

Online World 2000

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of commerce for each customer. It's important to recognize that information is a product. Some features of information that can be sold are the data itself, its currency, or a service based on the information.

To sample the Practical Searching track, I attended a session entitled "Search Strategies for the Serious Researcher" that featured three, advanced, and highly respected expert searchers. Reva Basch, Mary Ellen Bates, and Jan Tudor discussed some of their strategies for finding information for their customers.

Basch went back to the basics, examining the questions one must ask in deciding where to find information: Is online the way to go? Is the information the kind that would be found on the Web? What are the user's needs? Who would know the answer? Would it be found on their Web site? It's important to think about these issues before plunging into a search engine or an online vendor's service.

Bates used a case study to illustrate how she searches. She noted that we must break our old and comfortable habits as we move from traditional online to Web searching. She often starts with company or background sites to understand the issues, and then moves on to databases, following the links she uncovers. She finds it useful to sit back and think about the search at several points as it unfolds.

Tudor often uses a collection of reference books in her searches. She finds encyclopedias, almanacs, and yearbooks helpful because they contain articles written by authorities and provide an overall picture of a subject.

Day Three

The final day of the conference began with a keynote address by Steve Arnold, a frequent conference speaker and technology expert. He focused on the search process and the "R" technologies: Revenue, Research, Re-engineering, and Relationships (among people, information, and value). These technologies are important because

they help put information in context, promote new ways to solve problems, and add value through technology. Two triggers that Arnold sees are virtual databases such as Napster, Gnutella, and freenets, and smart agent software, which often identifies a key to system use and expected user behavior. He discussed four keys to survival and success in today's environment:

- Access—A way for people to get to you and communicate with you. Marketing is more important than technology. Arnold identified chat or instant messaging as a killer application.
- Bonding—Forms relationships and enhances communication and discussion. The rise of auction sites like eBay has established a new way of buying and selling.
- Mixing—Lets people get together and form networks. It makes people feel like they belong to a group.
- Nesting—Keeping users at your site. Search engines are trying to accomplish

this by developing channels, links to Web pages, and personalization capability.

Further, Arnold noted that innovation is becoming an umbrella business, affecting all areas of the information industry. Personalization is helping to expose content in more helpful and clear ways, and object models are making online functions easy to use, thus enhancing the user experience.

The final session I attended, in the Content Review track, was a special review of e-books. Two speakers active in the rapidly evolving and changing e-book industry discussed their experiences. The first speaker was Lynn Connaway of netLibrary, Inc., who gave an overview of the e-book industry and some of its recent developments. Then Nancy Gibbs from the North Carolina State University Libraries recounted some of her experiences in introducing e-books into a large academic library environment. Both of these speakers highlighted the many changes that are currently taking place in the e-book area. (For an in-depth review of

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The Final (W)Rap Session

by Péter Jacsó

When Susan M. Klopper, director of the Arthur Andersen Business Research Center, asked me to be one of the four panelists in the Schmoozin' with Susan: (W)Rap Session at the end of the Online World 2000 conference, I didn't know that it would be the last wrap session in the 22-year history of this event. As you're already aware, the Online World conference has been discontinued, and it will be replaced by two, more focused events sponsored by Online, Inc. Evidently, the company felt that online information has become a commodity and that the online world has grown tremendously—so much so that an Online World conference became too generic.

This surprise announcement gave a special spin to this final session, of course. The session's chair and the panelists—David Curle, a senior analyst at Outsell, Inc.; Susan Fingerma, principal of SMF Information Services; Libby Trudell, vice president of The Dialog Corporation; and your humble writer—tried not to wax nostalgic for too long, but rather to balance the looking-back and looking-ahead portions of the session.

Looking Back

As a longtime searcher, I wanted to corroborate the feelings of my fellow panelists with some telling search results. If you make a cross-database search in the 499 databases on DIALOG for the phrase "online information," you'll find a dearth of documents from 1979. There are only 23 databases with at least one record that matches the query. The LISA database has by far the most records with 386 postings (because "online information" is a descriptor and a part of other descriptors). Far behind, with only 10 to 20 articles, are INSPEC, Information Science Abstracts, ERIC, Social SciSearch, and NTIS. Following these, with merely two to seven records, are PASCAL, PAIS, PROMT, the Magazine Database, Compendex, the Trade & Industry Database, LC MARC, and ABI/INFORM.

Doing the same topic search for 1999, you'll find 200 databases with at least one record that matches the query. On the top is World Reporter with 1,453 hits; then a cluster of four databases, with about 1,000 hits (Trade & Industry, PROMT, Business Dateline, and ABI/INFORM); followed by a group of 600-hit databases.

Of course, comparing searches from 1979 and 1999 isn't fair. In 1979, there were far fewer databases and there were no full-text databases (on DIALOG), so the second search should have been limited to the title, abstract, and descriptor fields. Even with this restriction there would be more than 100 databases, many with 600 to 900 hits. But it's an important part of the landscape that now we can search the full text of far more databases than we could 20 years ago. That might explain what Trudell summarized as the renaissance of prepackaged information—a good mix of preselected documents of high nutritional value served ready for digestion.

At the conference, I noticed the dominant presence of some of the venerable online information services (OCLC, DIALOG, LEXIS-NEXIS, EBSCO, SilverPlatter, and Questel•Orbit) as well as the modest exhibit areas of other industry veterans (Gale and H. W. Wilson). The panel also noted the absence of some power players (Dow Jones and Bell & Howell Information and Learning). The latter two companies are very much present in the information industry, of course, but they just may not have

found Online World 2000 compelling enough to come and showcase their products and services. Quite tellingly, those absent from this event are the traditional information services that most fiercely target the end-user market. And we certainly noticed the presence of the relatively new powerhouses (such as Northern Light and netLibrary, Inc.), and the new players, like Questia Media, Inc. and METIS. Questia Media will launch a full-text, searchable, undergraduate textbook collection next year. METIS impressed me with its alpha version of a system that searches select subsets of ProQuest, Gale, and EBSCO databases.

Looking Ahead

The panelists took an inventory of the most-often-heard buzzwords at the conference; these represent the future, either directly or indirectly. Artificial intelligence, knowledge engineering, and knowledge management were high on the list, and rolled off the tongues of representatives from Google, Bright Station, and About.com in the most well-attended session, which was skillfully moderated by Greg Notess.

Fingerma picked XML, which symbolizes the importance of information structuring in a standardized format, with some customization. Klopper noticed that she hasn't heard "recall" and "precision" mentioned so much since she was in library school, and she used the term "identity awakening" to describe what many librarians/information specialists feel when realizing their potential in providing guidance to users and developers of Web products and services. We all need ongoing education, and I have no doubt that Online, Inc.'s upcoming Web University conference is a good idea for information professionals. I felt particularly so after attending this (W)Rap Session led by five information specialists. It was meant to demonstrate the inferiority of the Web search engines and products born of the Web. This session illustrated that information professionals may not always do their homework and are prone to using wrong search strategies, inefficient syntax, or ill-selected sources. They might also get Google's rank algorithm upside down, or they can't figure out what Xrefer (<http://www.xrefer.com>, a spiffy British site with respected, cross-referenced dictionaries and encyclopedias) means, deriding the name instead of glancing at the tag line or—heaven forbid—reading the help file.

In closing, Curle picked the term that he heard least often. He was surprised that he didn't hear a word throughout the entire conference about the copyright-infringement suit that was recently brought against some of the companies in attendance. I think this is one of those things that will, indeed, have a big impact on the information industry, and is worth tackling rather than just relegating to the company lawyers.

Although this was the end of the Online World conferences, the online world will keep spinning and bringing new conferences and exhibits with bright new products and services.

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