



The Search for Knowledge and the Online Producer

LET ME GO out on a limb and say that the Internet is just a fad. I know, I know, you are skeptical. The Internet, however, is much like the automobile or rock and roll music. They were considered fads, but at some time in their evolution they stopped being fads and became firmly entrenched in our everyday lives. I see this FAD as a Financially Automated Delivery system.

The Internet is exploding. There is more information on the 'Net than in the entire collection of the Library of Congress. There are almost 155 million Internet users online in the United States, and that number swells by 1.1 million every month. (Source: Nielsen/Netratings Internet statistics, November 2000. The Internet universe is defined as all members at least two years old in United States households that currently have Internet access.).

Many producers do not realize the wealth of knowledge out there. This gives the online producer an advantage. The producer should consider seriously the neat tools at some of these World Wide Web addresses. Using the vast amount of information available, a producer can research products, rates, companies or even his or her competition. Additionally, there are places to advertise, collaborate and even host meetings with prospects all from the comfort of the home or office.

Searching for Answers

A rudimentary task for the producer to master is knowing where and how to find the information he or she seeks. Most users consider search engines to be an effective way to do this. This is not necessarily so. Usually these searches provide a list of thousands of Web sites that may or may not be related to that for which the user is looking. Weeding through these results can take a lot of time. In some instances, search engines return everything except the information for which the user is looking.

Here are some tips to help readers search the Web better. In a search, the Internet user should enclose the topic in "quotes." This will narrow the search to items that match the phrase and not each word the user enters. Not all search engines are equal. The better search engines automatically categorize results into more meaningful sub-categories. A search engine like www.infoseek.com will permit the user to search within a search until he has narrowed the results to a list of meaningful contenders. www.askjeeves.com, which allows the user to ask for searches in plain English, also ranks high on my list.

The producer also should consider some software products. Coperitic is one of many programs that may be downloaded for free to perform searches on multiple sites at one

time. It then scores and lists them by relevance. An offbeat approach to consider is typing in random Web addresses related to a topic. A great example of this is how I found some of the information for this article. Wanting some statistics, I simply typed in www.internetstats.com on the first try and found a Web site with a multitude of Internet-related statistics; more than anyone ever would want or need.

Forms on the Web

On the other side of the coin is service. Making it easier for clients and prospects to work with the producer can lead to increased customer satisfaction. More often than not, a client or prospect will call with a simple request. A big headache for a producer is getting service request forms, or any form for that matter, to these callers quickly. An easy solution to this is having forms available on the producer's or agency's Web site. At the very least, commonly used forms should be available in a format that can be e-mailed. This enables the client or prospect to print the form from the computer, sign it and mail it.

A recent visit to an online insurance Web site showed a good example of this. After researching term life quotes with myself as the potential insured, I downloaded an application with a producer's information and signatures already filled in. All a prospect would have to do is fill in the requested information, cut out and paste the prepaid mailing label onto an envelope and mail it in. The system was so efficient that I received a call to schedule a paramedical examination a few days later.

Collaborate

Along with all of the knowledge available and services provided on the Internet, there are some great tools a producer might want to consider as well. To enable the producer to share information on his computer with someone else over the Internet, there is www.placeware.com. To enable the producer to have meetings or give presentations to a group of prospects, there is www.mshow.com and to collaborate online, www.intranets.com.

These services all offer real world solutions to meet and work over the Internet. With a little planning and imagination, it is possible for a producer to give prospects, clients or co-workers a place to meet without ever having them leave their home or office.

High Speed Internet

By now, most large communities have available high-speed Internet access such as DSL or broadband cable. If it is available in the producer's area, he should get it. As I have stated in previous articles, time is money and the extra \$20 or \$30 a month the basic service costs is well worth the price, especially if the user plans to connect to others. In agencies with networked computers, it is possible to share that high-speed connection with others and enable everyone in the organization to be more productive. A basic high speed DSL connection is at minimum 15 times faster than a 28.8k modem connection. And for power users, high-end DSL speeds along at 1.5Mbps, or 26 times the fastest 56.6k analog modems used for standard dialup connections. Research shows that with faster speeds, users view and return to more pages.

Out of the Comfort Zone

it is difficult to argue the success of America On-Line. With more than 20 million U.S. subscribers and its easy-to-use interface, it attracts more than 16,000 new users worldwide everyday (source: ISP-Planet.com). Living within the confines of the AOL

software, however, severely can limit a producer's reach. So, here is something with which producers who have AOL might like to experiment. The producer can start the AOL connection and minimize the software. Then the producer can open another browser such as Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator. Voila, with a little practice, this producer now can surf the Web like the pros.

The best advantage is that the producer immediately will realize a larger browser window, which makes Web pages easier and more fun to read. This also will be good training for that high speed connection the producer just ordered. Sorry, no AOL on DSL at this time. If the producer just can't live without that AOL interface or e-mail address, however, he still can subscribe to them at a reduced rate using his new high-speed connection.

The Internet is in its infancy. There are many tools and much more information yet to come. This "fad" one day will become the norm for how producers work with vendors, clients and prospects. Getting out there now and learning how to take advantage of the Internet only will help the producer better understand this World Wide Wonder.