

Designing for Online: LBC's Online Publishing Methodology

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Late last year, I visited the Department of Justice in Queensland to outline LBC's online plans and our approach to electronic publishing. Joanna Fear, reference librarian at the Department of Justice and joint editor of the *Australian Law Librarian*, suggested that the information would also be of interest to other members of the Australian Law Librarians' Group.

One of the main questions you might like to have answered is why it has taken LBC as long as it has to release an online service. Though we faced considerable commercial pressure to release electronic services online, we also heard from our customers that they were not looking for online services merely to replicate what was already available on CD-ROM or in hard copy. It was clear that what was needed was not just online content, but the right kind of content with a high degree of useability, appropriate to the delivery mechanism.

A problem well defined is a problem half solved, so we started solving the problem by going to the market and asking questions. This is what we learned.

THE FOUR C'S OF ONLINE PUBLISHING

Designing for online is very different from designing for paper and CD-ROM. Though there are common themes between the different production media, particularly between CD-ROM and online, the online medium requires a different approach. You could say that this is represented by the four C's of online publishing: currency, capability, comprehension and convenience.

Currency

An obvious benefit of the Internet is its ability to deliver information quickly. Load your information on a webserver, connect it to the Internet and the content is available. Even better, email some types of information directly to the intended recipient. The delivery end is relatively straightforward (not problem-free mind you, but not unduly difficult).

The production end is not so easy. Legal information that is produced for paper or electronic output must go through a process - authoring, editing, marking-up and value adding. Although you can take shortcuts with this process and deliver direct to online, if you intend to use the information for other purposes, any shortcuts taken have the potential to create inefficiencies in other parts of the system and other products could suffer. To ensure that this does not happen, LBC is in the process of re-engineering many of its processes both to meet the appropriate currency needs of various online products, and at the same time, to improve the production and delivery of other product formats.

Capability

When we consider all of the features that go into an electronic product to enable users to perform tasks, we often use the word *functionality*. It's a bit of jargon that stems from the software development environment. While it's a useful term for developers to identify and communicate user requirements, I have never been comfortable that it adequately expresses needs from the *users* point of view and few customers use the word *functionality* to tell us what they are looking for. Functional, yes, *functionality*, no.

A better word is *capability*. What is the product *capable* of achieving for the user? Thinking in these terms ensures that we have the user foremost in mind when we design a product. What information does the user need on a particular subject? How does it need to be communicated? How will users approach the problem that they are seeking to solve? These are the kinds of questions we ask when we are identifying user requirements.

Identifying user capability requirements and meeting them is one of the most satisfying aspects of electronic publishing. It is also one of the most challenging. Different content types (case law, legislation, etc.) require different design approaches and different features. For some content types, a search approach is the most appropriate way to access information, whether that means keyword searching, field searching or natural language searching. For other types of content, users prefer a navigation approach - browsing through lists of information and accessing relevant pieces through hypertext links. Some information requires both approaches.

For some types of information, users prefer to search through a subset of material to find relevant information and then either print the full text or refer to a hard copy equivalent of the text for more in-depth review. Additionally, some information has a logical structure and the context is easily ascertainable. For other information, we need to supply the context so that the user does not get lost within the information. One of the difficulties of moving from a paper format to an electronic format is that you lose the physicality and the visual context that comes with paper output. Multiple screens are generally considered not to be a solution. There are other ways to solve this problem, however, and it is one of the things we are working on.

We find in many cases that customers find it easier to articulate what they don't like about a product, rather than identifying what they require. For this reason, after we have determined the high level content requirements and expected uses of the information, we prototype the service with customers to identify more specifically what their detailed requirements are. It's easier to articulate what works and what does not work when you are in the service.

Though it may surprise you, our objective is not to create the perfect product. Different users have different requirements and what is 'essential' for one user is 'not important' to another. Perfection is often in the eye of the beholder. We must therefore strike a balance between all the factors that come together to create a product: the data, the uses to which the data is expected to be put, the application or software program that is delivering it and the delivery channel itself.

We also appreciate that product design is evolutionary. We have already seen this with CD-ROM products: initially the strong requirement from the market was for the CD-ROM content to mirror the paper content so that users could adjust more easily to the new delivery format. As users became more experienced, we found that the design constraints that resulted from the paper translation were not appropriate for electronic delivery and we were asked to change. This is a natural progression. As technology improves and users increase their expertise in using technology, requirements also change. We in turn will continue to adapt to these changes and, ultimately, you will be the judge of our success.

Comprehension

For LBC, comprehension is probably the most important driver of product development and design. At the end of the day, it's all about content. No matter how many features we add to a product, how clean the interface, how precise the search results, if the content itself is not right, the product is not right.

Technology is not the solution. Information and knowledge are the solutions; technology is an enabler. Technology is used to enhance access to information and to help us present information in a way that aids comprehension, but the greater focus is on ensuring that the information itself is responsive to the user's need.

Convenience

Convenience takes in a broad number of factors when applied to online publishing. It means connectivity, access on demand, access on the desktop, a familiar interface, intuitive presentation of information, reliability, flexibility, and ready and available technical and content support, both through the service itself and in person if necessary. In short, it means that the end to end experience of using the online service must be comfortable and easy.

Is this achievable? While each of the above factors has its own set of challenges, the widespread use of the Internet and the nature of web technology provides tools and experience that we can use as we work to meet these objectives. And, fortunately, the process doesn't need to take place in isolation.

For much of the past year we have been working with many of our customers in order to identify and respond to their online requirements, particularly in the above areas of the four C's. We have not viewed this as just a front-end, delivery process. Much of the work has been on the back-end, in understanding the new requirements posed by online publishing and then adapting the production and commercial systems that will be used to support the new services. We hope to demonstrate the benefits of these efforts as we start to release the new services in the coming months.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Why has it taken this long for LBC to release an online service? It was important that we get it right and it was important that we developed a solid foundation on which to build new value-added information services for the future. Accordingly, the initial online services will comprise core legal content areas, with appropriate value-adding so that use of these services is as effective as possible. As new services are added, they can then be integrated within the context of a total linked environment, promoting effective and productive access to information. We will continue to work with our customers as we build an online environment for legal information so that the outcome is a valued service that contributes to the value of your services and those of your organisations.

I would welcome any comments or feedback on your present use of online services and your requirements for online information. Alternatively, if you would like more information about our upcoming releases, please feel free to email me at Betsy.Hussin@lbc.com.au.