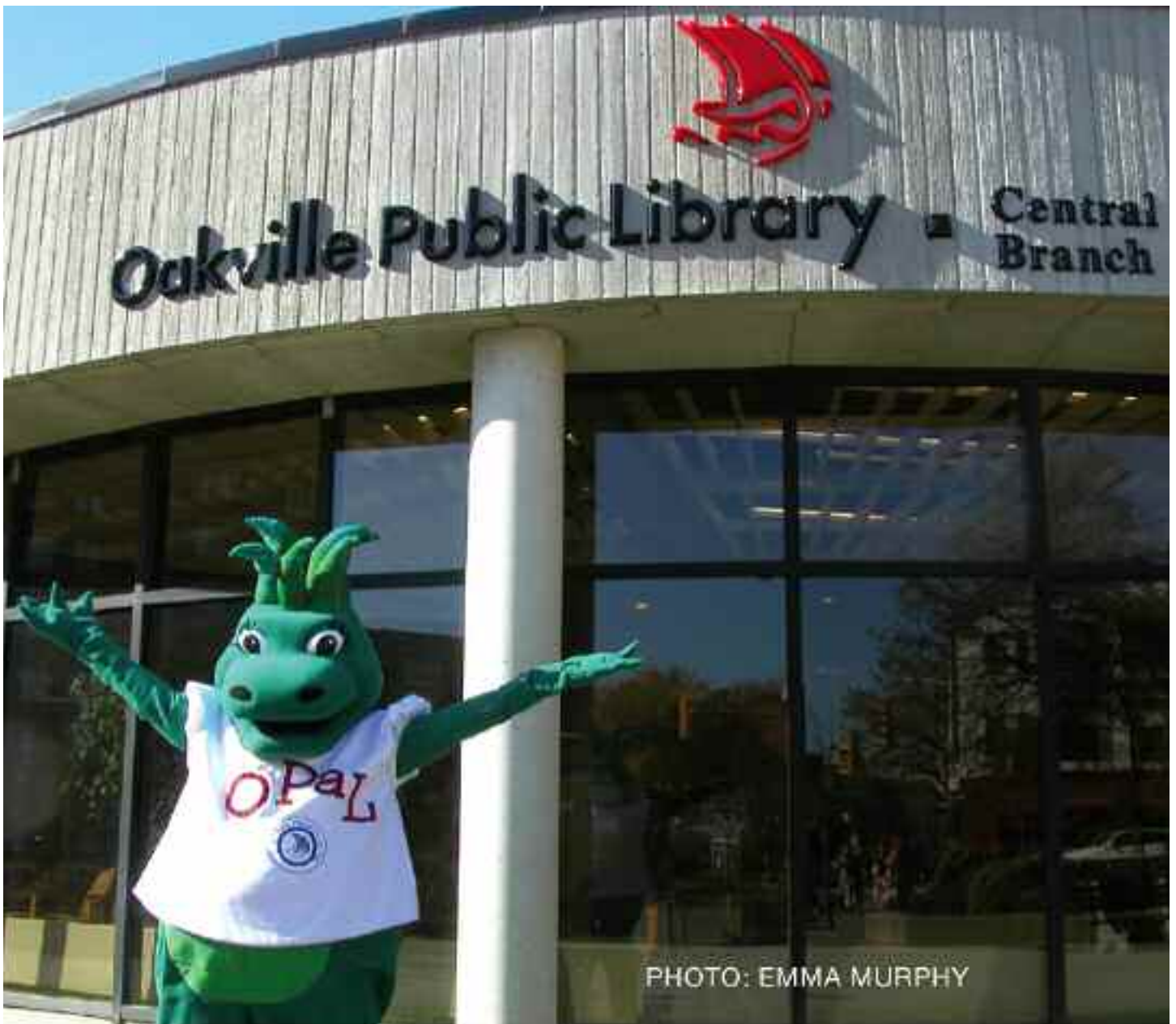


# Let Your Customers Design Your Website

The BiblioCommons Experience

by Melissa Cameron



*“I can’t believe how much I use this website! I LOVE IT! It is a constant open tab (along with my Gmail website) on my computer. I’ve stopped contributing to Amazon and Chapters – they are just too big. With the Oakville Public Library website, I actually feel like my comments and ratings are going to be read and considered. I am able to keep track of what I read, what I liked, what my kids liked, what I want to read for later ... it’s great!”*

*“With two kids under three years old, I find it difficult to browse the books for me (and them). I am thrilled with the ‘search the shelf’ feature. Even though I find myself running in once a week to pick up a handful of holds, I’m also visiting more with my sons. Thank you so much for this!”*

When’s the last time you received this kind of passionate comment about your website?

Three years ago there was no way the Oakville Public Library website would have caused such a reaction. Our website and online catalogue needed help. The Facebooks and Amazons of the world had changed the way people used the internet. More and more of our customer transactions were taking place online, and for many of our customers, online use of the library formed the majority of their experience with us. We knew we had to change or risk losing customers.

But how to do it? As anyone who’s tried it know, re-vamping a website is a mammoth undertaking. We also knew that this couldn’t be a simple makeover: we had to drastically re-think the way we were interacting with customers online.

Happily, with Knowledge Ontario we developed a partnership with entrepreneur Beth Jefferson of BiblioCommons. We wanted a customer-focused website, and she needed a library to help develop her idea of a whole new kind of online library space. Our shared goal was to design an online experience that reflected exactly what our customers wanted.

But what did they want? Customers jumped at the chance to tell us, and months of extensive research ensued. Many wanted better ways to discover the collection, much as they would in a physical library branch: they wanted to “browse the shelves” or look at the recently returned items. But they also wanted more than that. They wanted to know what other people were reading and talking about, they wanted to review and rate items. They wanted to keep better track of their borrowed items.

And they didn’t want to have to think like a librarian to find what they were looking for. For the legions of customers used to Google, easier searching would be paramount.

The screenshot shows the Oakville Public Library website interface. At the top, there is a red header with the library logo and navigation links like 'Take a tour', 'Contact', 'Home', and 'Log Out'. Below the header is a search bar with the text 'cat in the hat' and a 'Search' button. A dark navigation bar contains links for 'My OPL', 'Explore', 'Research', 'Programs/Events', 'Services', 'Interests', and 'About OPL'. The main content area displays search results for 'cat in the hat', sorted by relevance. On the left, there are filters for 'Narrow Results' including 'Only available items', 'All Branches', 'All Formats', and filters by Topic, Language, Published Date, and Format Genre. The search results list six items: 'The Cat in the Hat' (Book - 1957), 'The Cat in the Hat' (Book - 2002), 'The Cat in the Hat' (CD-ROM - 2005), 'The Cat in the Hat' (CD-ROM - 2001), 'The Cat in the Hat' (DVD - 2002), and 'Cat Hat' (Book - 2001). Each result includes a thumbnail, title, author, call number, status, and a star rating. On the right side of the search results, there is a promotional banner for 'Help us build the Ultimate Catalogue...' featuring an airplane icon and text about earning chances to win a prize pack.

## INTEGRATING WEBSITE AND CATALOGUE

To make all of this happen, we quickly realized that we would have to completely integrate our website and catalogue. Customers simply don't distinguish between the two. While good at inventory management, the catalogue is not capable of providing the kind of service we wanted to deliver.

This is when the real work started. The staff of BiblioCommons and Oakville's Online Services department began the complex task of integrating the catalogue, our website, and the new discovery features into one seamless online experience. According to Gail Richardson, acting director of Online Services for OPL, "This is a huge leap forward. The BiblioCommons product acts as an OPAC, a



Next Generation Catalogue and a Discovery Layer – and we’ve only just started. The potential to connect our customers with our collections, our customers with our customers, our customers with collections from customers of other libraries, is huge. With BiblioCommons’s hard work and original vision, we’re able to connect people and ideas in so many new ways. It is very exciting!”

Hundreds of intrepid Oakville residents participated in a lengthy beta-testing phase. Finally, the new website arrived this past July.

What happened next? In the three months since launch, more than 11,000 people have registered with the new website, with more signing up each day. Customers have called

The screenshot shows the Oakville Public Library website interface. At the top, there's a red header with the library logo, user login information ('Logged in as Cory Dee'), and navigation links like 'Take a tour', 'Contact', and 'Help - Log Out'. Below the header is a search bar with the text 'Find books, music, movies, and more...' and a 'Search' button. A dark navigation bar contains links for 'My OPL', 'Explore', 'Research', 'Programs/Events', 'Services', 'Interests', and 'About OPL'. The main content area features a search result for 'Walt Disney's Alice in Wonderland' DVD (2009). The result includes a star rating, a 'Find it at OPL' section showing 5 total copies and 0 available, a 'Buy this title' button, and a 'Connect With Others' section listing users who own the title. The 'Additional Information' section provides details like contributors (Carroll, Lewis), publisher (Walt Disney DVD), edition (Masterpiece ed.), ISBN (0788650253), language (English), and suitability (Canadian Home Video Rating 0). A 'Publisher Description' is also visible. On the right side, there's an 'Explore Further' section with a 'Browse the shelf' button and 'Subject Headings' such as 'Feature Films', 'Film Adaptations', and 'Animated Films'. There are also sections for 'Lists that include this title' and 'Tags'.

the site “addictive” and have said, “I only know a fraction of what is available on the site, but I am still totally amazed at what I have found so far.”

The new features are even wowing many of our more savvy users: “I think the new site is awesome! Totally web 2.0 – you’ve taken all the good practices of Amazon and Chapters-

Indigo and worked them into a great, consolidated web presence. Love the star-ratings, the user-generated tags, the networking ... I showed my Mum how to build lists and rate items yesterday. Bravo! I feel that this is showing my tax dollars put to good work.”

With just barely three months of statistics, the popularity of our new site is apparent.

**Oakville Public Library**

Find books, music, movies, and more. [View search options](#)

Keyword  Search OPL Catalogue

**My OPL** | Explore | Research | Programs/Events | Services | Interests | About OPL

**My Borrowing** | **My Collection** | **My Lists** | **My Networks**

Checked Out | My Collection | My Lists | Trusted Sources  
 Holds | Community Credits | For Later | Ignored Users  
 Fees  
 Recently Returned

**Monday** 9:30AM - 5PM  
**Tuesday** 9:30AM - 5PM  
**Wednesday** 9:30AM - 5PM  
**Thursday** 9:30AM - 5PM  
**Friday** 9:30AM - 5PM  
**Saturday** 9:30AM - 5PM  
**Sunday** 1PM - 5PM

[More branch info](#)

**Resources for Teachers**

**Frog's Riddle & Other Draw-And-Tell Stories**  
 by Thompson, Richard (Book - 1992)

**InfoTrac Educators eCollection**

For present and future teachers and administrators, this collection of 250 journals covers the latest technologies, developments, instruction and coaching breakthroughs.

[Visit Ovidata](#)

**Today in History**  
 7 Oct 1882  
 Cats Churn On Broadway

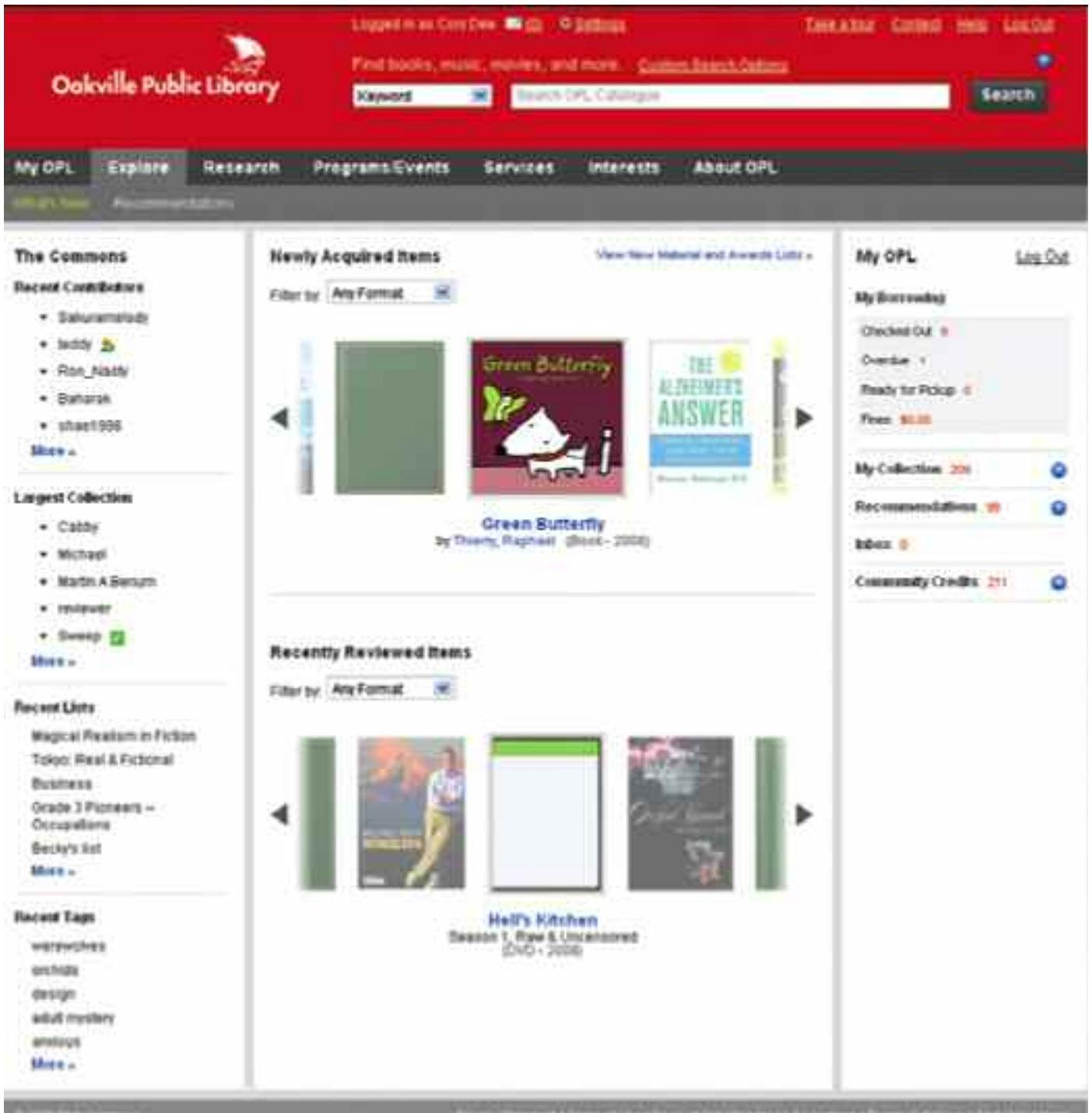
**Old Prescott's Book of Practical Cats**  
 by Elliot, T. S.

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Our holds are consistently up 10 per cent over last year. Hits on our website are up 123 per cent over last year and the number of visitors to our website is up 64 per cent over last year. People are using the site again and again to discover new items and information.

As with any new service, there have been a few growing pains. Predictably, a small num-

ber of customers weren't happy with the changes. Through feedback forms on every page, we've received everything from the inevitable "I want the old site back" to real, constructive suggestions for improvement. "Change can be tough," says Beth Jefferson, CEO of BiblioCommons. "The front line staff at OPL has done an incredible job of working through the challenges of the first release. As



customer concerns have come forward we've worked together to make real improvements to the site."

One of the issues that had to be resolved was requiring customers to enter an email address when registering for the first time. The beta-testers hadn't balked at providing their email addresses, but when we went live, a small

percentage of customers either didn't have email addresses or were uneasy about providing them.

When we decided that, first and foremost, libraries are about accessibility for everyone, BiblioCommons worked quickly to remedy the situation. Customers are now given a choice: they can enter an email address and take

part in the full range of services the site provides (such as receiving notices that books are coming due one to five days beforehand), or they can opt out of these services and receive notices from the system in the inbox of their account. This is just one example of some of the many refinements that have taken place since launch.

Which leads to the principal lesson in all of this: just as everyone uses the library in different ways and for different things, everyone wants to use the online library space in different ways and at different levels of engagement. The beauty of our current site is that it allows people to do just this. By heavily involving our customers from the beginning, we have created a website that is truly an extension of the high level of service we provide in our branches. It showcases a library keeping pace with change and remaining relevant to the community. Above all, it is a community space that allows people to exchange ideas, discover new things, and find the information they're looking for quickly and easily – truly the heart of any library's mission.

***Melissa Cameron***

is Manager of Marketing and Development at Oakville Public Library.

## **Following Oakville**

Oakville was the pilot library to receive and test drive the BiblioCommons Online Public Access Catalogue. It was created under a partnership agreement between BiblioCommons, Knowledge Ontario through its Connect Ontario project, and the Provincial Library Services Branch of British Columbia. The partnership involves joint funding for the project. With the Oakville pilot now successfully completed, Connect Ontario collected expressions of interest from other public libraries with plans to launch an additional 12 to 15 "early adopter" sites in 2009. Several British Columbia libraries are now up and running on BiblioCommons, and plans are underway to extend there as well.

"We are delighted by the early success of this joint venture, and the social networking capabilities it puts at the heart of the online experience for library patrons," says Knowledge Ontario's executive director, David Thornley. "So many patrons prize their libraries and they will revel in the added value of being able to see the covers of books they are interested in, to search easily right from the home page, and to create reviews and find trusted sources among other patrons with similar interests.

"It's also a vibrant way for libraries to stay relevant. Young people who are so at home with internet technology simply expect to find this kind of ease and interaction."

For more information:  
[knowledgeontario.ca/connect](http://knowledgeontario.ca/connect)

— Louise Slobodian, Communications and Marketing, Knowledge Ontario