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Interactive Online Reference

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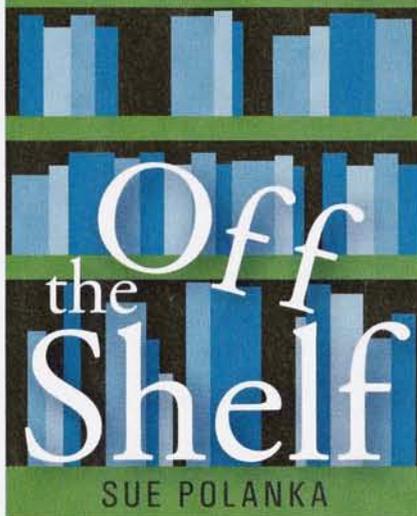
Last November I attended the 2009 Charleston Conference: "Issues in Book and Serial Acquisitions." E-content, licensing, business models, and a host of other issues were discussed. There were several presentations on reference, one in particular titled "Interactive Reference," presented by Tom Beyer, director of publishing at iFactory, and myself. Part of the RDW Group, iFactory designs and engineers a variety of online products, including *Sage Reference Online,* Rosen's *Teen Health & Wellness,* and multiple Oxford products. During the presentation, Beyer discussed the state of online reference and the variety of interactive features that could be useful in the next-generation products. Beyer defined a reference product as "something that will answer our questions in a way that is authoritative, accurate, and comprehensible," and he suggested that "the reference platform should interact with us to do that job better." So just how should the reference platform interact with us? In any number of ways, but Beyer focused his discussion in two areas, content and the user.

Why do our reference products need interactive content, and how do we accomplish this? Everyone learns in a different way, so conveying a message in a variety of formats can increase comprehension. Sound, images, and videos are obvious ways to promote interactive content. Visualizing information, hearing the pronunciation of a word, or listening to the content in its entirety can be a tremendous help, particularly to those with learning or physical disabilities and ESL learners. Animation and simulations are also up-and-coming interactive features. As Beyer said, "It's one thing to say that a seashell is made of a simple mathematical equation, another to allow users to manipulate the parameters of the equation and see the different shells that result."

These interactive features aren't limited to supplementing content. They can also be used to draw connections between content. For example, looking at side-by-side comparisons of versions of the Bible, using interactive time lines and maps to browse content thematically or geographically rather than the traditional *A–Z* browse, and visualizing content through "spoke-and-wheel" connections all provide interactive access to reference content.

But what about the users? What possibilities exist in the interactive reference environment for them? It's obvious that advanced search screens are lost on most users, but simple searches and search widgets (some grouped by subject) provide easy access points to content. If librarians encourage users to begin searches in a reference database, is the next logical step to interconnect that search to journal databases? The technology certainly exists. Other interactive features for users include "did you mean?" spelling suggestions, internal links to related content, and the ability to save, e-mail, print, or download content

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with a formatted citation. Furthermore, one can establish a personal account, with features to save search histories, categorize content, and save notes. But are these interactive features being used? My guess is no, not by most end users. Social networking and Web 2.0 concepts are also possibilities. Tagging, sending content to Facebook, or e-mailing content to friends are examples where the technology is in place but not likely to be used in online reference products.

One area that should be explored is mobile search. As Beyer said during the presentation, "Where do we look for the future of reference interfaces? In a word: smartphones." Press releases from EBSCO and Alexander Street Press in late November demonstrate this trend with the launch of two mobile search services. What are the implications of mobile search? Search screens need to be smaller, or scalable, with limited Flash components because many smartphones aren't equipped. Moreover, will the mobile device be used to search, or will it be used to read content? The mobile search products of today offer both but put a significant focus on e-mail features so users can have access to content on a personal computer later.

Before the conference, I decided to test several of Beyer's theories about interactive reference by compiling a survey of 30 interactive features. The survey asked if the feature would be used by librarians, patrons, or both and also provided responses of "It's ridiculous" or "Cool, but nobody will use it." Ninety-three of 119 people (87 percent of them librarians, 12 percent vendors) finished the survey. Everyone responded favorably to all 30 features but gave the highest ratings to the "did you mean?" spelling suggestions, citation builders, mobile devices, discipline-grouped content, video, and interconnectivity (searching journals). Another feature that received support was searching all reference content on a single platform, a concept I've advocated for a long time. Conversely, the features that received the least amount of support were internal social networking, linking to external Web 2.0 sites, sharing links, visual searching, sound, and sharing teaching aids among instructors or teachers.

Charleston attendees also responded to the survey. The attendees (38 percent librarians, 57 percent vendors) gave the most support to audio, video, time lines, "did you mean?" spelling suggestions, mobile support, saving searches, interconnectivity (searching journals), and the creation of course packs.

Features aside, it was obvious from the presentation that the reference platform of today won't be the platform of tomorrow. The search options and interactive features are limited only by our imagination (and our wallets) because as technology improves, so does the interface. All we need to do now is ask the users which features they really want. More information on this presentation can be found on the *No Shelf Required* blog and the forthcoming *Charleston Conference Proceedings, 2009.*

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