

The Surround Stuff

Today's content providers go in search for the true source of value

By Andy Moore, Editorial Director, Specialty Publishing Group

Jesse Kornbluth is the content director for AOL, and thus influences one of the most-read online resources in the world. I heard him address a conference, which he started this way: "I propose we find the guy who first coined the term 'content,' and kick the living %\$*# out of him."

It's a funny line. Everyone cracks up. And then he proceeds to talk about the difficulties in talking about "content" as though it were a single identifiable substance. It's not, and if there's any better proof necessary, take a look at the assorted lot we have in this "content" white paper.

As if to mock me in my futile search for a central theme to the content marketplace, the three executives I spoke with provide three distinct and unique views of this stubbornly difficult-to-pigeonhole marketplace.

One message is fairly constant, though: The challenge faced by content providers today has little to do with the content itself. Oh sure, they each have a great "quality" story to tell. Their ability to create proprietary, exclusive, important stuff is one of their hallmarks. And the editorial component—the skill with which they verify, aggregate and concentrate relevant information—remains a competitive necessity.

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But the real value, they all agree, is not only the product itself, but what my old boss used to call "The Surround Stuff." How can the content add meaning to a business process? How completely and

seamlessly can it be combined with other information? To what degree is the content delivered intuitively, as though the provider could read your mind and seem to know exactly what you wanted? It's another way of saying customer service, I suppose. But it's more than that. It's something deeper, more meaningful...

If I had to identify the single most impactful trend among the content market leaders today, I would say, thankfully, that "the Surround Stuff" really matters to them.

At the Customer's Threshold

Wendy Beecham is senior VP for LexisNexis, Enterprise & Library division. Because the E & L division is responsible for the corporate, Federal and academic markets, Wendy is focused on a diverse set of market segments that don't immediately seem especially compatible. And because she's only been at the job since February, Wendy is also focused on learning right now...especially when the subject is the cross-leverage potential of her various content resources.

"The statistical and government information we provide can be very valuable as back-up to create proposals, or to do a business analysis, for example, on cost-of-goods sold," she explains. "We also have very valuable information to help with risk assessment across countries, for instance. There are some real hidden gems in there. We've just never packaged it that way before."

Other examples of cross-pollination emerge from the overlap between the academic and business segments. LexisNexis produces a business-news service ("LexisNexis Universe") that, with the exception of a Yahoo!-type service—is the only service that provides access to news for the academic community. Now they plan to re-purpose some of the business services they currently package for the corporate market and make them more applicable for use by the key business schools.

(And by the way, this is premium content that goes way beyond run-of-the-mill



Andy Moore

contributions to the series as well as conducting market research for future topics of interest for the series.

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Andy Moore has held senior editorial and publishing positions for more than 25 years. As a technology writer and editor, Moore speaks with dozens of senior executives and industry experts each month. In his role as Editorial Director for the Specialty Publishing Group, Moore oversees the

Web content. "This kind of data isn't available publicly. If you're going to make strategic business decisions that have revenue impact, you need to go beyond Web sources," stresses Wendy.)

Seeing the value in existing content, and thoughtfully considering how to help customers use it to greater effect, is part of the Surround Stuff ethos. Wendy uses this example: "We have domain experts who can get into such levels of detail with our customers' taxonomies that we help make sure they don't miss any future trends or opportunities. And we continue to keep them updated, working together."

So the role of the information provider, already evolved beyond that of a mere general-reference source or database service, is showing more promising signs of maturity and complexity. Take high-value, original information, add a precise and application-specific search methodology and present it with an irrefutable validation of accuracy and trustworthiness, and a provider such as LexisNexis starts to look a lot like a business partner versus just another cost-of-business vendor.

Stressing "Provider" Over "Content"

The gradual evolution of the typical commercial content provider from monolithic information resource to value-added information partner can also be seen in another, more data-intensive provider, Thomson Scientific. Mike Tansey is the CEO of TS, which now includes the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI), ISI ResearchSoft, Derwent Information, Derwent-Wila and Current Drugs. Tansey views the shift in emphasis from the "content" part toward the "provider" part as central to his business,

and his worldview. “Over time, we’ve come to look at our database as a starting point for people who are managing a whole series of related information assets,” says Mike, and adds that this is “a path we’re still exploring.”

In describing the value-add proposition that TS and companies like it provide, Mike lists three critical discriminators, and—interestingly—the actual content is only tangentially related to any of them:

“One is the navigational database, and how much guidance you provide in the initial determination of what’s relevant;

“The second is how deeply connected that result set is to OTHER content that you can find to bring to the table; and finally,

“How seamlessly you can integrate all the above with internal business data.” For Mike, the richness of the relationship between content provider and customer is much more than just the quality of the content itself—it’s how well and how easily it can be put to use in the business process.

I think it’s the reality of our time. In the past, when research or patent information was delivered in print form—“pull up the forklift”—there was little alternative for the content provider except to accept that

the Surround Stuff includes the technical interfaces and underpinnings, too. Mike talks about the “validation and the precision of search” that Thomson Scientific strives to provide. At LexisNexis, Wendy stresses ease-of-use: “the extent to which the *complexity* is masked from the ultimate consumer,” they write, determines how well their products help the ultimate consumer, the knowledge worker.

From a whole ‘nother plane of “ease-of-use” comes our third example, Sawyer Media Systems. Best known (if known much at all) as the company co-founded by TV news anchor Forrest Sawyer, Sawyer Media has made “masking the complexity” practically an art form.

“Yes, that’s right,” says Peter Tierney, president and CEO. “We do try to hide the wires.” And wires aplenty there are. Sawyer Media works with customers to develop broadcast-quality streaming video and audio for all sorts of “communications” applications—marketing, sales training, investor relations, for instance.

The central message of Sawyer Media comes from an observation that Forrest used to get this company off the ground, and that is: *Why is it that you can watch a 22-minute news broadcast and remember*

Wrapping the two missing pieces—production expertise and deployment platform—around the basic business problem of communicating effectively became their mission.

“To start with, rich media is not very well produced,” says Peter. “We can help there, but secondly, streaming media today has a lot of exposed wiring.” By that he means, in part, that the RealPlayer or QuickTime media players interrupt the experience of the viewer, distracting and isolating the content from the rest of the data on the user’s screen. “In the same way that web sites have become the platform for publishing information, this is a platform for publishing rich media.”

Picking a Partner

To the degree that publishing useful information on behalf of your customers and partners is *central* and mission-critical to your business, companies like TS and LexisNexis and Sawyer Media all have a permanent seat at the table. For some, these companies will be the only game in town, and thus will always be thought of as more of a “have-to-have” than a “want-to-have.”

But to the further degree that they can enhance the experience you have with customers, playing a part in providing the all-important Surround Stuff, these companies are among the indispensable partners in your futures.

As I suggested at the beginning, the articles in these pages will do nothing to clarify the definition of “content” for you. But they do elevate the conversation past the raw materials of communication, and into the realm of service and partnership. And that’s a pretty good place to start the process of thinking about your strategies for buying and deploying “content.”

Whatever that is. □

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“The role of the information provider...is showing more promising signs of maturity and complexity.”

one-size-has-to-fit-all, and the best business model was to simply keep on doing what you’re doing. But Mike and the rest understand the concept of Surround Stuff. Mike puts it this way: “We used to sell a database, and this is what it’s going to do for you. Now, we’re talking more with customers about what the entire process looks like: What can we do to improve your intellectual property/digital asset management activities? Can we provide something that fits better into your workflow? Can we do **something** that is a better value proposition for you?”

These are Surround Stuff questions.

Hiding the Wires

Both Wendy and Mike would agree that their respective companies’ ability to compete and thrive will depend on customer-awareness, but this emphasis on

practically everything, but you can sit through a two-hour business meeting and remember practically nothing? It seems intuitive that business communications can learn a lesson from 50 years of news production expertise, and create a new way of delivering important content.

But it’s not as simple as putting a talking head in front of a camera. “Companies have been making videos for years,” points out Peter. “And they spend months creating them, untold dollars distributing them, and nobody watches them.”

It became clear that the answer was two-fold: One, there’s more to communications than talking heads—production expertise plays a part. And, secondly, Sawyer Media felt there was no software platform in place to publish streaming video in the same way that software existed to build Web sites, for example.