"Working Faster and Smarter on the Web" by Rita Vine

Workshop, Florida Library Association Conference, April 9, 2002
Synopsis, by Alicia Ellison, Librarian, Hillsborough Community College--Ybor City Campus

[Rita Vine is founder and president of WorkingFaster.Com, an Internet-user training company in Canada. The company also develops customized search portals for corporate clients. Her presentation consisted of two sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, each covering different topics -- a total of 3 hours. The workshop was sponsored the Florida and Caribbean Chapter of Special Libraries Association and Dialog , in conjunction with the Institutional Libraries Section of FLA, but it has applications for all types of libraries. The following is my distillation of her major points, with references to sources of additional information. Any of my own comments or references are enclosed in italics, in brackets, and followed by my initials. NOTE: All of Rita's handouts from this session are now available in .pdf format at www.workingfaster.com/links.html --AE]

The Truth About Real People

- Real people don't think like librarians nor should they have to do so. Boolean searching isn't really that useful anymore, with today's massive databases, such as those in a search engines, and which have no thesaurus.
- Real people just want the answers. Think of whether you want your financial advisor to teach you how to chart an analysis of your financial picture or do you want her to do the analysis and present you with options.
- When we give people what they want, we open the door to a relationship. Librarians are in the relationship business, one relationship at a time. Give them what they want first. After you've hooked them, you can teach them other things.
- Real people don't want to "evaluate" web sites. It is futile and a turn-off to try to teach them to do this. The Web medium lends itself to skimming and discourages deep reading.
- Real people do not read help screens, they type poorly, they do not construct good queries, and they do not know how to organize and save results.
- The majority of learning happens between friends, not in rigid situations.
- Real people ask their peers about how find information. Peer groups are "communities of practice." Libraries are not integrated parts of these communities, so the library is not the first choice for people to seek information. These peers are e-fluentials, and knowledge-seekers go to them because they don't intimidate and don't give too much information, but they know a little bit more than the knowledge-seeker.
- Libraries must market to these e-fluentials (teachers, group leaders), find out where they "hang," what they read.
- Adults see the Web as an information resource. Kids also see the Web as an information resource, but they also see it as an environment in which to relax, communicate and play games; and they see the world of information being a mouse-click away. So, librarians must create "one-stop shopping" on the library Web site, and consider e-learning, e-reference, and chat reference.
- We librarians are too enmeshed in our culture, in the "goodness and truth of libraries," to see how our customers see us, or fear us.
- We must make learning shorter and more focused, in teaching sessions as well as the reference desk (no more than two or three ideas in a one-hour training session).
- Use their terms, i.e. don't bother calling it a "database" if they ask you for a "search
engine" [see above, "real people don't think like librarians"-AE].

- Our view of information is complicated. For the generation that thinks that the world of information is just a mouse-click away, convey the idea of the library's Web page as the starting off point for paid information (books, periodicals) and the "free Web" (using resources that we recommend) as access to "grey" literature (see Rita's article, "Real People Don't Do Boolean: Helping End Users Search Faster and Smarter on the Web," Information Outlook, March 2001 (available in full-text through www.findarticles.com).


The Truth About Search Engines

- Search engines are just too big. We want fewer results that are:
  - High quality.
  - Best of the breed.
  - Unambiguously "a-ha" - the "wow" factor does not happen with common-topic searches.

- "True" search engines translate keywords into algorithms that compare query terms to the contents of spidered databases. Results are rank-ordered according to how often these results are linked by other pages.

- Every search engine except Google:
  - Buys its spidered databases from INKTOMI. Google spiders its own.
  - Requires sites to pay for placement and pay for consideration to be included (Yahoo no longer accepts a site for consideration without payment).
  - Requires sites to pay for spider (INKTOMI makes the spider search engine that is purchased by many search engines).
  - Measures "click-through" results ("powered by DIRECT HIT"). This software measures clicking behavior, i.e. where you go, how deep you go, etc. through cookie technology. It aggregates the behavior of all users--including clicks on ads, partner sites, etc.-- and produces "top ten" hits. Therefore, popularity feeds on itself, and the quality resources are de-emphasized.

- Therefore, search results are skewed because:
  - Pay-for-placement displaces content.
  - Popularity displaces content - popular pages become more popular, while other high-quality, unlinked pages continue to disappear.
  - Users don't know how to structure their queries properly.
  - There is much, i.e. "the invisible Web", that cannot be indexed, i.e. databases, deep pages, short pages [see http://www.invisible-web.net/ --AE]. PUBMED is an example of a database that cannot be spidered, and therefore its contents will not come up in keyword queries on search engines.

- Even Google can only cover at most 30% of the Web.

- Search engines should only be used for very specific searches, i.e.:
  - Known Web sites.
  - Missing pieces.
  - Needles-in-a-haystack.
Distinctively-named organizations and people.

- Use phrase searching with quotation marks for improved results. Forget Boolean!
- If you must use a search engine:
  - If your answer is not in the first 10 results, move on.
  - Use more than one search engine, rather than spending a lot of time trying different searches on the same tool.
  - Use lower-case only in your search terms.
  - Don't use phrase restrictions lightly, but rather carefully consider them, i.e. when you know that the phrase will appear the way you type it, and when there is no other way to limit your search.

**Browsing Is Better, or, Try Subject Starters**

- De-emphasize search engines and emphasize high-quality, filtered, subject directories, or "guided hierarchies", i.e. LII, BUBL-Link, Pac-Info (public records). See searchportfolio.com/searchlite.html for additional recommended subject directories.
- By using subject directories, you bypass:
  - Users inability to formulate good search queries.
  - Users inability to type correctly.
- Do not search subject directories as you would a search engine. Tools that are not "true" search engines (see above, "The Truth About Search Engines") do not index every word. They are tiny, inconsistent, limited databases. If you must search, use one general keyword, e.g. to identify a subject heading within the hierarchy.
- Think before you click [what a concept! --AE].
- Scan the page. Most people don't scroll [Really? We've never encountered that, have we? --AE].
- Use quick-fact lookup tools, i.e. DeskRef, YourDictionary.com, for ready-reference.
- To find people:
  - If the name is distinctive, try a search engine.
  - Phone books: teldir.com.
  - Public records: pac-info.com (over 6,000 public records databases).

For more information on search engines and subject starters, and training tips, see Rita's article, "Real People Don't Do Boolean: Helping End Users Search Faster and Smarter on the Web," Information Outlook, March 2001 (available in full-text through www.findarticles.com).

**Research Tips**

Four stages of research (see Rita's search planning worksheet at www.workingfaster.com/worksheetinfo.html):

1. **Gather**: Keep track of where you go. To track good hits for later review, but don't put them in Favorites. Instead, right-click and create a short-cut on the desktop. Then, create a folder for gathered resources. These are easier to access and delete than Favorites. Also, see "Search Planning Worksheet" in Session Handout.. Read less at this stage. Just gather, and recurrence/repetition will show when to stop.
2. **Select**: The Web's interactivity makes it easy to get sidetracked and hard to know when...
3. **Process.**
4. **Communicate.**

**Training Tips**

- Introduce great starting points
- Show them why search engines don’t work.
- Demonstrate good search engine search
- Show them how the library can help them.
- Help them organize their search (understand the four stages of research).
- Aim high - target the "experts" - you’ll still reach the lower-end users. Everyone can point and click.
- Assess learner needs carefully.
- Saying it isn’t learning it-allow time for hands-on-they must replicate.
- Teach rules.
- Teach the lost art of browsing.
- Give them distilled, simple concepts-which they can retain when they leave.
- This approach does the following:
  - Simplifies lives
  - Empowers users to be self-sufficient.
  - Makes them good information consumers.
  - Lets librarians do what they do best, i.e. advise and recommend.

For a fuller discussion of training tips, see Rita’s article, "Real People Don’t Do Boolean: Helping End Users Search Faster and Smarter on the Web," *Information Outlook*, March 2001 (available in full-text through [http://www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com)).