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People Profile: Ellen McCullough

Editor

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Search engines are everywhere, and they are meeting expectations, according to Needham, who cited the Pew Internet & American Life Project and ComScore Networks August 2004 study, “The Popularity and Importance of Search Engines” (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PDF-Data_Memo_Searchengines.pdf). According to the study, US Internet users turn to search engines for “convenience and effectiveness.” Eighty-seven percent find what they’re seeking most of the time, expressing “satisfaction, trust, self-confidence.” Forty-four percent use search engines to discover “valuable information that they absolutely need.” In June 2004, there were 3.9 billion searches, an average of 33 searches per person, an average of 4.4 searches per visit, and an average visit time of 41 minutes. Using search engines is second only to e-mail as the most popular online activity.

Search engines are so ubiquitous and pervasive, according to Needham, that they now condition users’ expectations of information resources. Users have grown accustomed to an identifiable, easy to find and use search box; a default to all subjects; formats and full-text, formulaic relevancy ranking vs. mere raw keyword counting; and self-organizing results informed by custom taxonomies, with word proximity parameters.

Undergraduates are the most likely adopters of eBooks...but they don’t find them.

For the most part, the eBooks that a search engine user can find are texts in the public domain, mostly pre-1923, from Bartleby and other advertising-sponsored reference resources, as well as such consumer purchase options as Amazon, eBooks.com and individual publishers. While search engine users can find these online, the riches available at their local libraries, subscription-based content, eBook platforms, databases or aggregated collections, are for the most part, invisible to them.

How can we enable discovery of eBooks? One effort Needham cited is the Open WorldCat project. OCLC opened WorldCat records to search engine indexing, and started with a pilot that indexed 2 million abridged records for most-cataloged books. They had more than 3 million inbound links in September, and expanded to index all 57 million WorldCat records in early November.

Google Print may also enable discovery of eBooks. Google takes all types of print books (reference, scholarly, technical, trade) and makes them more discoverable by allowing end users to view brief slices of the full-text content. Hits on the content refer the end user to an appropriate sales channel as designated by the publisher of the work. Users have also requested these results link to libraries.

Needham noted that it’s up to the eBook and e-journal publishers and aggregators to make their content available for indexing (and hence, discovery and use) by search engine users. This would require replication of the e-journal’s landing pages for abstracts (book description, sample chapter, perhaps controlled full-text browsing),

Libraries would benefit from a library locator to authentication solution, which Needham described as “Open WorldCat meets ATHENS.” Furthermore, search engines should be welcomed into the library family, as library users are already using them as their launching pad for research. Search engines are like any database: as accurate and useful as their users—particularly gatekeeping users—make them.

Meaningful Career Achievement: Anything where I’ve come up with a new idea that has reached others: coming up with new ways to present content, thinking up book titles, writing articles.

Goal I Hope to Achieve Five Years From Now: I want librarians and library patrons to think of xrefer first when they think about where to go for answers to their reference questions.

Where Do I See the Industry in Five Years: As more and more content becomes available online, there will be even more of a need for services like xreferplus that provide well-arranged collections of authoritative information. Also, context will be just as important as content, as the Semantic Web evolves. It will no longer be good enough to deliver 30,000 hits on search terms; search engines and content providers will have to understand more about what the user is looking for and deliver accordingly.

So where does this leave us? In my opinion, it could be that users want their eBooks and e-content to behave more like search engines, but search engines need to adopt the best features of online content in order to deliver the highest value in this regard. The most thoughtful providers of online content will focus on presenting a well-arranged collection of vetted resources that will integrate well with existing library resources and will ensure that the e-content becomes both more than the sum of its parts and more than just an online representation of the print version. If search engines want to be more like libraries, they need to deliver meaning and context, in addition to results.

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Ellen McCullough
BORN & LIVED: Born in Philadelphia, PA and spent my first 19 years there. I've lived in Massachusetts (both western and eastern) for the past 21 years.

EARLY LIFE: Grew up in the wonderful city of Philadelphia and came from a family of artists. Decided to buck the trend and "not" go to art school, in spite of my interest in illustration and photography.

FAMILY: I live in Lexington, MA with my partner and two stepdaughters.

EDUCATION: BA, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA.

FIRST JOB: I wanted to get into book publishing, got my foot in the door as a customer service rep for Little, Brown & Company, and then became a sales rep.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I spent 13 years in book publishing, first at Little, Brown then at Harvard Business School Press, in several sales and marketing positions. I fell in love with the Web and its potential to bring content to new audiences. I left book publishing for the dot-com world in 2000, right before the market crashed, to do online content and marketing communications. Now I'm marketing director at xrefer, which is at a perfect intersection of book publishing and the Web. I have always been interested in the role that technology plays in transforming information into knowledge and at xrefer I get to play with that notion a bit.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Write humor, perform stand-up comedy, draw, spend time with my family.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Too many to mention.

PHILOSOPHY: "Humor is emotional chaos remembered in tranquility." —James Thurber

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Anything where I've come up with a new idea that has reached others: coming up with new ways to present content, thinking up book titles, writing articles.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I want librarians and library patrons to think of xrefer first when they think about where to go for answers to their reference questions.

WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: As more and more content becomes available online, there will be even more of a need for services like xreferplus that provide well-arranged collections of authoritative information. Also, context will be just as important as content, as the Semantic Web evolves. It will no longer be good enough to deliver 30,000 hits on search terms; search engines and content providers will have to understand more about what the user is looking for and deliver accordingly.

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