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Are There Too Many Meetings?

AFTER OVER 20 YEARS, the face of online meetings is changing. As of 2001, Online World is no more, the National Online Meeting sports a new name, and ASIS (now ASIST) continues to refocus its meetings. Is the traditional online industry in trouble or were too many meetings vying for our attention and budget?

Online Inc. changes direction

Jeff and Jenny Pemberton, founders of Online Inc., started their annual meeting in 1979 as a companion for their two industry magazines, *Online* and *Database* (now *EContent*.) The autumn meeting attracted over 2000 information professionals, as the meetings moved each year around the country from San Francisco to Chicago to the East (most often Washington, DC).

A few years ago, meeting organizers decided to eliminate proceedings and contributed papers, began focusing on invited speakers, and attempted to attract an end user audience as well as information professionals. The meeting, renamed Online World, was rescheduled from late autumn to September and met in Washington two years in a row. The competition between Online World and Information Today's annual National Online Meeting (held every May in New York) began to heat up.

At the same time, the Online Inc. magazines began to change focus. Although *Online* continues to be the major information professional source for online topics, *Database* in its new incarnation as *EContent* began directing its efforts more toward database publishers and content producers.

At the September 2000 meeting in San Diego, the Pembertons announced that it would be the last Online World

conference. Instead, they will restructure their meetings to correspond more closely to the new target audiences and missions of their magazines.

Reva Basch, author of *Researching Online for Dummies* and editor of Online's "SuperSearcher" series of books, speculates that "Online Inc. took a long, hard look at the competition—especially the conference known until recently as the National Online Meeting—and decided that the industry could no longer support more than one massive, broad-spectrum conference/exhibition. On one level this mirrors the consolidation that's going on within the industry itself. On another, it indicates that the online industry is maturing, that the average attendee is already somewhat-to-very knowledgeable about online information and is ready to go deep, rather than broad, in furthering that knowledge."

Web Search University

Online World hadn't been able to keep up with the National Online Meeting in recent years and, frankly, had gotten somewhat stale. Online Inc. decided to try a different tactic to play to its strengths and differentiate it from the competition. The Online World meetings were wonderful, says Basch, "at providing the nitty-gritty search tips and tutorials that *Online* magazine has excelled at over the years." Searchers turned to *Online* and the meeting to learn tips and techniques they could immediately apply at work. Online Inc. will build on this tradition, in a smaller, more focused way, with its new Web Search University, due to launch in May.

According to Bill Mickey, editor of *EContent* magazine, "Web Search University (WSU) is a new series of medium-sized shows that...will replace the old Online World event." In this, its first year, WSU will be held twice—in Chicago from May 6–8 and in Reston, VA, from September 9–11 (www.websearchu.com). The intent, says Mickey, is to "attract a largely regional audience of serious searchers—many librarians but also a lot of specialty searchers in market research, cor-

porate development, competitive intelligence, etc."

The focus will be on practical techniques to improve searching skills of people who do it daily. This builds on what worked best at the old Online World shows. As Mickey explained, "Over the years, the topic of practical searching has always been one of the most popular at Online World events, so we're essentially taking best-of-show sessions and building them into a concentrated two-day program." Aiming to address the limitations of the old format, the new format will offer more time for the how-tos and the specifics of searching multiple fee-based online services and free web resources, without the distractions of short formal speeches held in huge lecture halls.

Mickey elaborated that attendees at the new meeting "will enjoy a much longer session format with enough time for in-depth coverage and enough space for laptops and note-taking." Although each attendee will receive a binder of handouts, the experience will not be hands-on (between 300–500 people are expected). There will be table-top exhibits but no exhibit hall.

Choosing the term "university" over "meeting" or "conference" was intentional. Online Inc. wants this event "to be an immersive educational experience." With this in mind, Mickey explained that "the instructors are searching for gurus whose day jobs involve keeping abreast of the constant changes in both fee and free web information. We want the attendees to leave the show with a ton of state-of-the-art searching skills and unique insights into web search technology."

Although I will be unable to participate in the May WSU, I wish it well. Continuing education is vital to all online searchers. How many times have you sat at a traditional conference session wishing you could hear more specific information from the speakers and ask more detailed questions? Online Inc. is counting on your answer being "many times" and providing the solution with its new innovative format.



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ONLINE DATABASES

EContent

Just as Web Search University reflects *Online* magazine, the second, more-focused show to replace Online World will reflect the content and purpose of *EContent* magazine. Former *EContent* editor Marydee Ojala, explaining the magazine's name change from *Database*, said that "as the definition of electronic content has broadened from printed literature to new media, commerce, and communications, so, too, have the interests of *EContent* readers and authors.... Creating content is something not too many librarians thought about two decades ago. Today, content creation for the intranet and even for sale on the Internet is not outside the job parameters of information professionals" (www.ecmag.net/ec2000/ojala12.html).

EContent 2001: The Content Expo will be held November 12-13 at the Santa Clara Convention Center, CA. Organizers hope to attract a wide range of "content professionals"—those responsible for aggregating, acquiring, distributing, managing, and selling digital resources. This won't be an entirely new audience for Online Inc., as the April "Buying and Selling *EContent*" show is a smaller show aimed at executives in the information industry, and *EContent* has focused on this broader audience for over a year now (www.econtent2001.com).

Still, it is more of a risk than WSU. It targets an audience less familiar with the Online Inc. name and meets in Silicon Valley just as a flagging economy, slowdown in investments in information companies, and an uncertain local power supply puts the information industry in a cautious mood. If the new show works, it will bring together a variety of players in the content world and allow cross-fertilization between information professionals and content creators.

Information Today

Online Inc.'s main competitor in the information professional market is Information Today. As Online Inc. downsizes its general meetings, Information Today's grow both in number and scope. For 22 years, the two companies directly competed with large conferences for online searchers. Now that Online World is no more, Information Today's May meeting in New York stands alone in the United States. Though long called the National Online Meeting, this also will change somewhat.

In January 2001, Information To-

day announced that the National Online Meeting will become part of an expanded conference: InfoToday 2001. To be held May 15-17 in New York, it will combine three simultaneous conferences: National Online 2001, KnowledgeNets 2001, and E-Libraries 2001. Six simultaneous tracks will focus on online searching, knowledge management, and library systems.

National Online 2001 shouldn't differ much from the old National Online Meeting. It still will combine contributed papers, keynote speeches, and other invited presentations by industry experts, plus a large exhibit hall. As usual, the sessions will include both research-based topics and practical tips. Speakers and attendees will come mostly from special and academic libraries.

The program should benefit, however, from the expansion and inclusion of the E-Libraries conference (a library

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systems-focused conference had run simultaneously with National Online for a number of years, but there was little cross-fertilization) and from the addition of a third new focus on Knowledge Management. Having a three-in-one approach should result in an expanded exhibit hall and, as exhibitors must hope, increased exhibit traffic.

Information Today also sponsors the successful Internet Librarian meeting, held in California every fall, and Computers in Libraries, held in March (www.infotoday.com).

ASIST

Even professional societies haven't resisted the urge to change conference names and focus. Late last year the members of the American Society for Information Science voted to change the group's name to the American Society for Information Science and Technology and to expand its scope to include technology applications as well as research-based topics (see "ASIST: ASIS

Born Again," Editorial, *LJ* 12/00, p. 6).

The name change followed the abandonment of a midyear general meeting each spring, owing to decreasing attendance and increasing expenses. Instead of two general meetings, ASIST will hold a single (and expanded) autumn annual meeting, plus a smaller subject-focused "summit" in winter or spring. The first summit, in April 2000 on Information Architectures, was a success in Boston, leading to a similar San Francisco meeting in February 2001. These meetings are open not just to ASIST members but also to anyone interested. The annual ASIST meeting will be held in northern Virginia in November (www.asis.org).

Oldies but goodies

General-interest meetings for librarians continue to offer a mix of online and digital library topics as well. Huge general professional meetings like the American Library Association's (ALA) and the Special Libraries Association's (SLA) annual and midwinter meetings, as well as other slightly smaller ones such as the Medical Library Association, Association of College and Research Libraries, Public Library Association, and more, continue to compete for our meeting budgets.

I asked Basch, who like me has attended hundreds of both generalized and specialized meetings over the years, how a new librarian/online searcher should choose. She believes that "everyone should have the chance to attend at least one of each. They're very different experiences. Not only do the programs vary, but the opportunities for networking, for interacting with vendors, and for direct, as opposed to passive, participation vary, too. At the larger conferences, you're generally more of an observer. At the smaller ones, you have more visibility, more of a chance to be heard. Obviously, if a small conference addresses exactly the subject area you need to learn more about, that's where you should go. But you really haven't lived, professionally speaking, if you haven't attended a massive, SLA- or ALA-scale blowout."

You will hear about a wider variety of topics, get involved in governance issues (and probably attend more parties) at ALA or SLA meetings, but for pure learning and the chance to ask specific questions, I'll take the more focused meetings. I hope they survive.