

Predicting the Future of Databases

FORETELLING THE FUTURE has never been easy, but even the smartest futurist could not have foreseen the recent economic woes. Each year for the annual Database Marketplace feature (see *LJ* 5/15/03, p. 38ff.), we ask companies what are the most important trends for the upcoming year. Not surprisingly, economic gloom dominated this year's forecasts. Worrying about library budgets is only part of the picture, however, as libraries and information companies alike seek ways to bring additional high-quality digital information to users in more convenient ways.

Budget worries

Many respondents echoed Eileen Lawrence, VP, sales and marketing, Alexander Street Press, who says, "It's difficult to talk about anything other than budgets. The economy will have an impact on how we create for libraries and how libraries will plan acquisitions."

An uncertain economy means that librarians will continue to look hard at every purchase. One way information companies are responding is by developing products to serve several purposes. Multiple content types, either from linking or from multimedia design, are being brought together for new products that meet librarians' needs to get the most for their money.

Linking

Linking is one solution to getting more from limited resources. Bob Murphy, senior marketing/PR writer for OCLC, foresees "information providers working with each other to link and integrate their services to provide the most benefit to libraries and their users. Users are less likely to be concerned about where the information...is coming from, so long as they are finding it quickly and

efficiently through their preferred information service provider." Librarians also want to provide their own links that will "highlight the availability of materials in their local or group library collections."

ProQuest and CSA also see broad-

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based linking as the major trend for 2003. Terry Owen, CSA marketing VP, explains that "end users expect to be able to access full text from abstracting and indexing (A&I) databases. It is up to the aggregators and content producers to work together to make this possible. In the end, the ease of linking from A&I databases to full-text articles and from full-text information back to bibliographic resources increases both the value and utility of both types of products." The upcoming OpenURL standard will make linking even more widespread.

The most value for the money

Integrated products can go beyond linking. Beth Dempsey, manager, corporate communications, Gale, predicts that "librarians and patrons will continue to seek seamless linking to relevant information. Publishers cannot just produce disparate, independent databases. New technologies and publishing models that produce integrated, interconnected information services that unite all types of information—primary documents, periodicals, reference—will find a welcome audience."

Eric Shively, PR group leader, CAS, agrees that the integration of services remains a major trend, "with primary and secondary literature becoming increasingly available as part of the same information service."

Usage statistics also help libraries to get more for their money and help librarians make smarter purchasing and renewal decisions. Meg Keller, sales manager, North America, World Bank Publications, predicts that "as more databases/electronic reference sources are made available to libraries, librarians will grow more selective about their purchases and will look for more evidence that the databases are being used by patrons. Unique content that is not available elsewhere and which is in high demand will have the greatest value." Good usage data will also help librarians measure the value of what they offer and convey that value to constituents and funders.

Education

The importance of educating users does not disappear as budgets shrink. Librarians can relate to what Debbie Durr, manager of sales and marketing, NISC, has to say: "Students need to learn that there is much more valuable content beyond Yahoo- and Google-type searches. End users need to be better educated to alternative reference sources."

Related to education is the need to present multiple online databases in an easy-to-understand way. Laurie Katz, director of publicity, Facts On File, says, "Librarians are wrestling with how to effectively organize the databases to which they subscribe so that students and patrons can readily access the wide range of information that is available to them."

Educating users and organizing databases in understandable ways are important challenges because, according to Tammy Melo, PR manager, Knovel Corporation, "The growing diversity of the student and adult population requires different levels of access and delivery to support these diverse audiences."

The issues that affect libraries also affect the companies that serve libraries. Tough economic times affect all of us, and budget problems are the most obvious issue facing libraries today. But tough times can also spawn innovation and new ways of working together to create better electronic products.



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