that dealt directly with searching.

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