



Leading Libraries

Building Information Communities with a SCOUG Workshop

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"Building Information Communities: SCOUG Looks at the Tools and Strategies Librarians Are Using to Develop Information Infrastructures for the Organizations They Serve": This was the theme of the Southern California Online Users Group (SCOUG) Spring Workshop held May 4, 2001, at the Burbank Airport Hilton. This year's annual workshop featured a wide range of speakers working in the broad spectrum of environments that librarians now face as leaders and designers of information communities.

Scott Kurnit, founder of the Mining Company and president of its current incarnation, About.com, Inc., was the morning keynote speaker. About.com [<http://www.about.com>] has 700 different communities on its Web site and Kurnit claims it's the fifth largest Web site in the world. Fully 50 percent of his audience accesses his Web site from outside of the U.S. He views his company as being in both the newsletter and Web site business. Information is sent to those communities using a variety of methods, including e-mail, bulletin boards, and chats for community members. Two of About.com's biggest Web site communities are rodeos (no, I don't think he was joking, he said it's been the biggest from the moment it started. Go figure! I guess I'm just too much a city girl.) and pregnancy (OK, that one I get, I have two

kids. I remember being obsessed and worried about everything connected with acquiring the kids, so I'm sure he's right in saying that "for 40 weeks at least, you've got them").

Kurnit believes strongly that you have to offer easy-to-use tools to your potential users or they won't use your service. You have to understand that it is not about the technology, it's about the people. About.com's communities are open environments where anyone who wants to get active can and anyone can become a leader in any community. These communities use chat rooms and bulletin boards. Many people will visit the community, but won't want to join.

About.com's biggest source of revenue comes from advertisers. They recruit guides for their communities from the Internet, seeking out people passionate about the Internet and about the topic of their community. Guides help to locate and evaluate the best resources out there on the Net for their community. Guides get paid depending on how much revenue they bring in (i.e., how many and frequently their sites are accessed). About pays guides 30 percent of their net revenues. The over 700 guides support each other with shared marketing and other aid. The company provides extensive training for those selected as guides. If a community loses interest and a site starts to die, About tries to revive it.

About recently merged with Primedia Inc., the publishers of over 230 traditional print general and trade press magazines (including *Modern Bride*).

Kurnit believes that his parent company takes print seriously. The fact that About's cost of distribution to clients on the Internet is 1/100th of a penny per page means that whatever the current ups and down of the Internet start-up market, for far-sighted publishers, the Internet, albeit with less competitors, is definitely here to stay.

The paradigm for advertisers has changed. Advertisers initially expected to measure success with a lot of "click-throughs." Now, according to Kurnit, About.com realizes that the better a site functions, the less likely people will click away from it to go to advertisements. Advertisers have begun to accept that it is "OK" to have their ads seen on a site aimed at a target market without a mass of click-throughs. Perhaps the best news of all in Kurnit's address was his belief that trick ads, the ones disguised as software or virus warnings, for example, are starting to go away.

Vickie H. Taylor of the Capital Research Group spoke about her company's unique culture, which she believes promotes community almost naturally. Started in 1932, Capital Research Group currently employs over 5,000 employees in 11 offices all over the world and became a global company in 1962. It's a money management firm, managing the third largest group of mutual funds. The company currently manages (give or take stock market fluctuations on any given day) about \$500 billion in assets for its clients. The firm has a long-standing commitment to quality research and

has committed significant assets to ensure this happens. Communities spring up naturally at Capital Research. People belong to several communities: their department, subject focus, job type. The subject focus tends to follow industry clusters. Some of these industry clusters are very active and others less so, based on individual participation.

Kay Henshall, now of LSSI and formerly the director of the Bay Areas Libraries Network, spoke about **the role of public libraries in fostering communities.**

Her group is still called the Library because it has always been well regarded and integral to the company research efforts. Many of her staff are called business research specialists. The Library is involved in many ways with Capital Research's communities. The staff manage archives, consult on the development of research tools, and work on the redesign and standardization of the company Intranet. They are involved in ensuring the capture and retrieval of all the knowledge within the organization and its individuals and making it available to whoever in the organization may need it. The Library's high level of service over the years has ensured that it has the clout to participate and support the sharing of knowledge, as well as the building and designing of databases. The Library has established a standard for tagging broker reports, for example, to ensure consistent retrieval.

Kay Henshall, now of LSSI and formerly the director of the Bay Areas Libraries Network, spoke about the role of public libraries in fostering communities. She discussed the "Virtual Reference Desk" [see my article entitled "Virtual Reference in Libraries: Remote Patrons Heading Your Way?," which appeared in the February 2001 issue of *Searcher*]. A virtual reference

desk service called Q&A Café [<http://www.qandacafe.com/>] was launched with somewhat limited hours at two of the Bay Areas Libraries with eventual implementation planned for all the libraries in the network. The new service went live at the Belvedere-Tiburon [see <http://www.bel-tib-lib.org/public/HomePage.cfm>] and San Bruno public

libraries [see <http://www.ci.sanbruno.ca.us/Library/library.html>].

The launch involved much fanfare and public relations outreach to the community. LSSI has developed a very recognizable, slick logo and has actively solicited the local press, which featured stories about this new service in local newspapers. LSSI mailed postcards to every community member announcing the service and its hours of availability (3-9 p.m., Monday through Friday).

A virtual reference desk allows librarians to take the library to the community members and meet them wherever they are, according to Henshall. Librarians staffing a virtual reference desk can conduct reference interviews online and direct their patrons to appropriate Web sites and information resources. Patrons no longer have to come into the library to get the services of a reference librarian. The developers of the service hope to reach those who may not usually come to the library, but rely only on what they find on the Internet.

At present, the project has trained 120 librarians to serve on the virtual reference desk and three librarians are on call for each hour of service. Henshall did suggest that not every librarian should be chosen for such an as-

signment. LSSI has found that the librarians who adapt best to the virtual reference desk environment are those who can do multiple tasks at one time and who understand and like technology. Do not worry too much about hurt feelings, however. Henshall said that a kind of self-selection process occurred after training and only those interested will remain to work on the virtual reference desk.

With a consortium of libraries, issues arose as to what resources different communities' patrons could access under contracts and licenses. A decision was made to go with the Gale Group suite of products. The Q&A Café currently averages three to 10 questions a night and LSSI hopes to continue to expand their marketing efforts.

Pavel Curtis of PlaceWare Inc. spoke about the Web conferencing products his company offers. PlaceWare has two major products: Meetings, designed for two to 25 people and supporting collaborative interactivity, and Events, designed for between 25 and 2,500 people and offering a much more structured interactivity. The Meetings product is typically used for e-sales, e-meetings, and e-briefings, while the Events product is used for Web seminars, e-learning, and corporate communications such as the president of a global company wishing to address all employees.

One example of how the products offered help groups involved individual doctors in private practice building a community with other doctors in private practice. It allowed the doctors to share new developments on drugs and treatments and use Web conferencing for continuing education recertification. Small and large companies use the packages to help communicate internally with counterparts in other locations. Each participant only needs a PC and a Web browser with Internet access. With Web conferencing applications, the neediest and most isolated can share and exchange information through their community connections. Schools and universities are

using Web conferencing for distance education courses.

Dr. Jose-Marie Griffiths, the chief information officer of the University of Michigan, gave the afternoon keynote and spoke about the changes that have occurred in the information technology structure at the university in the 5 years since she arrived there. Formerly, main frames having clearly defined boundaries and responsibilities were used to manage centralized control and finance. Today the staff work in an environment

Know where you are going and what can be done. You have to prioritize. You can't do it all, but get the big items done early or they won't get done at all.

An Afternoon of Librarians as Customers and Net Newbies

During afternoon sessions, vendor representatives from companies such as Lexis-Nexis, Factiva, Dialog, and Northern Light spoke about their products and services, which integrate into the corporate intranet.

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that is constantly expanding its functionality, use PC servers, has undefined boundaries and responsibilities, and constant change.

Some try to build empires around centralized IT functions, core applications, and services. While IT offers many functions, most users only see and know the core and mission-specific applications that affect users' lives and work. In most universities, the IT staff is not acknowledged, but remain extremely loyal to the institution. Previously the university recruited staff to work for specific departments or areas. Now new IT staff is recruited to the institution, not specific departments, and can be reassigned to other areas when needed. For the first time the University can see exactly what it is spending everywhere in the institution on IT. The staff is now functionally oriented and more responsive.

Librarians are publishing guidebooks to the world and have gone from collection builders to knowledge prospectors, finding those nuggets that contribute to particular knowledge domains. We have to have vision and knowledge to support that vision.

Each vendor had brought along a representative from corporate customers who spoke about why they chose each solution they did and what the vendors did that helped them. Lexis-Nexis was chosen by Genentech, while Universal Studios chose Factiva; Northern Light was the pick of Carole Leita of the Librarian's Index to the Internet, while Dialog was the selection of Rockwell's Research Science Center. Each representative had different reasons why they felt their vendor best matched their needs. In most cases, the decision depended on the content best meeting the needs of their organizations.

Most of these vendors help librarians with marketing, promotional materials, and initial training of staff members. Customers emphasized the importance of the support and response they got from vendors during their initial screening and evaluation process.

So vendors take note: If you want us to buy, make sure you impress potential customers from the start with the quality of response we can expect to receive. The bottom line was that the librarians had to understand and know what their return on the invest-

ment would be before they could make a buy decision.

Jean Heilig of Jones International University spoke about the e-global library that was created to support Jones International University. It is the first fully electronic library for the first fully electronic university. She also spoke about the tutorials they created for their distance education students. Since the e-global library has been in place, many smaller libraries have contacted Jones about contracting its use, a result the university had not anticipated. [For more information on Jones International University, see Heilig's article, "e-Global Library: Academic Campus Library Meets the Internet," pp. 34+ in the June 2001 issue of *Searcher*.]

Carole Leita of the Librarian's Index to the Internet spoke about the team she has developed to help build the Index, especially since the Library of California has fully funded the Librarian's Index to the Internet for 5 years. They currently have 7,781 resources chosen to answer the questions librarians get asked. They offer a free current awareness service. The Librarian's Index to the Internet trains only 40 librarians a year and then monitors their work for 6 months following training. Californians predominate the user community — 57 percent — with 7 percent of users coming from outside the country. Librarians can easily co-brand the Librarian's Index to the Internet from their own Web sites if they chose.

Another Good Day

SCOUG continues to offer consistently diverse and interesting workshops every year almost since its founding. Wonder what they'll come up with next year? If you are interested in joining or participating in SCOUG, just sign up at the Web site [<http://www.scougweb.org>] for details. SCOUG still offers free service. The next major event will be the annual SCOUG Retreat, this year back in Santa Barbara, California. Again, check the Web site. *