

Your Online Databases vs. the Free Web: How to Win the Battle

Compliments of
Morningstar Library Services

The Free Web vs. Library Databases: It's No Contest, But Who Knows Besides Us?

There's no doubt about it: General users, businesspeople, and students consider the Internet to be a boon to research.

After all, it's so easy to use. And it's satisfyingly prolific. Type a word or two in a search engine and reams of information magically appear. No wonder the Internet has captured the imagination of researchers of all types—and diverted would-be users from your databases.

Of course, as an information professional you know that the pages and pages of links that the free web offers should raise red flags in the minds of your users.

Red flags such as:

- ▶ With up to 60,000 or more free search items to check, how do you narrow the choices to just the right few?
- ▶ Which of the information is credible, reliable, accurate, and unbiased—and which is merely the opinions of the authors?

Without a doubt, you can easily add to this list of red flags. And you can eliminate the red flags by directing patrons to higher quality information than the free Web provides—information contained in your various databases.

The question is: How do you get the attention of users and effectively make the case for your databases?

The purpose of this booklet is to help you do just that.

In Part One, we review many of the problems researchers encounter when relying solely on the Internet for information. You're probably familiar with most if not all of these limitations, but this review provides an important backdrop for Part Two of our discussion.

In Part Two, we provide you with specific guidance and tools for bringing the limitations of the free Web to the attention of your patrons. We'll provide suggestions for and examples of promotional materials that present your argument that the first and best place to start (and often finish) research is with your library's databases.

Part 1: What's Wrong with the Internet, Anyway?

There is nothing wrong with the free Web, if you know how to use it and recognize its limitations. Unfortunately, not everyone who visits your library does.

Let's explore some myths with relying solely on the Internet to answer research questions. Many people accept at least some of these as fact.

Myth 1: The Internet holds the sum total of world knowledge.

While the Internet encompasses billions of pages of information, you will not find many paid journals on it, or books either. Mark Y. Herring, Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC, says fewer than eight percent of journals are on the Internet, and even fewer books.

...people conducted invaluable research and reported on it before the Internet. You can't benefit from all of this research if the internet is your only research tool.

Additionally, search engines cannot retrieve all the information on a topic for a user. That's because much information resides in what is known as the "deep" or "hidden web." And the unreachable is vast. Examples include: audio and video content, Flash or compressed files, information on sites requiring registration, and dynamically generated pages.

That's not all. The Internet is young in relation to the sum total of world knowledge. Some of your younger patrons may be surprised to hear that people conducted invaluable research and reported on it before the Internet. You can't benefit from all of this research if the Internet is your only research tool.

Myth 2: Search engines organize results in an easily scanned list.

Results come to you in a list, that's for sure. Information professionals know how to limit searches to zero in on exactly the information they want. Typical users, meanwhile, conduct searches using just a word or two. They can receive back thousands, even tens of thousands, of links. Scrolling through the list and clicking and investigating sites can chew up lots of time. Even then the search may not be fruitful, requiring another search, and perhaps another after that.

Myth 3: Information on the Internet is always up to date.

How many times have you visited a site to find the content as stale as yesterday's bread? Maintaining and updating websites is an expensive and time-consuming job. Large commercial sites do a good job, but this isn't always the case with smaller sites. The reverse is true, too; content on a page may have changed after a search engine indexed it.

Myth 4: If it is on the Internet, it has to be true.

The corollary to this is: Somebody must be checking the content. But as you know as an information professional, truth is many sided. In addition to plain old fact checking (which you know from experience is itself a tricky business) there are issues of authority, impartiality, objectivity, thoughtful interpretation, clear presentation, and probably more.

In addition, a researcher has to decide if a source is the best authority on a subject. For instance, is the better reference on an historical point written by a professor of the subject and published by an academic press, or penned by a journalist and published by a commercial house?

...there are issues of authority, impartiality, objectivity, interpretation, clear presentation, and probably more.

Myth 5: Information on the Internet is free.

Much of it is, yes, but by no means all of it. Often users will find that the information they need is available only by paying a fee or entering a subscription.

This is certainly true in our bailiwick of financial information. In fact, investors cannot access Morningstar Analyst Reports and other proprietary Morningstar content without paying a fee (except

when they access this research via Morningstar Library Edition in their library). And we are not alone. Proprietary, value-added information, whether financial, ancestral, historical, scientific, or other, usually comes with a fee.

All good points, you're probably thinking. Now, here's how to use them to persuade more patrons to use your databases and rely less on the free Web.

Part 2: Simple but Persuasive Promotions You Can Use Now

Okay, we've made lots of excellent points regarding the Internet's deficiencies. How do we transform these limitations into effective, persuasive promotion, the kind that will prove to patrons the superiority of your databases?

The first step is to boil down what we have said into short and pithy prose. Few will take the time to pour over long commentary. They are more likely to pay attention to a short, to-the-point message.

We've shrunken our conversation about the free Web versus databases into the following table:

Free Web	Library Databases
Shallow information on many topics	In-depth research on many subjects
Long, unorganized lists of links	Well-organized by topics
Often biased, unreliable or inaccurate	Authoritative, accurate, checked by experts
Best information is proprietary and often fee-based	All database information free to patrons
Do-it-yourself searches	Professional librarian assistance

Based on this chart, we can now build a full-blown marketing campaign encouraging patrons to choose library databases over the Internet.

Theme

Let's take a page from the playbook of big time marketers—the package goods and automakers of the world—and develop an overarching theme. A good theme should encapsulate our big idea and can be used in a variety of promotions.

Montgomery County Public Libraries, for example, promotes the scope of their databases with “Where the county gets MOR!” MOR stands for Montgomery Online Resources.

You'll probably want to create a theme personalized to the goals of your library. But for illustration, let's take the major advantages of your databases and turn them into a thematic statement.

We will use Learnalot Library as our fictitious library.

Learnalot Library Databases: Your First Choice for Research

“Your first choice for research” succinctly and clearly states the idea Learnalot wants patrons to carry around in their minds. When the need to research, say, a new car, ancestry, or stocks arises, patrons will think, “Let's get to the library and check out their databases.”

Build a Campaign

With our comparative table and theme in place, now we can create a unified promotional effort. Here's how the campaign for databases might work using a range of promotional vehicles popular with libraries for their effectiveness and modest cost.

Promotion #1: Bookmarks

Inexpensive and popular with patrons, bookmarks are a mainstay of many library promotional programs. We might translate our database campaign to bookmarks in a couple of different ways.

Side one:

Lernalot Library Databases: Your First Choice for Research

Side two:

Always choose Lernalot Library Databases first for:

- ▶ reliable,
- ▶ authoritative,
- ▶ easy to find answers to your research questions

Or:

Lernalot	vs.	Internet
Accurate		Not always reliable
Authoritative		Questionable
Well-organized		Long rambling

Or:

Lernalot Library Databases.

Always authoritative and reliable.

The free Web? Hit or miss.

Always choose our databases first.

As you can see, our thematic statement makes sure that our bookmarks, and all the materials that follow, remain focused on our goal: to encourage patrons to think about library databases first when conducting research.

Promotion #2: Posters

You can create posters in a variety of sizes to serve different purposes. Let's explore two of them.

First, use a poster to let everyone who visits Lernalot Library know our databases are the best for research. We'll craft a very large poster and suspend it from the ceiling over the entrance to the computer area. Or, we might place it on an easel near the computers. Here's what it could say:

Lernalot Library Databases

Your first choice for research on all these topics:

- ▶ Investing—
Morningstar Library Edition
- ▶ Genealogy—
Ancestry Library
- ▶ Medicine & Health—
MEDLINE

Accessible from in the library, your home, or your office!

Of course you have your entire collection of databases listed on your website. You might even have a brochure that contains a list of your collection. However, you can never do too much to get the word out. And few things beat promoting at “point-of-purchase.”

Second, let’s create a poster that points up the superiority of our library databases over information available on the Internet. Since we already have our theme and our comparison table created, the task is easy.

We can illustrate with a subject by comparing information from an Internet search with that contained in a library database. We can make our points with tailored, real-world examples.

Since patrons are different ages and have different interests and needs, you may wish to create a general seminar outline and then version it (that is, change the examples) for your various audiences.

Let’s say you create a seminar entitled “Secrets of the Internet.” Your title should capture the imagination of your patrons and promise a benefit, as these examples do.

Your versions might be:

Secrets of the Internet for Students

You might take students through a typical school assignment, perhaps historical research. You might coordinate this with the social studies teachers from your local middle or high school.

Secrets of the Internet for Businesspeople

Perhaps you focus on how to use particular databases to generate traffic in retail establishments. Or you show business people how to make wiser investment decisions using Morningstar Library Edition and other databases.

Secrets of the Internet for Genealogists

Your more general presentations might address the needs of larger but still target audiences. Genealogists are such a group. Also, how about people interested in foreign events and the history of countries and so on?

Researching today?

Why you should start with Learnalot Library Databases

Free Web	Library Databases
Shallow information on many topics	In-depth research on many subjects
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Often biased, unreliable or inaccurate	Authoritative, accurate, checked by experts
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Learnalot Library Databases:

Your First Choice for Research

Promotion #3: Seminars

Seminars, workshops, and presentations offer us the opportunity to elaborate on the points made in our comparison chart. For example, we can explain what we mean by “shallow information.”

Promotion #4: Newsletters

As part of your campaign, run articles about your databases in your online and print newsletters. One article might focus and elaborate on the information in your comparison table. Other articles could highlight a different database in each issue, including who might find particular databases helpful and why.

In addition, consider breaking the information in your comparison chart into bite-size promotions. These might be quick one- or two-liners, or perhaps small ads. Intriguing questions work well.

For example:

What's the "deep Internet"?

It's the majority of information on the Internet—and its information that search engines can't find.

Ask a Reference Librarian how you can access information that search engines can't.

Promotion #5: Library Literature and Website

If you produce literature about your library and your holdings, be sure to include key comparative points from your chart.

Earlier, we mentioned Montgomery County Public Libraries. They produce a brochure devoted to their online resources. In it, they cite the benefits of library databases vs. the Internet. Let's adapt what Montgomery County does with our fictional library.

Google is good, but with **Lernalot Library's Databases**, you get much more!

Every source is:

- ▶ Free
- ▶ Authoritative
- ▶ Reliable and accurate
- ▶ High quality
- ▶ Evaluated by experts
- ▶ Well organized
- ▶ Updated frequently
- ▶ User friendly

Your website provides nearly unlimited room to tell your database story. Why not use it to full advantage? Develop a page elaborating on the key strengths of your library databases contrasted against an expanded explanation of the weaknesses of the free Web and search engines. Place links on your library homepage and database page driving traffic to the comparison page.

Promotion #6: Screen Saver and Mouse Pad

Nothing attracts the attention of computer users like a computer screen. So the screen is one of the best places in your library to drive home the problems with relying solely on the Internet for research.

You can build a screen saver around the comparison chart, being sure to include your over arching message, as Lernalot certainly would: Your First Choice for Research. Or you could create several screens, each featuring a single key point.

And don't forget the mouse pad. You might put the bookmark message on it. Flip back and take a look at it. See how the copy on the front might run around the edge of the mouse pad and how the copy on the back would fit nicely in the center.

Promotion #7: Press Release

There's hardly anything better than P.R. It's free, of course, and that's always good when budgets are tight. But it also gets plenty of attention, because when it appears in a newspaper or on a broadcast, people regard it as news and find it more credible than advertising.

Your job is to create an intriguing news story in the form of a press release. You have many story options. For instance, you could create a press release discussing your comparison chart. You might focus on one or two key advantages of library databases over the Internet.

These press releases don't have to be long and involved. Here's an example of a simple release designed to encourage readers to visit Learnalot's website or drop by for free information.

Learnalot Cautions on Internet Information Searches

Most people's searches are very general, comprised of one or two words. For instance, a simple search for American Civil War can result in more than 150 million links.

If you do find information that seems suitable, you have to ask yourself: How reliable is it? Is the source an authority? How can you tell just by visiting a website?

Learnalot points out you can avoid time-consuming searches, uncertainty about accuracy and reliability, and other problems by using its extensive collection of databases.

For a list of databases, as well as a comparison of library database and Internet research benefits, go to Learnalot's website: [address]. Or stop by th library for free comparison information.

The Free Web vs. Database Research: It's No Contest, So Let's Tell Everybody!

Today, we live in a noisy, busy world. It's the kind of place in which the best product or service can easily get lost—unless it shouts over the noise for attention.

While we'd like to devote ourselves entirely to what we trained for and like doing, we have little choice but to put on our marketing caps.

Your library's databases have significant advantages over the Internet. They save time. They ensure users get accurate, reliable information. They can provide richer, more in-depth information on a wide variety of subjects. The best information is always free. And they come with the help of an information professional, you the librarian.

However, only a handful of patrons will be aware of these benefits—unless you shout over the noise.

We hope this booklet has given you effective shouting tools.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank and cite a few sources that greatly influenced us.

Montgomery County Public Libraries is doing interesting things to get the message out about how their databases best the Internet and search engines. They inspired us to take a closer look.

"10 Reasons Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library," by Mark Y. Herring, Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, South Carolina, crystallized many key points in our mind. He covers more ground than we address in our booklet, and we recommend his article to you. You'll find it on American Libraries Online.

Finally, "Free, Fee-Based and Value-Added Information Services," by Mary Ellen Bates and prepared for Factiva[®], a Dow Jones and Reuters Company, digs into many issues affecting business researchers. If you have a large business base, you'll find it interesting reading.



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