Enhancing visibility and access at Pitt Law with Digital Commons Exhibits

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The Barco Law Library at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law has a storied history, serving as a vital resource for legal research and scholarship. With a wealth of archival materials, including rare documents, historical records and unique collections, the library was eager to expand the reach and impact of these resources. The goal was to make these materials not only accessible but also engaging in a digital format. To achieve this, the library turned to Digital Commons Exhibits (DCX), a tool designed to transform how institutions present and preserve their collections online.

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— Rachel Rossi, Public Services and Circulation Librarian, The Barco Law Library, University of Pittsburgh School of Law

Challenge

The traditional methods of displaying archival materials at the Barco Law Library were primarily physical, limiting access to those who could visit in person. This approach was insufficient for reaching a broader audience, particularly in a world where digital access is increasingly crucial. The library needed a solution that would allow them to showcase their collections in a dynamic, user-friendly way, reaching alumni, researchers and the public, regardless of their location.

Solution

Under the leadership of Rachel Rossi, Public Services and Circulation Librarian, the Barco Law Library implemented Digital Commons Exhibits to digitize and present their collections. The platform offered the flexibility and creativity needed to build engaging online exhibits that highlighted the depth and richness of Pitt Law's resources.

Rachel shared, "We wanted to ensure that our collections were not just preserved, but also brought to life in a way that resonates with today's digital users. With Digital Commons Exhibits, we could create immersive experiences, incorporating high-resolution images, video testimonials and even interactive timelines that narrate the evolution of legal education at Pitt Law."

Digital Collections

One of the most successful exhibits created with DCX showcased the achievements of a Pitt Law alumna who has made significant contributions to the legal field and civil rights. This exhibit featured detailed biographies, historical photographs, court case dockets, and interviews that reflected on their time at Pitt and their impactful career. It garnered attention on social media and received commendations from the alumni community, who appreciated the recognition and the quality of the presentation

Other key exhibits focused on the institutional history of the law school, highlighting its evolution, milestones, and the contributions of faculty and alumni, particularly from historically underrepresented groups in the profession. By utilizing materials from the Archives and Special Collections, these exhibits help Pitt Law provide a richer narrative of its legacy, serving as valuable educational resources for current students and researchers worldwide.

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Customer Experience

"We wanted to emphasize the importance of contextualizing content through well-designed exhibits, and Digital Commons made that possible. Exhibits within the platform are carefully crafted to explain and interpret objects, making them more accessible and engaging for users. A key aspect of this is the degree of professional presentation and intuitive navigation, which is crucial for retaining audience interest. An aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly interface ensures that users are more likely to engage with the content rather than leaving the site for other sources."

"The platform's support for interactive displays and comprehensive content interpretation enriches the user experience. Digital Commons goes beyond simple identification and display by incorporating interactive elements that engage users more deeply. The ultimate goal of these information-oriented exhibits is education. By building a narrative around a theme and incorporating associated materials, Digital Commons helps users gain a richer perspective and make informed conclusions about the exhibits."

"One of the standout features of Digital Commons is its support for precise item-level metadata that adheres to established standards. This level of detail is often lacking in other web publications. The system allows for the creation and application of various metadata schemas, such as Dublin Core, EAD, and MODS, to describe objects comprehensively. This precision in metadata helps users clearly identify and understand individual items within a collection. Digital Commons balances the importance of both item-level metadata and the broader context of the entire collection. This dual focus ensures that users can appreciate individual objects while also understanding their significance within the larger collection."

Rachel Rossi,
Public Services and Circulation Librarian,
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"Robust metadata not only aids in the accurate description and identification of objects but also enhances the visibility of exhibits through search engine optimization (SEO). This means that items and exhibits can be more easily discovered through search engines, broadening their reach and impact. Furthermore, exhibits in Digital Commons strategically represent and present materials in ways that reveal similarities and relationships, thereby enriching research opportunities."

"Digital Commons is also adept at handling mixed media objects, including text documents, images, and videos. This capability is crucial for exhibits that aim to create information-rich environments. The system's flexibility allows for the integration of various types of media, each supported by well-modeled metadata, to enhance the educational and interpretive value of exhibits."

Results

The adoption of Digital Commons Exhibits at the Barco Law Library yielded impressive results. The library saw a 40% increase in online engagement within the first six months of launching the exhibits. User feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many alumni and students expressing their appreciation for the ease of access and the depth of information available through the digital exhibits.

Rachel noted, "The ability to track user engagement through the platform has been invaluable. We've been able to see exactly how our exhibits are being used, which collections are most popular, and how we can continue to improve. This data-driven approach has allowed us to fine-tune our exhibits and ensure we're meeting the needs of our audience."

ROI and Customer Satisfaction

From a return on investment (ROI) perspective, the success of Digital Commons Exhibits has been significant. By digitizing key collections, the library has reduced the need for physical maintenance of these materials, saving costs on storage and preservation. Additionally, the increased engagement has translated into stronger alumni relations, with several alumni making donations specifically to support the continued development of the library's digital offerings.

"One of our goals was to strengthen our connection with our alumni, and the digital exhibits have done just that," Rachel remarked. "We have received donations that have enabled us to create some of our digital exhibits, reflecting the positive experiences between the library and alumni these projects have fostered. It's not just about preserving our history—it's about building a community around it."

"Digital Commons has been a way to align our library and law school with the strategic pillars of the University of Pittsburgh. Through supporting our institutional goals, we've been able to highlight our department's academic excellence, research and scholarship, and overall service to the university itself."

Overall, the implementation of Digital Commons Exhibits at the Barco Law Library has not only preserved important historical materials but has also transformed how these resources are accessed and appreciated. By leveraging the power of digital technology, the library has set a new standard for how academic institutions can engage with their communities and showcase their history in a meaningful way.

Digital Commons

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