Being content with content

Ivan Trundle

Manager, systems
and publishing
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

Forget the technology — focus on the content and develop a personality

Having just returned from *Internet World 99*, a heavily suit-laden talkfest (in stark contrast to long-bearded geek-laden conferences of yesteryear) on all matters internet, a casual observer might have concluded the the internet industry revolves around technology to such an extent that without regular and inexorable advances in technology, the internet would shrivel up and die. Not only that, but the visionary Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's prognostic 'the medium is the message' appears to have been applied to all forms of media — new and old. Building world-beating websites, for example, merely required the right technology able to deliver to the right people — who presumably also have the right technology. What surprised me about this conference (and it is always good to be surprised at such events), in the light of the volume of data thrust upon hapless delegates, was that there was barely a candle of light to illuminate the topic of content, and how to make the internet a great, or even rather good, place to be.

Granted, conferences such as these are rarely prescriptive. But all the same, apart from the usual smatterings of where this is all heading in five years time (ridiculous hyperbole notwithstanding), practically no-one was prepared to discuss content over delivery. Even content regulation — a hot topic for the library and information sector — was lightly dismissed, in that only a handful of delegates bothered to turn up to listen to the debate on this issue. Apart from one wit dryly remarking that the government of the day did not bother to regulate fax transmissions and content before facsimile technology became all-pervasive, there was little added to the debate.

The whole conference led me to believe that the internet now supports little else other than gambling and share-trading (spot the difference). This turn-around is obviously fuelled by the public float of many Australian and overseas businesses and the boom in the value of internet-related companies. Yet this boom appears to be overshadowing the fact that more and more material is appearing online, in all manner of forms — much to the dismay of those attempting to traverse and navigate the internet with any serious intent.

A glimmer of hope came from one speaker, declaring that good websites needed personality — in spades. As always at these conferences, Amazon.com was wheeled out as as the paragon of a great site. So much so that of the sixty per cent of internet traffic that leaves Australia, sixty per cent of it arrives on Amazon.com's doorstep. If these figures are to be believed (and who can argue with such impressive figures — they just have to be right...), then we should all be looking to Amazon.com for inspiration.

Does Amazon.com have personality? How does one build personality into a website? Instinctively, I knew exactly what the speaker was referring to the moment that he mentioned the word 'personality'. Some sites have it, and some don't. Those that focus on the end-user and strive to deliver really useful services or information (as does Amazon.com) have made a significant step in the right direction. But it takes more than pure end-user focus. Really great websites not only deliver the goods (so to speak), but also offer a 'human touch' by demonstrating that there are real people behind the pages viewed — people who genuinely want to communicate with those who visit. As much as I loathe using the word in this context, a level of 'interactivity' is added to the equation. Good sites attract and encourage visitors, but great sites engage their visitors.

This is where many a fledgling website runs off the rails. Offering pages as a direct translation of pre-existing paper documents (even glossy brochures) can be a recipe for an impersonal, non-engaging cobweb of a site. Invariably, what appeals in paper rarely attracts on the web, especially if presented with the same mind-set and overall philosophy. Now that so many new users are coming online and seeing the internet as a jumble of websites with the added spice of a little bit of e-mail, it is even more important to identify the reason for having a website and using e-mail to effectively communicate with the ever-increasing mass of online users.

In the early days, internauts (internet users) could be categorised as librarians, researchers, academics, and information technology protagonists. Their main use of the internet was to retrieve and disseminate information across organised, and easily locatable resources. Nothing could be further from the truth today. A new wave of internauts has arrived, with no prior background in information technology and no great reverence for or commitment to order and understanding. Even automated search engines have buckled under the strain of the new wave of publishing (only seventeen percent of the world's web pages are indexed — and possibly seventy-five percent of those indexed are not worth indexing in the first place). Content is therefore becoming even more important, and the ability to engage visitors who come to your site will be measure of how well you are able to translate the resources that you have into a format that your visitors want, whether it be stock values, book prices or information on upcoming events and/or opening hours. Give your visitors want they want — Amazon.com worked that one out long ago. ∎

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