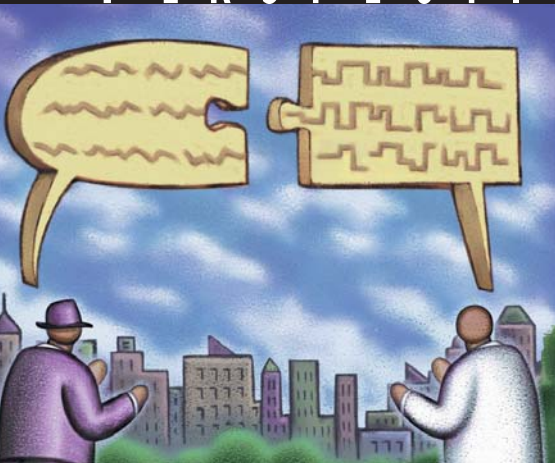


PERSPECTIVES: A Members' Forum



"Perspectives" serves as a members' forum and features articles on issues of concern to the profession.

The Web Needs Information Professionals

Are Information Professionals Ready?

by David Kemper

The Scene

The Web is changing. Recent events, such as the collapse of several dot-com companies and the increased awareness of and emphasis on Web design and usability, have revealed that the Web is still in its infancy, but growing, and learning to establish a place in the bigger world of information. The Web is also, as never before in its 10-year history, in need of the skills and knowledge of information professionals from all fields, be it medicine, law or business. But are information professionals really ready to shape the future Web of information?

The Argument

Information professionals, while skilled at serving patrons in such areas as law libraries and business information centers, need to become more proficient with the applications that shape the Web. In short, information professionals need an increased knowledge of, and more hands-on experience with, the tools — HTML, JavaScript, CGI, etc. — and theory — Web design, user interface design, etc. — that make the Web work.

Yesterday's Reality

A few months ago it seemed like the whole world was about to be engulfed in dot-coms. Everything from shopping to dining to whatever obscure hobby one can think of was anchoring on the Web. Some Web sites were sitting idle, accommodating a few curious visitors, while others, like Amazon.com, made their computer-savvy creators overnight multimillionaires. Wall Street and other banking executives were announcing, rather prematurely it turned out, the end of the "old economy" and the dawning of the "new economy," where everything under the sun could be bought or sold over the Web.

Then something happened.

Today's Reality

The dot-com bubble burst, popping loud enough to send shockwaves through the tech economy. In the aftermath, in which we continue to see the specter of bankrupt dot-com companies, the 20- and 30-something owners are left scratching their heads. As smart as they were in establishing their Web site presences and garnering financial support, and as ingenious as some of their sites were, they did not understand users and what those users really wanted. Although they understood every aspect of HTML coding and how they could attract venture capital, they simply did not know how to deliver the goods and satisfy users' needs.

A business news article in the Jan. 2, 2000, *Montreal Gazette*, "Dot.com Deaths," does a fine job explaining what went wrong in the dot-com world. Essentially, reporter David Streifeld explains that, while many users were eager to venture online to buy, they tended to frequent and purchase items from sites that had actual physical counterparts. So while Web sites such as Yahoo! and Amazon.com did brisk business, retailers such as Sears and Wal-Mart did even better business.

The reasons for this are plenty. People are more comfortable with the familiar than with the unfamiliar, they trust brand names, and so on. But I am suggesting that these

well-established retailers, who use the Web as an extension of their business, simply know how to deliver the goods and satisfy their customers' needs.

Moving away from the world of retailing to the world of legal information, the question is: Who knows how to deliver the goods and satisfy user needs? The answer is: librarians and information professionals. Now if librarians and information professionals are the experts in information dissemination, why then aren't they more involved in the Web-design process?

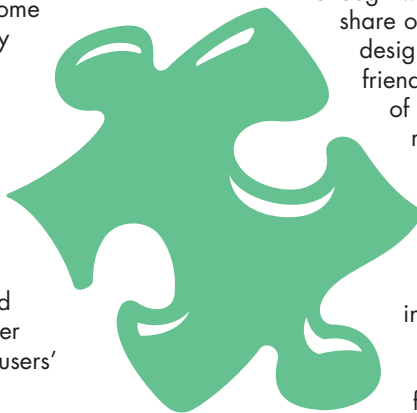
The Need Is Out There ...

Ever come across a Web site whose designer has created a Frankensite — the kind where the designer has sewn together a hideous color scheme, a bunch of annoying animated GIFs and a confusing navigation system ... not to mention an organization of information that leaves the reader pumping the "back" button on the browser in frustration? To make matters worse, this site claimed to carry accessible, up-to-date legal information.

Anyone who travels along the Web long enough will come across a large share of poorly planned, poorly designed, and, basically, un-user-friendly Web sites. If the world of Web-based information remains in these incapable hands, the information that users seek will be that much harder to find. And researchers, who often need their legal information in a hurry, will have their information needs only partially fulfilled.

Web design is a serious issue, especially for librarians and information professionals interested in the Web of information forming in the world today. Unfortunately, the Web is far too big now to be completely re-designed. However, it is at a stage when new ideas can and must be injected into the sagging foundation.

How can librarians and information professionals make a positive impact on the Web when two seemingly untouchable players — technology and money — dominate it? On the one hand, there are computers and computer programmers; and on the other, big business. Both are



integral to the proper functioning of the Web, but neither have the skills — the librarian skills, I might add — to select, organize, retrieve and transmit information. For information professionals to make an impact on the Web, they must become more adept in and less intimidated by computer technology and business matters.

The Plan

In light of the fact that the structure of the Web is undergoing changes, both subtle and obvious, and that the business model that gave life to dot-com mania is undergoing some well-deserved scrutiny, it is now, more than ever, crucial for

information professionals to become involved and take their rightful place in the evolution of the Web. To do so, information professionals should receive intense training to handle the challenges and possibilities that computer technology heralds. They should be given more opportunities to learn the necessary computer and management skills in order to stand against the dominant players of the Web. A well-rounded information professional, proficient in his or her field of specialization, as well as capable and competent in the fields of computers and business, is a necessity.

This change will require much time and effort. But it is necessary in order to maintain the effectiveness and viability of the profession in the 21st century. Librarians and information professionals establish standards in many different information environments, and the Web should not be an exception.

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