

Information Overload

Issue 63, December 2007

Welcome:

Welcome to the December issue of Information Overload. Another year has come to an end. I hope you managed to achieve everything you set out to achieve throughout the past 12 months, and that the next 12 months will be just as rewarding for you.

At Information Enterprises, 2007 saw the launch of our new website. For the first time, we have been able to accept registrations for our training courses and employment services - online, and of course take orders for the books that we publish. We are also able to accept direct signup for our newsletters – Information Overload and the Registrant Resources Edition of Overload.

And what of the New Year?

Our training calendar for the first 6 months of the year has been set. We will be offering new courses including TRIM Archiving, Desktop and Power User. Of course that doesn't help if you don't use the TRIM system, so we will be running our usual range of training courses throughout the year. Our consulting calendar begins straight after the Christmas and New Year break along with a push to try and find people to join our team of contractors. As an employment agency, people are our life blood, and we need you. So if you have any spare time on your hands and would like to undertake some short-term project work, long-term project work, or fixed-term contracts – Rachel would love to hear from you.

We close out the year of Information Overload by looking at the role of the “modern” library in today's society.

Or perhaps the title should have read, is there a role for the library in today's society? As you can imagine, this edition may get a little emotive at times, but perhaps now is the time to discuss the many issues we face in this technologically driven society. Just so you know, I am a qualified librarian, and worked directly in the industry for more than 20 years. However, as you may have realised by now, I no longer handle the day-to-day operations, so admit that I sit squarely on the fence on this one.

We would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition onto friends, colleagues and other interested readers. Please note that all back issues of this edition, as well as our registrant resources edition can be read and/or downloaded from our web site – <http://www.iea.com.au/web/Publications> should any of the topics be of interest and use.

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In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Forging strategic alliances
- Moving beyond the traditional library service: get feedback

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- Into the world of virtual reality
 - Going beyond the corporate intranet
- A Thought to ponder

Forging strategic alliances

I'm going to start off with stating the absolute blindingly obvious, but please bear with me. "A library and information centre should support the business needs of the organisation to which it is aligned." As I said, I know you know that. But what I would like to know is this – do you know where your organisation is headed in the short, medium and long-term?

When was the last time you spent time with your manager/supervisor/line manager. Chances are it was a one-way meeting with you telling them what you've been doing – this may take the form of a weekly or monthly stat report, or your annual performance review. Nothing wrong with that, in fact it is important for the organisation to know that the library / information centre is more than just a black hole into which money is sent.

With the case of the stats report, you will advise your line manager of things like: Number of loans, number of new borrowers, number of new books, Inter Library Loans, items catalogued etc etc. But unless you do some additional analysis, for example – changes over the past 12 months, these stats have limited impact.

Imagine then, what kind of impact those stats would have if you can annotate your report with a series of pertinent questions / statements with regards to the organisations long/medium and short-term goals.

For example, if you know what research projects are going to be undertaken, what new subjects will be taught, if your organisation is planning on acquiring another company, what areas of concerns are facing the general public and so on then you will be able to determine which way your library and information service will need to move in order to meet these new demands.

However, if you don't know what your organisations short-term, medium or long-term goals are, then you will lose the opportunity to ask for additional funding to provide the extra services / books / journals / subscriptions that you will need in order for your clients to achieve these goals. And if you don't know what your colleagues will be working on, then you won't know the types of research questions that you may well be facing in the not too distant future. Whilst this may be relatively easy to do for corporate libraries, even academia, it can be a little more difficult for the public library sector to ascertain. But if you think firmly outside the triangle, you may well be able to determine some interesting trends. For instance – are companies moving into the area? Are new schools being built? How many houses will be built in the next 12 months? Are companies moving out of the area? This kind of information will impact on the kinds of service that you will be expected to provide.

Going back to the corporate side of things just for a minute, if your organisation is moving into new areas, then chances are that the organisation may not need some of the items that you currently subscribe to. This has the effect of being a double win for your library / information centre. You can save money for your organisation by culling those items which are no longer part of the core business activities. And, you can promote the new material based on the new project / research areas that your organisation will be moving into.

Orders for the new material can be placed well in advance, and you will be seen to be the person with all the right answers...because you asked the right questions in the first place.

Moving beyond the traditional service: get feedback

One of the first rules in moving beyond the traditional library service is to know what your customers want – and then providing it – preferably in the best, most cost effective and efficient way possible.

For those of you who work in a busy library or information centre, you could argue that you do that on a daily basis – simply by answering customers and clients requests when they ask you a specific question. This reactive type of service, may have worked in the past, but as we have said before, if you want to move with the company you need to do some form of proactive service delivery as well. And you do that by placing yourself at the forefront of people's minds.

You may have a series of “solutions” already packaged that you issue on a daily/weekly or monthly basis. This includes providing:

- Alerts or SDI's;
- New acquisition bulletins;
- Table of Contents and/or abstracting services;
- Bulletins and Newsletters highlighting items of interest (web pages, books, journals etc);
- Journal displays in common areas, journal circulation (routing);
- Open days; and
- Displays.

However, this type of marketing is of limited value if it's not what your clients or customers actually want you to provide.

How many of you have taken the time to ask your clients what it is they want to see your library and/or information service provide for them?

Oh no, I can hear the groans going around now....surveys!

Well, surveys are a good place to start – but in reality the best type of “survey” is not achieved by people filling in an anonymous form, but the types of comments you receive from your clients after they've stood in a queue waiting to be served.

One of the most successful marketers of all time has to be Richard Branson and his Virgin Empire. The reason that Virgin was able to take on the biggest airlines in the business was simple. Mr Branson took every opportunity that he could when he was flying to and from his many business meetings, to speak to the people who happened to be flying with him.

He took the time to discover what these people liked about their flying experience, and what they didn't. And whilst price was one of the biggest draw cards, Mr Branson has used every single piece of information to open up new markets.

Richard Branson took every opportunity to ask questions. He may not have had a piece of paper on which these questions were written down, but he certainly had a mental list. But more importantly than the questions that he asked was his ability to listen.

One of the biggest drawbacks to suggestion boxes, feedback forms, questionnaires and surveys is the fact that they are completely impersonal. They are usually anonymous too, so while some people will take the opportunity to make slanderous accusations about the staff and the service, they do not give you any opportunity to follow up with further questions or be able to seek any sort of clarification from the person(s) making the statement. So how do you move onwards?

Into the world of virtual reality

It is unlikely that anyone reading this has one set of clients who all live / work in close proximity to the library service. If that were the case, then this next section would be of little interest to you. After all, your clients can wander into the library / information centre whenever they wanted something. But what happens if your client base is not based in the same building, the same part of the country or even in the same country. How do you “serve” these very important people in a way that gives them the same kinds of service experience as those people who do live and work nearby?

Consider that Australia (and apologies to our overseas readers) is a very large continent. Organisations may operate out of more than one location and people may need to travel between them. Take the mining, extractive and research industries for example. The library and information centre tends to be based at head office in the city. But your chief geologist spends a good deal of time travelling to and from the various mine sites, prospecting for additional resources, some of which may not be found in this country. What happens if he needs a vital piece of information? Can he call you “out of hours” to get the information he needs now? Or does he have to wait several hours or days for the query to be answered? Can you imagine how much money you could save the organisation that you work for by being able to provide that kind of service? I know; it can be hard to get excited about making additional money for someone else’s bottom line. However, that is why we are employed – to do exactly that.

Going back to the first round of comments we made. If you knew what areas your organisations were moving into, then you could offer some advice prior to the journey. For example, previous well reports based on similar geological structures and of course travel information. Given that some of the richest reserves are based in areas that have been fought over for centuries and feuds are still going on today, then wouldn’t it make sense to advise your colleagues of the fact that things had changed since they left? Of course, you could argue that it is up to the individual to know about whether or not his journey will be a safe one, after all it really doesn’t affect you, you don’t know they guy after all.

An extreme example.

But what about those organisations that occupy more than one floor of a particular building? Do people have time to leave their desks, wander down the several flights of stairs and to walk around the shelves trying to find what they need? Probably not. While the use of telephones and emails have made our lives a whole lot easier, if we are not at our desks when the inquiry comes through, we are still not going to be able to provide the information to our clients in a timely manner.

So what are the options? In one word – Technology!

Going beyond the Corporate Intranet:

Long before the world wide web we have come to know and love so well, people have been trying to find ways of sharing information. The earliest ideas of a computer network intended to allow general communication between parties were formulated by [J.C.R. Licklider](#) of [Bolt, Beranek and Newman](#) (BBN) in August 1962, in a series of memos discussing his "[Intergalactic Computer Network](#)" concept.

In October 1963, Licklider was appointed head of the Behavioral Sciences and Command and Control programs at [ARPA](#) (as it was then called), the [United States Department of Defense](#) Advanced Research Projects Agency.

This computer network became known as the "ARPANet" and came into existence in 1968. In 1983, the military arm "Milnet" was separated from the ARPANet, and the "world wide web" was born. Unfortunately if you didn't know where to look for the information you wanted, you couldn't find it.

Imagine a 4 drawer filing cabinet with bits of paper stuffed in it. Unfortunately no-one had thought to provide any kind of indexing or filing of this "stuff" and unless you happened upon it, could spend days trying to find what you thought was needed.

The first search engine appeared in 1990 and we thought our problems were over. For those of you with long memories, the search engine we call "Google" began life in [January 1996](#), as a research project by [Larry Page](#) and [Sergey Brin](#), two [Ph.D.](#) students at [Stanford University, California](#) with a paper entitled "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine". They hypothesized that a search engine that analyzed the relationships between websites would produce better ranking of results than existing techniques, which ranked results according to the number of times the search term appeared on a page. Their search engine was originally nicknamed "BackRub" because the system checked [backlinks](#) to estimate a site's importance. Google was not officially launched until September 1999. *(Note some information is taken from <http://wikipedia.org>, additional information from the Advanced Internet Searching training course, run by the LB).* Of course as the spammers and the hackers found out, they could manipulate this kind of ranking algorithm, and Google has had to change its parameters.

But how far do we still have to go? Even with search engines to help us, they can only index what they can see. And what they cannot see is massive. The robots and spiders that trawl the surface web harvest information, assigning the ranking algorithms allowing us to receive a list of so-called relevant information. For those of us in the information industry, we know there is more to life than Google and will delve into the deep web to find the "good stuff". Before I go on, I need to explain to the lay readers out there what I am talking about. Robots and Spiders are unable to access websites that have password protection, flashing oojahs, "click here to enter" buttons and any site that requires you to ask a question before you receive the answer. Take for example the Whitepages telephone directory. It is unlikely that if you type in the words John Smith, Keane Way, Sunderland, England into a search engine you will find his telephone address. Ask the same question of the Whitepages directory and you should. As far as I know automated robots and spiders can't type, which is why you will not find this kind of information in the surface web.

As we information professionals know, our clients (and the bean counters) may think that everything is on “the net” and because it’s “on the net” it’s free and can be found by anyone who has access to the Internet. Wrong, and wrong again.

If you have ever created a website and understand a little about search engine optimisation you will know that simply isn’t the case. If you haven’t created a website and have no idea what I’m talking about – don’t worry you are not alone, even some of the so called web developers don’t understand the importance. The important part of any website is content. Specific, keyword rich content, linked to the individual page names of each page of your site, along with other relevant sites that link to yours. Next time you are on the web, have a look at the blue bar at the top of your screen, does it reflect the site that you are visiting, or could it belong to any generic website. And when you’ve done that, check the URL bar – you know the bit where you type in the web address....does the address change depending on the page you are visiting? Hint – it should.

In determining where in the search engine ranking these websites should sit, the robots and spiders take all these things into consideration before placing the site you are after on page 96.

The other major problem with the Internet that we know is that everyone can create a website and probably has. So we have to contend with opinion, bias and hearsay in our quest to find quality information. It can be hard for us to keep pace with the rate of change with regards to technology, the new sites, the online diaries (blogs), the news feeds (RSS), the social interaction sites, so how can we expect our clients to do it?

Well if we want to stay in the forefront of our readers minds then we are going to have to do exactly that. We can deliver our information to the desks of our clients, using this same technology. We can “blog” about the types of inquiry we are being asked and the results we have found. And yes you can have closed networks on sites such as twitter (<http://twitter.com>) that allow you to share your information only with those people who need to know. Perhaps not a good example as you have to explain your findings in 140 characters or less.... But you get my point.

We can align our research into new fields using the strategic information we have discussed with our CIO and we can prove once and for all that we have a place in the heart of every business.

With many thoughts
Lorraine

A Thought to Ponder:

“For a list of all the ways technology has failed to improve the quality of life,
please press three.”

Alice Kahn