Info Tech Column
Due Nov. 4, 2008
Information Outlook, Dec. 2008 Issue

Access is Not Equal to Know How
by Stephen Abram

We're still hearing that hackneyed old comment, "Most everything's available on the web now, so exactly why do we need librarians?" It's coming from all quarters and other professionals too. In financially tumultuous times, when every sous is being scrutinized to within a centimeter of its life, we can expect this ugly example of shallow thinking to raise its head again. So, it's time for reminding ourselves of quick ways to respond to these comments. Make no mistake. It's not an option to leave these challenges unaddressed, whether they're explicitly spoken or just lay their as underlying assumption to conversations. If we don't respond we put our organizations at risk. We have a professional duty to educate and inform our world about the role of librarians and information professionals. So, here's a modest attempt to develop a few strategies for talking to key folks in our world who may try to hurt our organizations and society at large because they haven't thought through the real world issues of a web that:

- Contains too much information;
- Has no clear bias toward quality or authority;
- Is subject to manipulation by third parties through search engine optimization;
- Offers potentially different answers depending on your geo-location, personal profile or stored previous search behaviours;
- Is primarily focused on meeting those needs of its primary customers – advertisers – which may include your competitors;
- And, is available to everyone which means that you have absolutely no competitive advantage.

So, what kind of story can we tell that gets our point across in the context of those folks who would seek to cut our staff, cut our budgets or eliminate our roles entirely?

Bean Counters

We have an interesting relationship with these folks - MBA's, CPA's, CA's, financial professionals. Organizations value their role as keepers of the statistics and measures and making dollar based analyses of our overall enterprise or program success. As a general rule, they often look for cost savings. Often they have incomplete understandings of the operation of some units beyond the

ledger. This isn't bad; it's an opportunity for education. So, one of your valued bean counter colleagues comes up and utters the dreaded question, "Most everything's available on the web now, so exactly why do we need librarians?" Don't run screaming from the room and don't leave the question unanswered. It's an opportunity. People love being agreed with. Agree that it's a valid question and that perhaps reviews of what is useful, safe, high quality and authoritative might be well worth offering to the enterprise. And note that you do that regularly, even on an hourly basis. Then suggest that there are greater opportunities for savings. As their eyes widen in anticipation note that bigger saving would come from putting a calculator on all staff desks and drastically reducing the number of number crunchers in the organization. After all, if putting free content and information tools on every desktop instantly made all workers ideally information literate, then a calculator which contains all the numbers in the world and all the formulae would clearly endow everyone with the abilities for advanced bookkeeping, budgeting, auditing and financial analysis. Putting tools on desktops merely gives people tools and giving people content merely supplies them with content. The magic is in making sure they're the right tools, trained properly and that they align accurately and competitively with the organizations mandate, vision and need for productivity. *Tools don't come with the knowledge to use them.*

Legal Beagles

Years ago a administrative officer at a major national law firm closed the firms library and laid off nearly all of the librarians in favour of the web and intranet alone. Lawyers, attorneys, barristers and the like and true information junkies and .all of their work involves information based decision making. The world of librarians was appalled. Of course, it wasn't long before librarians started trickling back into the firm. The experiment was a disaster, even if there was no public admission. In parts of my career I was involved in projects that placed a very significant amount of common law cases, statutes, treatises, analyses and more online. My most counts the law in North America is one of the most electronic domains. So, "Most of the law is electronic now, so exactly why do we need librarians?" Again, does anyone feel it is now needless to consult a legal professional for legal advice? After all everything is there for the searching. *Clearly, there is a difference between access to content and know-how - a big difference.*

Vampires and Other Medical Pros

I often tell the story of a major illness I once lived through. I believed at the time that I was a somewhat talented information professional I decided to search the web and the big well-known databases like MEDLINE about my illness and treatment options. Aside from the law, a huge corpus of medical literature and major medical reference books are also easily available and lots of information and many answers are out there for the searching. It was a personal disaster. I

scared myself halfway into a depression as I learned every awful thing that could happen, every contraindication, every potential for death and a long cruel journey there to boot. I fled into the warm embrace of an excellent, local, consumer health information professional who provided me with just enough information at my level of information literacy and put me back on the road to health.
Information has context and so do end users. Although it might change, at this point search engines and electronic information does a very poor job of sensing the end user's specific context. Google cannot tell the difference between kids in grade nine searching STD's for his health project and a worried adult needing a support group. It's just a big stupid empty search box. Personal service senses the difference easily.

Geeks

Enterprises are based on and make their success on what is in the pipes, not just the pipes. A plumber can practice her skills whether the pipes are flowing with water, gas, oil, oxygen or whatever. There are subtle differences but the basic skills are similar. When our pipes – online, web or intranet - are flowing with information, questions and collaboration, we improve the quality of what is in the pipes. This is an opportunity for teamwork with the people who know how to make the pipes better. It's a desirable relationship to be on the best of terms with the people in control of the keys to the technology. Either way, if any IT professional tells you that "Most everything's available on the web now," simply ask him to show you! Have fun.

The Rest in the Information and Knowledge-based Economy

Either way, we are undeniably entering a world where the best jobs, the bet positions and the best strategies are in the field we have chosen – libraries and information science. It's time for us to find your voices and use them.

Tough times need tough people.

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