Libraries Hope for Web 2.0 Shake-up with New Site

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Body

The labyrinthine library is remanufacturing itself into a portal that tells Web users the nearest library for books they want, lets them tag and review items and challenges Wikipedia as a top result for searches like "chess rules," a library consortium official said Tues. The Online Computer Library Center, used by over 40,000 libraries worldwide, recently took its subscription WorldCat library-collection database to the Web at WorldCat.org, a beta offering. People generally think highly of libraries but have low expectations for advanced services at them, Center Dir.-Content Initiatives Doug Loynes told a meeting of the National Commission on Libraries & Information Science.
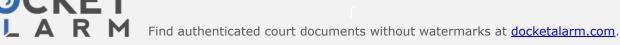
Libraries need to follow the "Amazoogle effect," Loynes said: Drawing users through comprehensive yet "not necessarily exhaustive" Web resources and providing "immediate gratification" with relevant results. Amazon and Netflix have made a "science" of closely monitoring behavior by site users and adjusting features accordingly, he said: "Libraries for the most part don't take [user behavior] into the design" of resources. He noted the recent "social networking explosion," contrasting "stratospheric" traffic as measured by Alexa.com at YouTube, Blogger and Flickr even before corporate acquisitions, with the Center's OCLC.org, which has seen steady growth but ranks about 11,000th.

Since 2004 the Center gradually has opened its catalog to search partners via Open WorldCat, now letting Google, Yahoo, Windows Live Academic, Ask.com and others index its database. Traffic more than doubled a year after Open WorldCat launched, and "we're pretty close to tripling it" for 2006 with the WorldCat.org beta, which went live in Aug., Loynes said. But WorldCat.org is a "demonstration place, not a destination," asking users and "potential partners" to embed its toolbars and search box into their own sites, he added. Its search box has been downloaded nearly 2,000 times.

If WorldCat used Google AdWords, the Center would have made $30.9 million this year, Loynes said. Actual revenue from FirstSearch, the library subscription service that funds the website, was roughly $16 million in 2006. The goal is to make participating libraries -- which must subscribe to FirstSearch -- more visible to Web users, and nudge them back to the library for services. The Center began with a million database records at its 1974 founding and now has 73 million -- with 12 million added this year alone, including Dutch, U.K. and German holdings, he added. About 11,000 libraries link their catalogs to WorldCat.

Algorithms, Geomapping and Netflix-Like Features

Commissioners peppered Loynes, requesting specifics of WorldCat.org's ranking algorithm, display capabilities and accuracy in telling patrons their closest library. Works are ranked by how widely

they're held in libraries and year of publication, with recent works favored, but, like Google, the Center regularly tweaks the algorithm, he said. Via "faceted browse" on the left sidebar, users can narrow search results by author, publication year and other criteria, with works of many editions usually listed by most recent with an expand option. Users also can search by zip code and media type, such as book, CD and large print. It has language support for German, Spanish, French, Dutch and most recently, Chinese. WorldCat.org soon will check browser settings for European users and save their language preferences for later visits, Loynes said.

A service launched this week takes "a guess about where you are" by geomapping the user's IP address, removing another click from the user experience, Loynes said. Results from test searches at the Center's Dublin, O., hq showed libraries "a couple towns" away at the top of search results. Loynes noted a sidebar link for the Library of Congress in results for searches performed for the commission, which met at the Library on Capitol Hill. Commissioner Jose Aponte, San Diego County (Cal.) library dir., said results by zip for his area began with the central library, not the nearest branch. Loynes said the Center is improving the zip search and geomapping to home in on branch libraries. Soon it also will list in search results libraries that don't subscribe to Center services.

Features planned for rollout include article content from databases like Medline, better resolution for digital works, and addition of public domain scanned works, Loynes said. WorldCat.org lets users write reviews and soon will add ratings and "lists" of favorite works or citations that can be exported to a file.

Is the Center comfortable sharing its intentions with Google and other Open WorldCat partners, which have their own book-scan projects? asked Commissioner Jan Cellucci, wife of former U.S. Ambassador Paul Cellucci. Google has no problem with WorldCat's parallel effort, Loynes said, and next year the company will give WorldCat.org a real-time feed of bibliographical data from scanned books. The Center is part of Google's scanning project and of the Open Content Alliance, led by Yahoo and MSN. Responding to Aponte, Loynes said he spent many "sleepless nights" pondering how to improve WorldCat's ranking in other search engines' results. In the "chess rules" search, it was a 2nd page Google result; Wikipedia made the first page. But the Center can't affect other engines' algorithms, which also are changing regularly, Loynes said.

Some said they doubt WorldCat.org can remain free for users long. Commissioner Stephen Kennedy said users can find and download expensive items, such as digitized historical records from Rome. Loynes again noted that the service is paid for by FirstSearch subscriptions and added that local libraries always can charge a fee for special items. The Center gets revenue from purchases on Amazon and Baker & Taylor linked back to WorldCat, and passes the money on to users' local libraries, he said. "We're transitioning" to a model including premium services, which may include delivery services like Netflix's, he said.

It sounds like the Center wants to create a traditional Web portal, commissioners said. Actually WorldCat.org simply wants to serve libraries so they add their collections to the database, Loynes said. "So you're the glue," Cellucci said. "Our intent is not to be Yahoo," he replied. Commission Dir.-Statistics Neal Kaske asked if the group was abandoning its charter duties to reduce per-unit cost to libraries. Not at all, Loynes said. Libraries can free revenue for WorldCat participation by shrinking their collections in line with the extent to which users quickly can scan nearby libraries in WorldCat.org results, he added.

Libraries "threaten to become a utility" if they don't tell users how much they put into improving services and service, Loynes said. Commissioners tossed off cheeky ideas to get WorldCat's visibility up -- perhaps renaming it "WikiCat" or "Second Life OCLC." -- Greg Piper

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