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Nouvelle Cuisine

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Nouvelle Cuisine — New Developments

New column — time for some new ideas! Keep 'em comin'! —Yr. Ed.

Intranet — Stranger in a not-so-strange land...

by Nancy Dennis (University of New Mexico General Library, Library Technology Development)

As in many academic library systems departments, the summer months provide a few brief moments to reflect on last year's accomplishments and challenges, and prepare for next year's expected implementations. It is also a time to ponder the latest trends in computing and how they may be applied within the library computing environment. The big buzz last year was the Internet and the World Wide Web. This year "intranets" are headline news in computing trade publications and trade shows.

Essentially, intranets are private or internal networks which utilize the same software tools and transmission protocols (TCP/IP) which ARE the Internet. The "glue" to an intranet is the rich document format and protocol (i.e., HTML) and the presence of a common-user graphical interface in the form of a Web browser like Netscape. Unlike so many other innovations, intranets can be implemented on most existing local area networks (LAN) or wide area networks (WAN). Server software is readily available (actually free from some vendors) and can be run on a relatively low-end desktop computer. The client or PC

software is even more widespread and affordable. Intranet documents, just like Internet documents, can be produced in HTML format with either ASCII text editors, an HTML editor or converted from MS Word or WordPerfect formats. To view these documents requires a graphical browser or client like Netscape or MS Internet Explorer.

Actually, anyone who has created an HTML document, mounted it on a Web server and then viewed that document with a browser has used intranet technology. Pretty basic stuff within Internet-savvy circles. Just more sales hype or is there some substance here? What would intranets offer to the library computing environment? How would intranets be implemented in a library computing environment?

Imagine using a Web browser to place orders with vendors, verify fund reports within the acquisitions module of the local library automated system, send payment authorizations to campus accounting, view and download a bibliographic record into the local system, post the title on the virtual New Book Shelf and then circulate the title to a waiting

patron. All with just one graphical interface from PCs, MACs or Web "terminals". While such innovation would impact all functional units of a library — i.e., Reference, Instruction, Cataloging, Acquisitions, etc. — from the systems point of view the impact could be dramatic. For the first time libraries could implement mainstream commercially available hardware and software applications. No longer would libraries represent a small or special-sector market where prices are typically higher with limited innovation. Libraries would join the ranks of other technology customers who enjoy lower market-based prices and expanded product availability.

Pie-in-the-sky rambling or just wishful thinking? Perhaps, but consider how vendor-independent Internet applications already are, yet how difficult and costly they can be to integrate within the closed or proprietary library automation systems today. The success of intranets will be determined by the extent to which libraries and our business partners embrace intranet and networking technologies. A trend definitely worth watching.

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