Sustaining Digital Resources

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ITHAKA S+R
Ithaka S+R: An Overview

- Mission: to help the scholarly community take full advantage of advances in information technology

- We are pursing that mission by
  - assisting organizations and projects with market research and strategic planning to help them innovate and build sustainable digital resources
  - conducting research and analysis on the impact of digital media on the research and learning communities
  - helping the academy to build new models for university-based publishing and digital resource development
The Sustainability Problem

- Many digital library projects return to funding agencies for additional grants to support core operations once a project is up and running

- Funding agencies are seeking ways to encourage projects to become sustainable after the grant funding period

- Project leaders are seeking ways to support the resources they have developed, beyond grant funding

- Since fall 2007, with the support of JISC, NEH, and NSF, Ithaka S+R has been involved in an ongoing project with the goal of understanding the key factors in developing sustainable digital resources
Sustainability and Revenue Models (2008)

• Project leaders should not assume ongoing grant support

• Sustainability plans should include strategies for future growth, as well as maintenance of the resource

• Digital resources can create value through their positive impact on users

• Projects should consider benefits of scale through partnerships

• In an increasingly competitive environment, strategic planning is critical

• Needs and expectations of users are constantly increasing

• Project leaders must be fully accountable for their projects

• There is a need for continual creativity, risk-taking, and innovation
From Theory to Practice

• 2008 report on sustainability outlined the mindsets and theoretical strategic shifts needed for digital resources to thrive.

• Feedback from project leaders, funding agencies, libraries, and other stakeholders indicated a need for on-the-ground examples of the strategies that projects employ.

• With support from JISC, NEH, and NSF, Ithaka undertook a second round of research and analysis. Case studies examined 12 projects engaged in creating and sustaining digital resources.

• We explored the evolution of their strategy, the decision-making process, and their cost-containment and revenue-generating models. *Sustaining Digital Resources: An On-the-Ground View of Projects Today* (2009) is the result of that inquiry.
Case study subjects

We chose cases that represented a range of projects spanning:

- Different countries: 6 from UK, 3 from Europe and Middle East, 4 from US
- Disciplines: Science and Humanities
- Different types of institutional bases: libraries, archives, museums, academic departments at universities, government-sponsored initiatives, k-12 educational resources
- Different types of revenue models: subscription, endowment, membership, author pays, licensing, institutional subsidy, government support, public/private partnerships, non-profit partnerships.
Part of the larger NSDL digital resource funded by NSF

Identifies digital resources for teaching and learning, including community-based web 2.0 tools (integrating current events into instruction through a blog).

Sustainability through user-generated content and community participation by middle school educators and partnerships with organizations that support middle school community.
Findings from the Case Studies

- Sustainability strategies must include financial stability of the whole resource, as well as the ongoing value of the content.
- Sustainability is a dynamic process, requiring continual investment in a resource to keep up with user needs and the competitive environment.
- Project leaders must be willing to adapt and alter their business models as conditions around them change.
- Most projects we studied rely on some part of their costs being contributed by a host institution.
- Sustainability models often include creative cost management strategies as well as effective revenue strategies.
- Collaborating with partners outside of the organization can help to amplify the impact of a project’s content, and can result in significant cost savings.
What are some challenges we observed?

- There is no consensus on which is the right sustainability model. This is a very difficult problem to solve and experimentation is necessary in order to learn what succeeds.

- Reliance on a single revenue source can put projects at risk. Hybrid business models and a portfolio of sustainability strategies is most effective.

- Hidden cost contributions can obscure the real costs of operating a digital resource. Leaders must have a clear understanding of total project costs.

- Making the switch from a “research project” to an “operational resource” is one of the most difficult but important challenges.
What contributes to success?

- **Understanding users**: their habits, needs, and preferences, and how these characteristics differ among disciplines.
- **Defining the value of a digital resource** to its user community.
- **Leadership with vision, dedication, creativity, authority, and accountability** for the project’s outcomes.
- **Willingness to make difficult decisions** and changes in the project’s plan and staff when necessary for its success.
- **Ability to create partnerships** to share costs, gain skills and experience, and build on existing infrastructure.
- **Skill in demonstrating the value of the resource** to its host institution, partners, or collaborators.
- Expertise in selecting, editing, and **contextualizing content for a particular audience**.
- **Ability to lead a hybrid, collaborative organization**.
Next steps: Business Planning for NSDL Pathways

- SMILE
- CLEAN
- Eco-Ed Digital Library