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As the Online World turns

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Abstract:

The relationship between online vendors and content providers was a major issue at the 1997 Online World conference. Other important topics included pricing of online services and Web sites of online providers.

Full Text:

THE ANNUAL Online World conference, sponsored by Online Inc., was held in Washington, D.C., September 14-17. It joins the National Online Meeting, sponsored every May in New York by Information Today, and Learned Information's Online Information Meeting in London each December as a major trade show for online information professionals. Corporate librarians/information specialists are the main attendees, along with government, academic, public, and other librarians.

This year I was asked to participate as a panelist in the wrap-up session and reflect on and predict the upcoming hot issues and products. Several themes emerged.

New partners and competitors

Online vendors and content providers may be competitors one minute and partners the next, or they may compete within one market segment and be allies in another. This may confuse customers, but the overall effect for us is often positive. Several major joint ventures between competitors were announced this fall.

UMI ProQuest Direct and Dow Jones Interactive (formerly Dow Jones News/Retrieval) will share content but for different markets. UMI has agreed to focus on the academic, public, and school libraries markets, while Dow Jones gets the corporate and other special libraries market. By dividing the marketplace this way each builds on its traditional strengths and brings new content to libraries that did not want to buy access to systems they don't know well.

UMI ProQuest Direct will add the full text of the Wall Street Journal all the way back to the 1860s, Barron's, and other Dow Jones content that had been exclusively available from Dow Jones. Dow Jones will be able to offer ABI/INFORM and the many full-text journals and magazines offered by UMI, including the image versions. Both parties will benefit, as will their customers, most of whom would probably just as soon not learn another online system.

The new World Reporter represents cooperation at the database level, rather than the system level. Dow Jones, Knight-Ridder Information Inc. (KRIL), and Financial Times together are building this database for business customers. Hundreds of newspapers from around the world are filtered for business-related articles to be added to this new full-text database. It will be available on DIALOG, DataStar, and Dow Jones Interactive.

Owners, future and former

A variation on the theme of company change is the imminent purchase of KRIL by M.A.I.D., a British market research electronic publisher best known here for its Profound online service for business end users and corporate libraries (see "GUIs Gain Prominence," LJ, February 1, 1996, p. 34, 36). If the sale goes through as expected, M.A.I.D. will purchase all of KRIL's services, including some big names in the library market (DIALOG, DataStar, and CARL.)

It is too soon to know how the move from a U.S. newspaper publisher to a British online company will affect customers. Business information sources are DIALOG's and Data-Star's biggest moneymakers, but scientific, technical, and medical (STM) sources are important to many long-time users of these services. STM databases--and the academic and public library markets--represent new territory for M.A.I.D.

There has been at least one negative turn of fortune this fall. NewsNet announced it will close its online service, which for 15 years has offered full-text access to newsletters, wire services, and trade journals, most recently through its Baton software (see "GUIs Gain Prominence," LJ, February 1, 1996, p. 34, 36).

NewsNet filled a niche that was especially useful for corporate libraries that did not want to maintain individual subscriptions to the many specialized industry newsletters. Perhaps the days of small online services are gone, as large multinational companies dominate the commercial online world and the web offers low-cost alternatives.

Back to traditional values

For the individual online searcher, many Online World sessions touched on search tips and techniques. I was surprised (and pleased) this year to see how many of these sessions focused back on traditional values of librarianship, including the importance of a good reference interview, knowing your users, and using standard selection criteria for judging the quality of electronic sources.

In "Practical Searching" and "Reference Interview" sessions, all panelists emphasized the importance of the presearch process. They advised taking preliminary steps to any search, steps that most librarians would have heard in "Reference 101" or a beginning online search class but might have dismissed as being not nearly as interesting as hands-on search skills.

These crucial first steps include determining what the question really is, not just what the client says it is; identifying all components of the question to see if you have a single search or multiple searches; thinking about the characteristics of who is asking the question, including their expertise and expectations; envisioning an ideal answer for that person; and thinking of possible sources and considering the authoritativeness and reliability of each source.

In a session on Internet searching by end users, George Plosker of Information Access Company (IAC) emphasized the need for librarians to use "what we know" in an era of ubiquitous online use "to leverage our knowledge" in formal training classes, informal instruction, and, sometimes, mediated searching. He recommends that librarians offload "common cooking" to end users, while being there for them when they want "gourmet cooking."

Some of the important knowledge and skills that librarians bring to an Internet age are the reference interview process; organization of data; awareness of the probability of success of any search; sensitivity to use, uses, and users; a tradition of service; and traditional selection criteria. It may seem simple to us but providing end users with a "Successful Searching Checklist" will help them do their work.

The importance of the human touch and expertise offered by a good information professional came out loud and clear in several sessions. The need to express that expertise in creative ways was emphasized by Cynthia Hill, manager of Sun Microsystems' library. Hill talked about the future of our profession: librarians as "extremers." Like people who participate in extreme sports such as sky surfing, rock climbing, or bungee-jumping, librarians as extremers push the comfort zone, take something familiar and expand on it, and push the envelope "to get a natural high."

Building communities

Sharing information and ideas with other information professionals is one way to learn about creative ideas. Professional organizations such as the American Library Association and Special Libraries Association serve this function, as do the many library-related listservs. Two online services that rely on the information professional market announced web-based forums that will help searchers keep up with issues as they work.

IAC's InSite Pro is a web search system that provides access to IAC databases such as Trade and Industry Database, Magazine Database, and PROMPT. In addition to searching these popular databases, InSite Pro offers a virtual place for keeping up with issues. IAC will load "White Papers" on selected topics of interest, present search tips, and offer a forum for searchers to discuss topics of interest. An IAC InSite Pro account and password are required.

KRII's Crossroads will provide news, topics, and discussion lists of interest to the professional searcher. No fees or passwords are required; to reach Crossroads, a searcher may click on the Crossroads button on the DIALOG web page or go directly to <<http://crossroads.krinfo.com/>>. The first "expert-led" discussion topic was "Core Competencies of Information Professionals."

InSite Pro and Crossroads represent the first effort to provide for information professionals what Ei Village does for engineers. They are the first comprehensive sites aimed at information professionals, offering the databases we need, presented in a way we can use, with connection to the people and issues of interest to our professional lives.

No more Internet angst

In previous Online World meetings there was a decided feeling that the World Wide Web somehow posed a threat to information professionals. This paranoia was just about gone this year, as online searchers discussed web resources as another tool in the process of searching for information or helping others to search.

Comparisons of the most popular Internet search engines such as AltaVista, HotBot, InfoSeek, and Lycos repeatedly show that searchers must use more than one search engine for a comprehensive search. Each search engine retrieves different web sites for the same query, and no one engine retrieves everything. This reaffirms in the web environment what searchers have known for a long time in the commercial online world: a truly comprehensive search is difficult and, probably, impossible. A combination of the

web, commercial online services, and print resources are a necessity in reference work today.

The "used car" syndrome

While the web is lowering everyone's cost expectations, significantly lower prices have yet to hit most segments of the commercial online world. One major change in the last few years is that the model for pricing electronic resources continues to shift from a transactional one (a taxi cab model) to a subscription one (buying a car at the lot), where librarians spend lots of time negotiating prices and terms. One beleaguered special librarian in the audience said she felt like she does when she buys a used car--she goes away with the nagging feeling she could have done better.

Sessions on price negotiations reaffirmed this "used car syndrome" in a world where most site license prices are individually negotiated. The more a library approaches the negotiation from a position of strength, the better the prices should be. Thus, the library that buys through a consortium or buys several databases from the same vendor will likely do better than the individual buyer. Volume discounts, group rates, and member prices all will lower advertised subscription prices. [For an in-depth view of the licensing story, see Ann Okerson's "Copyright or Contract?" LJ, September 1, p. 136-139.]

Libraries have asked for site licenses so online services can be budgeted just as print resources are, but paying for all electronic resources up-front can be expensive. Site licenses are recommended for those resources that will be used the most, while transactional pricing fits lesser-used databases.

Pricing will continue to fluctuate in the next few years as the Internet drives price expectations down. Online news and some business sources likely will rely more on advertising to keep subscription or transaction prices down, just as print newspapers do. Libraries and end users may be able to choose between a low-cost version of an electronic news source that is full of ads and a higher-priced ad-free version.

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