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Dressing the Part ...

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Very few catalogers may think of their work as a stage, but in these times of media mania, I think catalogers have a stage from which to perform. How do we create experience for our users? The possibilities are endless.

For two centuries, our catalogs thrived in a conservative non-competitive user environment. Never in our history have we concerned ourselves about losing out to our competition. We generated catalogs believing in the mantra: “make them and they will come.” This is no longer true today. In a pre-test I give my students in Beginning Nursing Informatics, I ask the question, “In searching for information, which source do you search first?” The overwhelming answer is always: “google.com or the Internet.” It is clear that we can no longer ignore the competitive reality that surrounds us.

We have always regarded our catalogs as the center of our universe; today that center is fast becoming a gaping hole. We need to do something fast to recapture our position of relevance in the digital age. Our Internet competition is flagrantly imperfect—everybody knows this. They rampantly lack the “human intelligence so essential in making logical connections that express relationships” (Tillett, 1999), something we have done so well for so long.

So what exactly is wrong with our catalogs? This has generated discussions in the literature. Kristin Antelman discusses



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very compelling reasons why our catalog is a misfit on the Internet. Roy Tenant concurs that our catalogs are not fluid enough; others argue it's not easy enough for the “point & click” generation's need for mindless tools; still others propose it needs to be an all-encompassing tool, providing seamless access to the entire universe of information. I suggest a most obvious reason, one that cuts us out of the competition—our catalogs are not “hip” enough.

The adjective “hip,” “hipper,” or “hepper” is a slang word defined by Webster to mean “keenly aware of or knowledgeable about the latest trends or developments; also to mean “very fashionable or stylish.” I use both meanings to suggest that our catalogs in general fail to exemplify our knowledge of technological trends and developments and are much lacking in what is considered “trendy” and “fashionable” in today's digital environment. Admittedly, adding elements that spark and sustain curiosity and interest may not be so simple considering that we are trying to hook the attention of a technology suffocated, sophisticated, completely informed information culture. Furthermore, this idea may not sit well with catalogers, who may argue that this is contrary to our mission, much less with our prevailing attitude of subservience to rules and standards of practice. But to sustain the relevance of our catalogs, these need to be responsive to the expectations of a new emerging information culture in the digital age, a culture that gravitates to tools that are not only efficient but also engaging and entertaining.

The profession as a whole and catalogers, in particular, are taking serious measures to make our catalogs more relevant, calling for new standards, new rules, new tools, new partnerships—new ways to make our catalogs as powerful, if not more powerful, than our competition's. For years, we've talked and actually implemented adding value to our catalogs, providing extensions or enrichment to our catalog



data—elements like tables-of-contents, author or dust jacket information, community information. Lately, we embrace the Web's hyperlinking function to bring our catalogs closer to our dream of "one-stop-shopping." Many of our leaders are engaged in profound discussions on global issues of authority control, bibliographic rules and standards that are so important to our viable existence on the Web. There is no question that more developments are brewing to improve access, quality, and bibliographic control. But these do not constitute what makes a catalog "hip" in today's emotively motivated environment. I'm not suggesting we add nudity to our catalogs. I'm suggesting elements that engage our clients.

Pine & Gilmore (1999) suggest experience as a new source of added value; that experience engages our clients in a personal way to the point that after we satisfy their immediate need, we leave them with an experience that lingers on and stays with the client long after service is rendered. John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, couldn't have put it more succinctly when he said "Information must be experienced" (Albanese, 2002).

Web technology powers a new genre of communication that is interactive, multi-based, multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional, including virtual reality that is capable of bringing about what Pine refers to as "immersive experience" (Pine, 1999). From a rather static beginning, this sounds like an impossible challenge. But it is not if you think of how librarians and system developers are now experimenting with employing new standards and new technology to make our catalogs literally sing. Today we have the technology to make our catalogs become living entities that can walk (through wireless PDAs) and literally talk to our users, capable of making the information-seeking experience engaging and memorable. How do we create experience for our users? The

possibilities are endless. But let me put the spotlight on a few elements that I think hook the average Web client.

A Sense of Community

A friend looking for a particular piece of music in CD (he knew so little about) reported about having gone to Amazon.com and found exactly what he was looking for, an outcome he considers "positive experience." But this is not all. He also received additional information that immediately linked him to the experience of others. "Customers who bought this title also bought the following" is a function of co-location that we have provided in our catalogs all along. So what is different about the way Amazon.com delivers it on the Web? Presentation—for the very same reason food presentation is important to dining. The feature "Customers who bought this title also bought the following" is not just suggesting other similar titles on the same topic of interest, it is also suggestive of instant approval, a positive feedback everyone is looking for—you're not the only genius who happens to love this music, there are a few others who bought it and bought more of the same. In other words, you are part of an existing community.

The "sense of community" is a very important concept on the Web. Defined as "perceived belonging and perceived mutual interdependence" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Sarason, 1974), it is an essential spiritual nutrient for human beings (Albanese, 2002), that promotes a sense of self-esteem and well-being that feed healthy and successful collaborative relationships.

Today, cataloging is not just about passively creating bibliographic records and subject analysis to aid information retrieval; it is also about promoting collaborative relationships among scholars. If our mission is to support intellectual pursuit then providing a convenient way for one scholar to talk to another is core to





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our mission. It is a well-documented fact that in the research process, scholars first talk to another scholar before turning to the literature.

Interactivity

Have you visited a music Website lately and sat for hours to enjoy a piece of music—in your own time, in your own living room—and then had a chance to rate the song, or write your own review? The “If you like” feature on the Tower Records Website allows you to pick an artist you like, suggests which song to try, then lets you know which album sells the most, while an expert tells you why. Choosing from a panel of experts (instant peer review) is only a mouse click away. You may enjoy a conversation with a contemporary artist or composer himself, or invite another fan into your virtual living room to discuss the piece and have a music critic or two join you in the conversation.

We learn in education that interactivity is a very powerful teaching tool for the very reason that it engages students. Engaging our clients to participate in the process, as in writing and sharing their own impressions of the work and adding these as extensions to our core record, will not only enrich our records but also create a memorable experience for our clients.

Librarians are recognizing the value of interactive digital encounter. Public ser-

vices librarians in particular are jumping into this much earlier than their cataloging counterparts. A chat-based virtual reference is on its way to becoming the new mode of reference. Those of us who have served at reference desks know how often and how many questions are “catalog-related.” A cataloger’s version of “Questionpoint” or a chat button: ASK A CATALOGER may not be so trivial an idea for very long. As projects like LinkPlus takes off, catalogs will grow into enormous databases where searching has the potential to become as hairy as in today’s searching the Web. Why do you suppose Ask Jeeves and LooksmartLive are thriving on the Net?

The Human Touch

Early deliberations on the digital encounter often cited the lack of “human touch” as the biggest challenge in digital communications. Have you followed the animated demo on how to track down your orders on Amazon.com? A pleasant human voice comes on with easy to follow instruction, carefully guiding you through transitions of screens to demonstrate the process—it’s short, sweet and simple. There is no question that “How to search the catalog” using a cataloger’s captivating voice is more fashionable than a static single sheet of instruction.

Personalization

Word is out that the Marriott hotels are actively collecting data on their clients, keeping an individual record of customers—their preferences, habits, likes and dislikes—so that the second time the same client checks into a Marriott anywhere in the world he is guaranteed a customized service environment. Knowing who accesses our catalogs, keeping track of their reading habits and preferences will give our catalogs a customized touch. The next time the same patron accesses the catalog (using a human voice) we should be able to address him by his name—“Hi Bruce, have you checked the latest titles by your



favorite author, John Grisham?" Or, "Did you know that the book you reserved is now waiting for you at the checkout counter?" While one can still be "a dog on the Internet," there is a growing need for having an identity on the Web. Perhaps it is the antipathy towards anonymity on the Web that is driving the need for recognition, this or the "desire to set one's self apart from everyone else" (Pace, 2001). "My Library" or "My catalog" could be a step in this direction.

So, then the next question is: who has the time to devote to non-essentials when we don't even have the time to take care of our backlogs? But I say, this is the 21st century when we can't and shan't go at it alone. This is the era of collaboration and the eventual triumph of cataloging industrialization—whether we like it or not. Producing a catalog is no longer as simple as creating a main card and duplicating this to make a set of cards for as many headings as are in the tracing—it is far more complicated than this. There is more to master than ISBD and AACR2R. Our only salvation is to forge partnerships with "experts" in our fields who have the technological know-how to make our catalog walk or talk or sing.

We are at the threshold of a totally new era of cataloging that is characterized by new bold approaches that may be revolutionary or revolting to the traditional cataloger. Just the very idea of cooperative metadata "on the fly" by a vendor, a user, or anybody who has not taken Cataloging 101 gets many of us nervous. Someone said "perfection is the enemy of good." We need to go beyond the perfect record if we are to prevent the imminent decline of our catalogs.

To apply Pine & Gilmore's analogy that "work is theatre and every business a stage," the catalog is our stage, and catalogers are but a member—albeit an important member—in a stage crew of several who share a common goal of providing our audience with a catalog

experience that is not just precise and productive, but also engaging, entertaining and memorable. 

NOTE: *The author would very much welcome imaginative ideas and insights into making our catalogs "trendy and fashionable."* Please direct your comments and ideas to nwurang@dwebb.llu.edu

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