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Getting the User's Attention

By Carol Tenopir

CAN WE DELIVER INFORMATION the way our users want it—cheap, fast, and good? According to Stewart Bodner, associate chief librarian of the New York Public Library, that's what users desire and what librarians and vendors must provide. But at least in the public library world, "convenience trumps quality every time," Bodner went on to tell the audience at the annual meeting of NFAIS (National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services) in Philadelphia this February. NFAIS brought together company representatives and librarians to brainstorm ways to redirect users away from Internet search engines and the open web and toward high-quality information.

The view from Google

Perhaps no company has been more successful in grabbing user attention than Google. Keynoter Catherine Gordon, Google's director of business development, faced a crowd worried that Google's deep pockets and name recognition make it a formidable competitor. Gordon reassured content providers that Google considers them partners, rather than competitors, because the search engine brings people to the doors of publishers rather than replacing publishers. It is not interested in being a content creator but in organizing information and making it available to the global community.

Google Scholar and Google Print are what most interest and concern the NFAIS crowd. Many scholarly publishers and librarians are working with Google to have their material indexed through them, while the secondary publishers are concerned because they make their living providing indexing and abstracting with links to other publishers' full texts.

Knowing user habits

Google does not do vertical marketing, except in very large chunks (such as people interested in news or videos). Still, Google has valuable insights into what the public wants in information systems. In general, "users don't want to do anything hard," they "want it simple and fast," with "no speed bumps." That should sound familiar to librarians. A recent change, noted Gordon, is that users have "switched from surfing to snacking." She compares current search engine habits to a "well-stocked refrigerator," where users start with a search engine, pick a site, return to the search engine, pick the next one, etc., until they are full. Not too different from Marcia Bates's well-known "berry picking" analogy, where Internet users wander from bush to bush until their buckets are full.

The information providers in the room took note of Gordon's prediction that "deep, rich content in all forms will be the norm. This is where brand makes the difference to rapid acceptance or rejection."

Are users more sophisticated?

Several speakers echoed the seemingly contradictory observation that users are getting more sophisticated in searching but want only what they can get quickly and conveniently. Perhaps sophistication shouldn't be confused with time spent online—many users remain perpetual novices who trust the search engines to do all of the hard work. That is why Google wants "all solutions to be automated" and why it continually refines the search engine.

Bodner points out that "the general public wants to be self-sufficient." Public librarians don't do much intermediation anymore but must work with both "digital natives"—who have grown up with information technology—and "digital immigrants"—the older generation. Specialists in academia or companies may have different expectations.

Is good enough enough?

Leigh Watson-Healy of Outsell reported on recent surveys of over 30,000 academic and corporate online end users. She observed that academic information users are getting more sophisticated, savvy, and independent. They evaluate usefulness and quality of information, but "convenience factors are looming large" and for many users "good enough is good enough."

> The demand for mediated searching for difficult topics remains high in corporations

In the corporate world, in contrast, Outsell's surveys report a return to reliance on information staff and the company library and a bit of a retreat from the open web. Independent purchasing of content is down strikingly from just four years ago—users either rely on their organization to purchase information or want it for free. Barbara Peterson, global knowledge management manager, EcoLab, observed that the demand for mediated searching for difficult topics remains high in corporations.

Although web search engines appeal to diverse users, librarians and publishers make their mark by providing services and products that speak to the special needs of a wide variety of subject disciplines and levels of user needs. Convenience, important to everyone, isn't enough. Quality information provided in a convenient way, with little or no direct cost to the end user, is still the hallmark of library and information producers.

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