Against the Grain

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Opinions and Editorials

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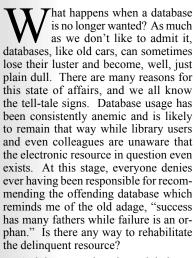Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Coping with an Unloved Database

by **Steve Shapiro** (Sprague Library, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043) <shapiros@mail.montclair.edu>

What happens when a database is no longer wanted? As much as we don't like to admit it, databases, like old cars, can sometimes lose their luster and become, well, just plain dull. There are many reasons for this state of affairs, and we all know the tell-tale signs. Database usage has been consistently anemic and is likely to remain that way while library users and even colleagues are unaware that the electronic resource in question even exists. At this stage, everyone denies ever having been responsible for recommending the offending database which reminds me of the old adage, "success has many fathers while failure is an orphan." Is there any way to rehabilitate the delinquent resource?
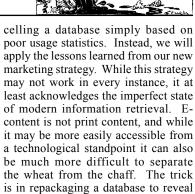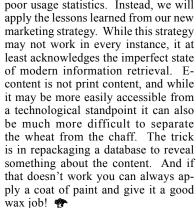
As it happens, there just might be an antidote for this perplexing condition. At **Montclair State**, there was one such database (not overly priced) which shall remain nameless (but was related to international affairs) that we rolled out with great fanfare a couple of years ago but failed to meet expectations. It had every reason to succeed. A faculty member recommended the database, and the content seemed unique and timely. Yet, it did fail. The product's usage statistics (based on searches performed) were abysmal. At that point, many of my colleagues suggested that we drop the resource as renewal time approached. Even the faculty member who recommended it, informed of the database's poor usage, disavowed ever wanting the database. We could have dropped the database but decided not to. What next?

There were several steps we took to try to reverse its disappointing performance. First, we redefined the nature of the database. It was no longer just something related to international affairs but something also related to international business because it contained economic analyses and forecasts on a country-by-country basis. Therefore, we started listing it under the subject headings "Business/Economics" as well as "Political Science" on our database webpage. Secondly, we requested MARC records from the publisher in order to publicize the content in our **OPAC**. This was only natural since the product also included books, case studies, as well as conference proceedings (although MARC records only existed for the case studies). Thirdly, we started marketing the database on the news feed on our Website as well as the Library's Blackboard Community page. In addition, we contacted faculty to inform them of the value of this resource. Another option we considered was to append a description like "International Affairs/Economics" to the database name (see "What's in a Name?" in the Sept. 2009 issue of *Against the Grain*, v.21#4, p.44) to better reflect the subject coverage of the database. Encouragingly, usage of the resource increased over nine-fold this past year (2009-2010) after implementing our new marketing campaign. The volume of activity, however, was still lower than we would have liked.

As a result of our experience, we will probably think twice before cancelling a database simply based on poor usage statistics. Instead, we will apply the lessons learned from our new marketing strategy. While this strategy may not work in every instance, it at least acknowledges the imperfect state of modern information retrieval. E-content is not print content, and while it may be more easily accessible from a technological standpoint it can also be much more difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. The trick is in repackaging a database to reveal something about the content. And if that doesn't work you can always apply a coat of paint and give it a good wax job! 🐃

Trend Overload

by **Elaine Robbins** (Reference and Instruction Librarian, The Citadel, Charleston, SC 29409) <elaine.robbins@citadel.edu>

"Ask Yourself Why, Consider Your Purpose, Create Boundaries, and Communicate Your Plan"

In a recent conversation with one of my colleagues, we found ourselves (and our heads) swimming in terms that describe the newest trends that librarians are working with daily. I use the word "trend" to describe everything from libraries' social networking sites to trendy catalog improvements — and everything in between. In 2010, a library can have a Website, a blog, a **Facebook** page, a **Twitter** account, a presence on **YouTube**, an interactive catalog, and many other non-traditional communication and Web 2.0-like outreach methods. It seems like any method of promotion, marketing, or communication can be used by libraries. The days of library news or information being updated by a flyer in the lobby or at the front desk are archaic, but it is worth questioning whether the current methods are effective. Similarly, to make the library's content and Web presence more appealing, libraries are tapping into patrons' love of Web 2.0, wherein tagging, sharing, and communicating are the names of the game. By moving into the worlds in which our patrons dwell (the Internet, **Facebook**, **Twitter**, for example), is the library contributing to the barrage of information that patrons (in our case, undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and staff) digest, then disregard? The question is hypothetical, naturally, but it is worth examining.

Librarians, and other information professionals, observe patrons, review the literature on current trends in library science, then try to remain relevant and flexible by adjusting to the findings. Sometimes, the adjustments are effective and efficient, such as the **Toronto Public Library's** proposed automated library kiosk in Union Station, Toronto (*http:// www.thestar.com/news/gta/article/845357--city-library- considering-book-dispensing-kiosk-at-union-station*), which will reach out to patrons, but proposes to save millions by not building a fully functioning library branch. Sometimes, the adjustments are time-consuming and with questionable benefits (such as a "slicker," more expensive catalog that presents tagging options, tag clouds, and other Web 2.0 features hoping to appeal to the patron who is used to social networking sites or *Amazon.com*). Certainly, these examples of technology trends can be successful for different libraries based on the patron population and their familiarity with the trend, but it's important to question whether or not the trend will last and if it has palpable benefits. Often, I am assisting a student with a research paper assignment, and the student is uncertain of the difference between a book chapter and a journal article; this is a fundamental concept that a student must understand, yet many do not. Neither a slicker browser, a **YouTube**