

Susanne Markgren

Ten simple steps to create and manage your professional online identity

How to use portfolios and profiles

Librarians are not good at self-promotion. It's true. When was the last time you shared your accomplishments with your colleagues, your supervisor, your director, your friends? Your mother doesn't count. How often do you bask in a little professional recognition? Have you ever scrutinized your own professional identity (as a potential employer might)? Do you distinguish between your online identity—which is essentially, “The information on the Internet about an individual”¹ and your professional identity? Do you have a professional online identity? Do you maintain a professional portfolio and a current résumé? These are just a few questions that we need to ask ourselves in order to successfully manage our careers, promote our accomplishments, and move forward in our roles and in our profession. Librarians, perhaps more than other professionals, should understand the power of online information and the influence it can have over our careers.

As a tenure-track faculty librarian, I am required to submit my portfolio to review committees for reappointment and eventually tenure. A few years ago, as I was compiling my print portfolio, which involved finding and printing out lots and lots of documents and putting them into a three-ring binder, I decided to create an online portfolio at the same time. My goal was to create a professional portfolio using free and easy-to-use tools. I didn't want to spend any money and I didn't want to spend a lot of time building it. I wanted an accessible space to display and store my materials.

As a digital services librarian, much of what I do for my job is online, and much of my scholarship and professional participation is documented online—presentations, articles, reviews, blog, associations, newsletters, design work, etc. So it seemed to make perfect sense to have an online portfolio that can be found if someone searches for me (so important for people who are job hunting), and that I can use for professional advancement and self-promotion.

Since I created my portfolio, I have used it for my review committees (this year my college has started accepting online portfolios for faculty reviews), as an easy way to share my current CV (rather than as an attachment), as a demonstration tool for presentations and workshops, and perhaps most importantly, as a single place to store all of my professional materials.

Most of us are not drawn to librarianship for fame and fortune, but we could probably all benefit from a few tips on how to update, manage, and professionalize our online identities. Hopefully, these steps will provide you with enough encouragement to build up your brand and use your online identity for self-promotion, and to gain a little well-deserved recognition.

Susanne Markgren is digital services librarian at Purchase College, State University of New York, e-mail: susanne.markgren@purchase.edu, and she maintains a portfolio at smarkgren.wordpress.com

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Step 1. Accept that you have an online identity, that you exist online, and that people can find information about you.

Step 2. Realize that having an online identity can be a good thing and that the social Web can and will influence how others perceive you, both personally and professionally.

Step 3. Decide that you need to professionalize your online identity, and you can do this even if you've never created a Web page.

If you are looking for a job, or will be looking for a job in the near future, you can be certain that potential employers will search for you online. And here's the thing—they want to find you.

In a CareerBuilder survey from June 2009, 45 percent of employers reported that they use social networking sites to research job candidates.² If your online identity is difficult to find, not maintained by you, not updated, or is locked down, you might be overlooked or deemed not progressive enough for the job. On the other hand, if they find questionable activity (photos/postings/opinions/language), you will probably not even make it to the interview stage. As an information professional in a hi-tech world, you are expected to have a professional online presence.

Step 4. Acknowledge that you will not be able to keep two separate online identities for professional and personal purposes.

The online spaces we inhabit are filled with a mixture of professional contacts who might ask work-related questions, and high school and college classmates who might post embarrassing photos or comments. And don't forget about the people you meet while networking online, who could turn into future employers or colleagues. This is why you should always maintain a level of professionalism no matter what site you are using, and no matter how private you think it might be. The sites themselves do not determine conduct, the line between personal and professional no longer exists.

Step 5. Find what's out there on you. Clean it up and correct mistakes.

Search for yourself on a regular basis using different search engines. Put your name in quotes, use variations and misspellings of

your name. If you have a common name, use other keywords along with your name (e.g., title, work, school, city, state, etc.). You may be surprised to find yourself in directories that you didn't know existed. Go to all your known social identities, such as Facebook, and clean them up by removing any embarrassing photos or comments and unfriending people who consistently exhibit unprofessional behavior. Try to view these sites from a potential, or current, employer's eyes, even if you are positive they could never possibly see the site (you never know who might be a friend of a friend of a friend). Make sure that you are listed on your library's Web site and your institution's site. Make sure your name and e-mail address are spelled correctly, and use the variation of your name that you prefer. If you do not find anything, don't worry—you will soon if you follow these steps.

Step 6. Think carefully about personal branding, because that's what you are doing when you create and manage your online identity.

Personal branding can be defined as, "The public expression and projection of an individual's identity, personality, values, skills, and abilities."³ You are in control to build your own brand, so how do you want people—potential employers, search committees, colleagues, reviewers, relatives, friends, your mother—to perceive you? You can highlight specific skills, experience, history, accomplishments, associations, etc., to craft your own unique mold.

Before you begin, consider the following: What are your goals for building your online identity, for creating your personal brand? Do you want to find a job; get promoted or recognized; build your reputation; clean up your existing identity; or do you simply want to gain more visibility by putting yourself out there?

Step 7. Create your online portfolio.

Your online portfolio is basically your résumé, deconstructed on a Web site. Gather your professional materials, choose a reliable, ad-free, cost-free online tool that will provide you with plenty of storage such as PBworks, Google Sites, or WordPress, and upload your materials.⁴ These tools do not require any

knowledge of HTML. They all have easy-to-use toolbars and handy built-in organizational and design functions, such as tabs, pages, search boxes, tagging, templates, comments, and privacy options. Include a current PDF version of your résumé or vita; links to online sites, documents, tutorials, and videos that you created or worked on; copies of papers, posters, reviews, syllabi, handouts, and other professional documents that you think might be useful for a potential or current employer to see; and any other items you want to store in a safe and accessible place.

What online portfolios can provide

- A storage space for all your important professional documents, which makes it easy to find things (like the most current version of your résumé) when you need them quickly.
- A professional-looking and easy-to-create display space for your documents and materials.
- A simple way to share your information—your portfolio is a URL for you to send to someone, or link to from other Web sites or from your résumé or cover letter.
- An accessible (in the cloud) site that you can edit from anywhere.

Tips for building an online portfolio

- Upload or embed items and documents that you own, link to ones you do not.
- Keep it organized and think about navigation and design (e.g., create a page for each section of your résumé).
- Only include materials that you would show your current employer.
- Make it easy for people to contact you: include brief contact information (name and e-mail address will suffice), but do not include personal information (like home phone or address). This is true for any online presence or profile.
- Use tags/keywords (if available) to help in searching.
- Be creative. It shouldn't be just an online version of your résumé.

Step 8. Create profiles to make it easier to find your portfolio.

Now that you have an online portfolio, you want it to be found. The easiest way to do this is to create professional profiles on a variety of sites and link your portfolio from your profiles. Profiles will give you a stronger Web presence because they exist on popular sites and have high rankings with search engines. You may already have profiles in social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, or Twitter, so link your portfolio from those.

There are several other profile sites that are intended for professional interaction, are simple to setup, and don't require much attention, such as: LinkedIn, ALA Connect, BrightFuse.com, and Academia.edu. These sites are also good for networking with colleagues and professional groups.

If you don't have one, get yourself a Google profile, which should display in the first page of Google results when your name is searched. You can also link your portfolio from your work profile on your library or institution's site (if you have one), from your college's alumni page, from a personal Web site or blog, and from your e-mail signature.

Step 9. Be mindful of your online existence and treat it with respect.

Now that you have a professional online identity, you need to monitor it. As in Step 5, search for your name regularly and make sure that you can find yourself. If you are job hunting, you might want to set up a Google Alert (or ego alert) that will send you an update of the latest relevant Google results (Web, news, etc.) based on keywords you provide, such as your name. You can also check out WebMii, to find your PeopleRank—your visibility score on the Web.

Step 10. Share your portfolio, use it, and keep it current.

Use your professional portfolio for reappointment, promotion, or tenure reviews; for job interviews; for annual activity reports; or just to keep your director and colleagues up-to-date on your professional activities. An online portfolio will give you an edge if you're looking for a job, it will give you a sense of

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wanted them to see how much the library cares about them. Did I use the library at the institution where I was studying? Nope. Why would I? I'm near a library where I have access to what I need. Granted, I know how to work the system, but it really was more convenient for me. Convenience and timeliness are very important to distance education students. We have to respect that.

As a librarian, I never discouraged students from using local resources, but I did alert them to the fact that the local community college or public library does not purchase materials that support their curriculum and may not have the scholarly resources their instructors want them to use. I also contacted the local libraries regularly so that they knew they could refer a distance education student to me.

Make it easy

Make it as easy as possible to get access to your library. At my institution, I had to register each semester and verify that I was enrolled in a class before I could get an account number that let me access the databases and get interlibrary loan services. I'm sure there must have been a good technical reason for this, but after one semester, I couldn't be bothered. I did not like having to justify getting library access every semester. If I had not had to go through the process, I might have explored the library a bit more, but I didn't because I had easier access elsewhere. Working with our circulation department and interlibrary loan department was essential to making things as smooth as possible for the students. Fortunately for me, our system was already quite seamless, but that is not the case at all institutions.

Finally, make your experiences help you connect to your students. I found that telling my students that I, too, was a distance student at another institution, impressed them and connected them to me. I could share some of their stories or frustrations about Blackboard or WebCT or how hard it was sometimes to get the work done while working full-time. In fact, as both a distance

education librarian and a distance student, I got to know Blackboard/Web CT from both sides. My experience came in handy at the reference desk when students had questions about how to access something on their Blackboard or why the system was not working.

If you are a distance librarian, this is an experience you should not miss. Even just taking on online class offered at your institution can provide you with a perspective that you have not had before. Even though I am no longer a distance education librarian, those students are still on my mind. I have a newfound respect for the students who are working full-time, have families, and are going to school in a far-off or even not so far-off place. I can understand better the disconnect they feel, despite all of our efforts to make them part of the university. I can relate; and for a distance education librarian, I can't think of a more valuable skill. ♪

("Ten steps ..." continued from page 33)

accomplishment and order if you are happily employed, and it will give your online identity a boost of professionalism. It doesn't cost anything, it is easy to create, and updating it is a breeze. So, what are you waiting for?

Notes

1. PCMAG.com. Definition of online identity, www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=online+identity&i=60604,00.asp (accessed December 9, 2010).
2. CareerBuilder.com. "Forty-five Percent of Employers Use Social Networking Sites to Research Job Candidates, CareerBuilder Survey Finds," June 2009, shar.es/myyhJ (accessed December 9, 2010).
3. BNET Business Dictionary. Business Definition for personal brand, dictionary.bnet.com/definition/personal+brand.html (accessed December 9, 2010).
4. During my research, I tested several other tools, but these three were the clear winners and had all of my required and desired features. ♪