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About FreePint

FreePint is a global network of people who find, use, manage and share work-related information. Members receive this free twice-monthly newsletter, which is packed with tips, features and resources.

Joining FreePint is free at <<http://www.freepint.com/>> and connects information practitioners around the world with resources, events and answers to their tricky research and information questions at the FreePint Bar, our free online forum: <<http://www.freepint.com/bar/>>.

The FreePint Newsletter is available online in several formats and can be read, saved and forwarded at <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/>>.

Editorial



In the classic movie "Desk Set", Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn sidestep a computer the size of Godzilla, arguing about who can do a researcher's job better: human or computerzilla.

The answer, which seems Hollywood-perfect in this 1957 film, is the same today. Computers are great at regurgitating facts, but only people know how to interpret that information and present it in a friendly format.

I'm talking about customer service, of course. It's what sets a great company apart from an efficient one. This is a lesson that contributor Emma Wood has learned. She devised a strategy for emulating technology -- specifically web tools -- to appeal to the users at her lawlibrary. But at the same time, she uses her carbon-based wiles to do what a bit of silicon never can.

Kristen Giovanis, who has written "Think Globally; Write Locally" for this issue of FreePint, also knows about communicating with customers. When you work across international borders, it's important to know that everyone understands what you're saying. For Giovanis, it means sounding like a local. For Olivia Freeman, who reviewed "Teach Beyond your Reach", written by our own Robin Neidorf prior to joining FreePint, it means connecting to a diverse population through an e-learning environment.

No matter what techniques you apply to reach out to your customers, it's important that you're doing so. A tight focus on superlative service has made some companies legends in their industries. We recognise this at FreePint. That's why we're accepting nominations for the 2006 Online Information / FreePint Award for Best Customer Service. Do you know a company that offers excellent customer service? Read the guidelines and complete the nomination form by September 29th at <<http://www.freepint.com/events/online-info-2006/>>.

Hepburn and her cronies in "Desk Set" realised technology was a fact of life in their business. The challenge is letting computers do what they do best and filling the gaps with being human, even if it takes more time and energy. Trust me, it's worth it. Your customers will thank you for it by sticking with you.

Monique Cuvelier
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Vernon Prior provides training in competitive intelligence and is the compiler of a comprehensive glossary of terms, available at <http://www.scip.org/> (under Resources: Language of BI), and elsewhere.

Submit your top five favourite Web sites. See the guidelines at <http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>

My Favourite Tipples

by Vernon Prior

If you've ever wanted to run your own business, the first three sites may help, and the last two will help you organise your information:

- Australian Anthill magazine <<http://australiananthill.com/>> is devoted to innovation, entrepreneurship and the development of fast-growth companies.
- Best for Business <<http://www.bestforbusiness.com/>> is a gateway to business-related information, such as checklists, plans, fact sheets, guides to essential information and tips on how to run a business.
- Business Owners' Idea Cafe <<http://www.businessownersideacafe.com/>> describes itself as a fun approach to serious business and gives practical advice.
- Having acquired all that extra information, you will need to find it again. Make the job easier with Copernic Desktop Search (capable of handling files, emails, pictures, and music) at <<http://www.copernic.com/en/products/desktop-search/index.html>>.
- And, if you are really serious about organising your information, control your vocabulary by selecting an appropriate taxonomy from <<http://www.taxonomywarehouse.com/>>.



Using business information to meet compliance regulations

Confused by anti-money-laundering regulations? Many business information products hold the necessary data to support KYC enquiries. August's VIP provides an overview of compliance regulations and the products that can help you.

<<http://www.vivaVIP.com/>>



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The right stuff in customer service

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The Jinfo Newsletter is published free every two weeks, and contains a list of the latest vacancies along with job-seeking advice. The latest article is entitled "Job Trends in the Information Market: A Q&A with Hazel Hall". Read it online and subscribe free at <<http://www.jinfo.com/newsletter/>>.

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<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5601>>



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<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5640>>

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**Researcher X3**

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Country: United Kingdom

<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5504>>

Approvals Selector

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Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment and Services Limited

Country: United Kingdom

<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5752>>

Information and Website Co-ordinator - maternity

An experienced Information & Website Co-ordinator is sought for a professional body, to provide maternity cover.

Recruiter: The Market Research Society

Country: United Kingdom

<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5749>>

Interim Head of Editorial and Content

An Interim Head of Editorial and Content is required for this public sector organisation initially for 3 months.

Recruiter: TFPL Ltd.

Country: United Kingdom

<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5743>>

Senior Information Officer - Investment Banking

Investment Banking Researcher at senior level to work from 9.00 - 5.00 and deal with quick and in-depth enquiries.

Recruiter: Glen Recruitment

Country: United Kingdom

<<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5824>>

NB: The above are paid listings, and a selection of jobs from the database

FreePint Bar

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Monique Cuvelier serves as editor of the FreePint Newsletter. She has contributed many articles to dozens of publications in the UK and US, CFO, CIO Insight, eCommerce Business, and also written about business and technology for The Western Mail, Wales' national newspaper. She has launched and run several online and print publications. She can be reached at <monique.cuvelier@freepint.com>.

The FreePint Bar is where you can get free help with your tricky research questions <<http://www.freepint.com/bar/>>

The Bar is alive with discussions that range from recommendations for companies that help you research and write, to books differentiating Corinthian, Ionic and Doric columns, to government sites that flop or flourish. Read a summary of these discussions below and then tell us what you think at the FreePint Bar <<http://www.freepint.com/bar/>>.

- It's red, it's a 'bible' and it's used by architects in restoration work. Do you know what this book could be? If so, help one FreePinter who's been asked to look for a book that fits that description <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b59220>>.
- If you're looking for a product to help you organise a large body of work, you may want to read this discussion on content management software <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b58880>>. One suggestion is to use what Microsoft Word provides, and another is to use some software that organises graphical structure.
- When it comes to researching companies, products and technologies, a few products stand out among FreePinters: Thomson Business Intelligence, Lexis-Nexis and Factiva. Some Bar contributors are discussing the merits of each. Weigh in yourself or see what others have to say <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b58565>>. For an in-depth look, read the review of Thomson Business Intelligence in VIP <<http://web.vivavip.com/go/vip/26>>.

- Market research can help when submitting a tender for a project. One Bar member is trying to land bigger contracts and is looking for advice on structuring tenders <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b57931>>.
- After much fanfare, the New Zealand parliament launched a new and improved website last week. It was a dud. The server timed out, links were down and users were unhappy. The site now seems up and running and slick, but the episode made FreePint wonder which governments have good sites. Tell us about those you use and why you like them <<http://www.freepint.com/go/b58587>>.

Know a company with excellent customer service? Nominate them for our award. Make your nominations by 29 September <<http://www.freepint.com/events/online-info-2006/>>.

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- Finding People in the Digital Age
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If you have a suggestion for an article topic, or would like to write for FreePint, then please contact <monique.cuvelier@freepint.com> or read the notes for authors at <<http://www.onopoly.com/author.htm>>.




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"Think Globally; Write Locally: What Source Writers Need to Know About Localisation"

By Kristen Giovanis



Kristen Giovanis is the Managing Director of KJ International <<http://www.kjinternational.com/>>, a leading-edge company providing translation, localisation, desktop publishing and compliance consulting for global companies in regulated industries such as pharmaceutical, life sciences and financial services. Kristen frequently speaks at conferences and publishes articles on regulatory and technology topics, and she has specific in-depth experience in CE regulations, medical compliance and international contract law, as well as the practical requirements of working effectively across international borders. She can be reached at <kristen@kjinternational.com>.

Information professionals deal with fewer borders than many other business people. Researchers often work for clients in different countries, and many companies use technology that must make sense to an international workforce. But when you're working with words, sometimes you need more than translation -- you need localisation. A document can be translated word-perfect, yet not be effective in another market due to differences in the way local businesses operate and the way people think.

Through the process of localisation, writers translate the words and adapt the content of a source document to the needs and norms of the target country or market. Yet they can only work with what they are given -- part of the responsibility for effective localisation lies with the generator of the source document. After all, poorly written English cannot be turned into good Japanese.

Going to the source

Anyone, be it a technical writer or you, generating the source document becomes an important part of the localisation process. Their job is already pretty tough. They must:

- Understand the product (often with the same level of detail and intimacy as the engineers who created it)
- Incorporate content from engineering, legal and marketing departments
- Please many opinionated people who most approve their work -- and all of whom have an opinion
- Meet deadlines that are not always grounded in reality.

It's no wonder that the requirements of localisation are rarely at the top of writers'

lists. Some essential tips can make a big difference in how well writers can produce documents that reduce the challenges of global communication.

Plan for success

There is no substitute for a good plan. This happens from the moment a company, a department or a writer knows that documentation will need to be translated and localised. The individuals involved can build a plan that will help the process run smoothly and have a positive outcome.

Create a standard workflow

Create a workflow or standard operating procedure that takes into account the needs of localisation. For example, if your organisation has international offices which will be reviewing and validating documents following translation and prior to release, incorporate that step and required time within the workflow. If the piece requires desktop publishing, determine whether it will be completed internally or if it will be outsourced.

Another element to consider in the area of workflow is consistency and document streamlining. If several individuals or departments will be creating source documents, be sure they are all working in tandem, with the same style guide and glossaries. One of my clients recently submitted a project made of up technical documents created by several writers; none of the documents conformed to a template or style guide. The company later revised its procedures, created a style guide and updated all documents using a modular system. As a result, they were able to reduce the word count of the source documents by 41 percent, resulting in significant savings in translation and localisation costs.

Related FreePint links:

- "Plain and clear: Resources on Plain English", by Vasyl Pawlowsky <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/280705.htm#tips>>
- "Writing for the Web - How to Write Web-Friendly Content for your Site", by Steve Lee <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/050603.htm#feature>>
- "Effective Writing: How Good Copy Can Make Your Information Work Harder", by Paul Waddington <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/031002.htm#tips>>
- IBM: Globalize Your On-Demand Business <<http://digbig.com/4mqnc>>
- World Wide Web Internationalization Activity <<http://www.w3.org/International/>>

Budget time realistically

Translation and localisation projects require adequate time, usually calculated based on the length of the document. Other variables that may impact the timeframe are: the technical difficulty of the text, the review and validation processes in your workflow, and formatting or production of the final text in appropriate format(s).

Budget finances realistically

Localising can be expensive, especially for projects with multiple target markets. Keep in mind that localisation may be different, even when the target language is the same. A document will need to be localised separately for Chile and Argentina, even though Latin American Spanish is the target language for both countries.

Remember, too, that words are money, when it comes to translation and localisation. Many factors go into estimating the costs of a translation project, but the most important one is word count. One of our clients regularly produces documents in 26 languages; when you add up the cost of translation, localisation, validation and production, it comes to \$9.72 per word.

Invest in your resources

Templated documents and style guides take time and resources to develop, but they ultimately serve to reduce your costs and improve your results. A specialised term glossary can also be a worthwhile investment, since a major challenge in localising documents is how to handle industry- or company-specific terminology, abbreviations and product nomenclature. Investing in the creation of such glossaries improves accuracy and consistency of your documentation, while reducing costs.

Writing for localisation

Companies can also invest in their resources by providing specific training and support to technical writers and others who create source documents. Build awareness and skill in your team for the requirements of localisation, and you will reduce your headaches -- and your costs -- for every project.

These tips can get you started:

Content tips

- Be conscious of date and address formats. Standards differ from locale to locale. Many countries use the 24-hour clock, and the day/month/year order is the internationally accepted format except in the United States. One option is to spell out the names of the months or to use multiple formats such as '3.00 p.m./15:00'.
- Understand that numerical values are represented differently in various languages. 4,222,222.00 in English is represented as 4.222.222,00 in Spanish, and as 4 222 222,00 in French.
- Avoid country-specific information. Free telephone numbers, hours of operation for support services, local offices, country-specific warranties and regulatory information will all cause issues in localisation.
- Use consistent terminology. It gets boring, but it is a must! Avoid creating new technical terms where adequate ones already exist.
- Avoid abbreviations and acronyms wherever possible. They can be confusing to both your reader and your translator. When acronyms are necessary, remember the standard rule: On first occurrence of the abbreviation or acronym, give the full phrase, followed by the abbreviation or acronym itself in parentheses.

- In such cases, the acronym definition list is crucial, and in fact could be translated ahead of time, e.g. while a tender is being prepared in parallel. You can either merge this glossary with your general glossary of technical terminology or (preferably) include it as a separate appendix to your document.

Writing style tips

- Use symbols whenever possible. Many industries have standardised symbols that are globally recognised and accepted.
 - Avoid passive voice. Use a direct, simple writing style and short sentences.
 - Do not use upper-case letters to emphasise a particular action, especially in noun phrases; in German, all nouns are capitalised, and you will lose your emphasis.
 - Write full sentences, including all articles, unless there is absolutely no alternative.
 - Avoid jargon, slang and buzzwords.
 - If a term is not listed as acceptable in a current reputable dictionary or specialised glossary, don't use it.
 - Avoid 'modifier strings' (also known as noun strings, stacked modifiers, etc.). Example: 'plastic tip fastener clips'. Modifier strings make up the most common form of grammatical ambiguity. Break these long uninterrupted strings of nouns and adjectives into 'bite-sized' pieces before they reach your keyboard.
 - Avoid 'invisible plurals'. These are usually two-word phrases (noun + noun), in which it is not clear whether the first noun is meant to be singular or plural. Example: Is 'program update' an update of one program or a general procedure for multiple programs? Example: For 'file retrieval', should one file be retrieved or all of them?
 - Avoid using the slash (/) as casual punctuation meaning 'and' or 'to'.
- Choose words with one meaning, or at least with few meanings. Avoid verbs like 'make' and 'have', which have multiple meanings.
 - Use the simplest verb forms. Example: 'use' instead of 'utilise'.
 - Use indicative mood. Example: 'you do' instead of 'you would do'.
 - Avoid wordy expressions for time, place and relationship. Example: Use 'now' instead of 'At this point in time'.
 - Avoid nominalisations. Example: 'conclude' instead of 'reach a conclusion'.
 - Avoid using ambiguous modal auxiliary verbs like 'may' or 'might'. Instead, use a phrase such as 'It is possible that'.
 - Avoid gender-specific words. Avoid 'he', 'she', 'his' and 'her', and use 'they' and 'their' instead. (Be sure to make the corresponding noun plural, to avoid creating a grammatical error.)
 - Don't clutter your text with redundant expressions such as 'as is well known' and 'it is generally accepted that'.
 - Don't waste words telling readers what the text is going to say, or reminding them what it said earlier. Just say it once. The credibility of a document is not determined by the length. Shorter documents tend to have more impact, as do shorter sentences.

Design tips

- If providing electronic documents, pages' sizes should match standards where printing will take place. Documents to be printed and distributed in America, for example, should be designed for 8.5 X 11 paper rather than A4 paper.
- Make sure your design and word processing software supports the languages you will be localising.

- Separate text from graphics on the page. Do not include words in your graphic elements. Text embedded in graphics must be translated and localised separately, triggering a complete recreation of the graphic.
- Be aware of language expansion and leave appropriate white space. The general rule of thumb has traditionally been to leave an extra 30 per cent of space to account for the differences in languages. However, actual text expansion can exceed 50 per cent, for some languages. Romance languages are usually longer; Asian languages, on the other hand, tend to be shorter since individual characters may contain several words.
- If developing software, design as much extra character space as possible in the display, software prompts and error messages. Otherwise, the translator will have to use abbreviations, which make the interface difficult to understand.
- Avoid constrictive framed, boxed or columnar copy; in tabular column headings, include extra vertical space.
- Try to keep your text outside the graphics or in text boxes to allow for easy editing and translation.
- Provide all artwork, including illustrations, photos and other graphic components of your to-be-translated document, even if the art does not contain text. Artwork provides the translator with a critical visual reference.
- Standard punctuation in foreign languages differs from that used in English. Do not inadvertently make changes to punctuation in a translation without consulting your translator. For example, French uses spaces before and after colon marks.

Ready to go local?

While these tips can help you start with improved localisation processes, an experienced language services company can help you take it further. Translation and language consulting companies can proactively identify solutions and suggest approaches to save you money while improving results. It's always a good idea to involve your vendor early in the process -- experienced professionals can spot potential issues early on, which may mitigate or eliminate barriers later, when changes can be expensive.

Most importantly, work in partnership with your vendor to provide resources and reference materials, work through solutions and review your processes. The more you communicate with your vendor, the better job they can do for you.

{ the ugly truth }

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"Teach Beyond Your Reach"

Written by Robin Neidorf

Reviewed by Olivia Freeman



Olivia Freeman works as a freelance trainer, researcher and information-management specialist. She develops and delivers training on topics such as strategic planning, evaluating information resources and data protection. She undertakes strategic research, specialising in research for product development and competitor monitoring in financial services.

Olivia is active in professional groups and has held various executive positions. She regularly speaks at meetings and conferences and has published many articles. She can be reached at <marketintellig1@btinternet.com>.



As a professional trainer, I know how to lead people when I'm standing in front of them. But I didn't know how to transform an in-person course into an e-learning course. "Teach Beyond Your Reach", by Robin Neidorf, provides the answers.

The book and its companion website <<http://www.electric-muse.com/tbyr.asp>> are written in an informal, readable style that is suitable for instructors with or without experience using e-learning techniques. The book takes the reader through all aspects of creating and delivering a course or workshop for adults. This starts with a review of multimedia teaching tools backed up by useful sidebars which show, at a glance, the pros and cons of each tool. For example, asynchronous discussion -- conversations on a bulletin board or listserv -- works best for in-depth group discussion.

Neidorf stresses that successful e-learning means getting to know the students and developing a rapport with them. Learners need motivation, stimulation and active involvement to excel in a distance-learning environment. The book is packed with tips and best-practice examples to achieve this. Have a look at Neidorf's checklist for the well-run classroom for examples <<http://www.electric-muse.com/pdf/Chapter5checklist.pdf>>.

I had naively assumed that the instructor's role stopped after developing the course, but Neidorf's book shows that this is wrong. Distance learning requires hours of preparation both before and during the course; this is demonstrated in the chapter about the classroom, which I found most interesting. She advocates using push communication (the instructor delivers

information to the students) rather than pull communication (the learners are responsible for finding static documents). For instance, the author's e-mail signature block includes a classroom tip, which is rotated every few days.

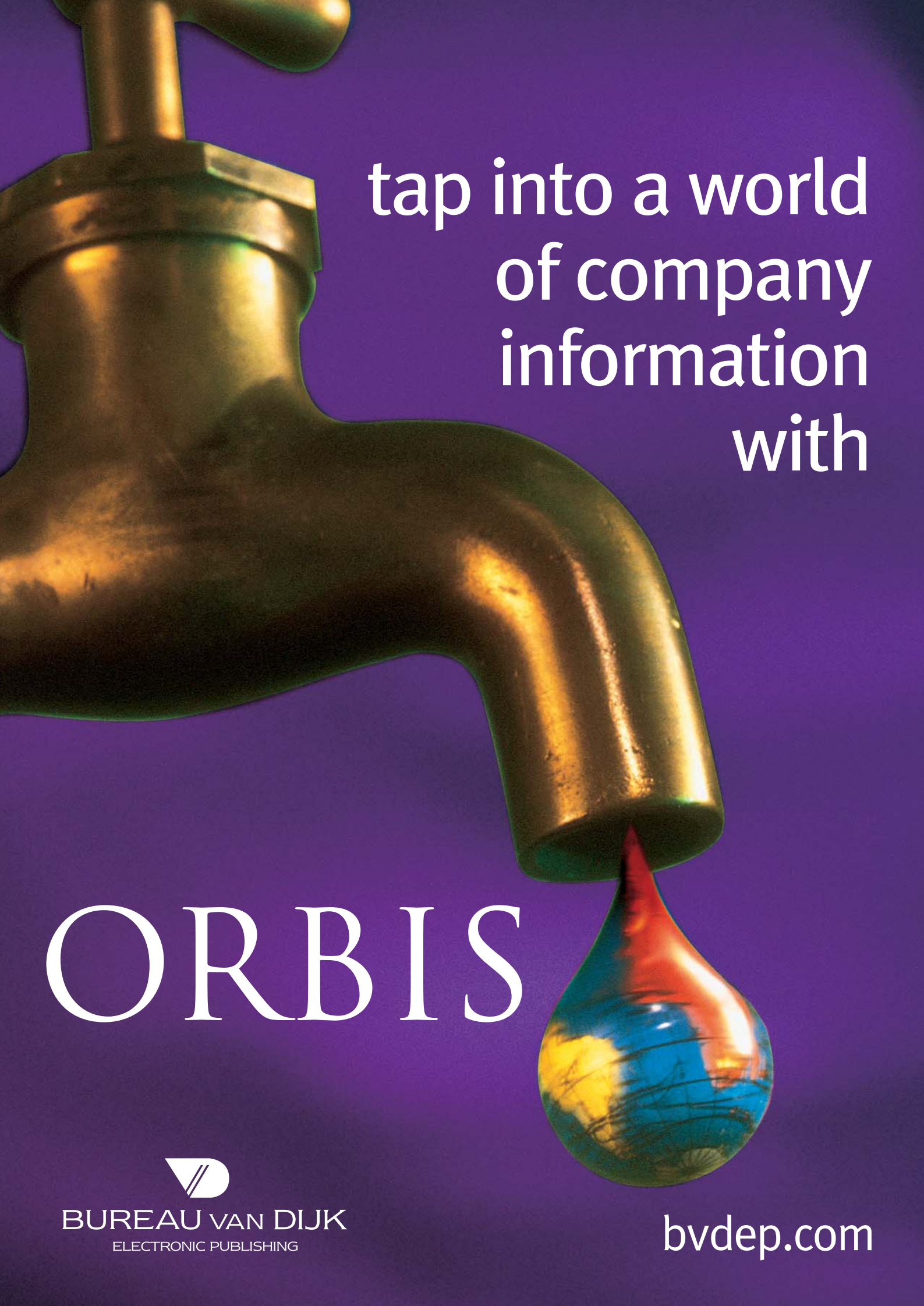
Two chapters relate to instructional design and content development. Initially an instructor must develop an instructional framework, starting by considering learner needs and desired outcomes. This tip is a good refresher for me, but I was interested to see how establishing this framework for an e-learning environment differs. "Teach Beyond Your Reach" does separate distance-learning design particulars from physical classrooms. For example, Neidorf says a unique characteristic of the online classroom is that while teachers can present content in a linear fashion, they can also simultaneously customise the same information for different learner groups.

Neidorf offers some tips on how to write this content. She recommends working with the end-user in mind and using short sentences, as most learners will be reading lectures on a screen. She advises not trying simply to convert existing presentations because this does not make best use of the web, which is visual and interactive. She suggests making the online course into a virtual library, field trip and scavenger hunt.

It's clear the virtual classroom provides instructors with a platform to create exciting learning opportunities. This manual's strength is that it describes real-life examples, and you know that the author is speaking from her own experience. I would enjoy being in Neidorf's class, but in the meantime, I'll learn what I can from her book.

Related FreePint links:

- Distance Learning in the FreePint Bar
<<http://web.freepint.com/forum/bar/read.php?i=2892>>
- "Distance Learning is Closing the Distance", by Anne Esler
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/280405.htm#tips>>
- "Distance learning as a collaborative enterprise: Tips on teamwork to make the class work", by Robin Neidorf <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/080606.htm>>
- "Teach Beyond Your Reach", by Robin Neidorf <<http://digbig.com/4ftwk>>
- British Learning Association
<<http://www.british-learning.org.uk/>>
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"Emulating Web Tools to Become Indispensable to Your Users"

By Emma Wood



Emma Wood is a library technician at Alexander Holburn Beaudin & Lang LLP in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. She is a member of the Vancouver Association of Law Libraries, and recently blogged for the Special Libraries Association's 2006 conference. Emma enjoys working with fellow paraprofessionals on technology, education, and advocacy projects as part of the Library Technicians and Assistants Interest Group <<http://www.bcla.bc.ca/taig/>>, for which she serves as a social coordinator and newsletter editor. She can be reached at <ewood@ahbl.ca>.

Do you remember where you were the first time you heard about Google? I do. It was 2002, and I was enrolled in the library technician programme at SAIT, a polytechnic college in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Some of my classmates and I were talking about our search engines of choice, and one of them mentioned Google. I'd never even heard of it, but one search was enough -- I was hooked. I still use other search engines, but like the thousands of other people who have it set as their home page, Google is usually the first place I turn to for Internet searches.

But it's an everyday battle to get the lawyers and staff at the mid-sized law firm, Alexander Holburn Beaudin & Lang LLP, where I am a library technician, to stop relying on Google for all their searching. So much of the information they're looking for isn't accessible through search engines.

For those of us in the information field, understanding why we and our users are drawn to web tools like Google is critical. The Internet and its major players are ubiquitous, and we can't expect our patrons to stop thinking like they're on the Net when they start using our services. The panic about information professionals being replaced by computers and search engines is over, but information literacy is more important. People are busier and time is worth more than before. Face it: our users will never completely stop using popular websites and online services, instead of asking us for help.

So we might as well emulate the web services our patrons rely upon, and then one-up them. If information professionals borrow cues from these web tools, they'll become as critical as the internet to our users. There is much to be learned from wildly popular sites like Google, Flickr and Amazon. But there's still much to be said for the human touch.

The first thing to keep in mind is that it's not all about technology; it's a frame of

mind. When it comes to coding, our skill levels may vary, and even when the will to learn is there, few of us have unlimited budgets and resources to purchase or develop sophisticated new applications.

Usability counts

We should, wherever possible, pay attention to user interfaces. This is a fuzzy area. For every expert who claims a particular site has excellent usability, you'll find another who disagrees. But we can probably all agree that familiarity triumphs lacklustre design. Do the advanced search capabilities of your catalogue matter if your users are afraid to use them? Try to capitalise on search techniques and interactive functions that your users are already familiar with, so that they can search for information in a business setting in the same ways that they would search for information in their personal lives.

The John Hodgson Library of Imagine Canada has done a great job of doing just that. They host an information portal for the non-profit, charitable and voluntary sector at <<http://nonprofitscan.ca/>>, where their online catalogue of library and internet resources makes use of interactive features reminiscent of Amazon.com. Each item's record can be assigned a five-point usefulness rating and users may leave comments about the item, along with their name and location, for other users to read. Users may also compile book lists, similar in function to online shopping carts.

Kim Turner, Manager of Library Services, says the library worked with Andornot Consulting, their Inmagic Webpublisher Pro provider, to develop these features as part of a 'web effectiveness' project. Because the majority of their users access the library 'virtually', from across the country, these enhancements to the catalogue provide a way for users to connect and create their own readers' advisory, which, according to Turner, "... is important in a public, non-profit sector setting, and will help promote the development of online communities of practice".

Related FreePint links:

- "Marketing for the Info-Entrepreneur," by Mary Ellen Bates <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/060504.htm#feature>>
- "Marketing for the Info-Entrepreneur: Top Techniques to Build Your Business" <<http://www.freepint.com/shop/report/mie/>>
- Google Labs <<http://labs.google.com/>>
- "The Seed of Apple's Innovation" <<http://digbig.com/4mqnd>>
- Plain English Campaign <<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>>
- Post a message to the authors, Emma Wood, or suggest further resources at the FreePint Bar <<http://www.freepint.com/bar/>>

Be nimble

Apple's Steve Jobs is famous for his 'one more thing' utterances at the end of keynote presentations. Apple always has something newer, better and more exciting than they had a few months ago. If we can learn one thing from this giant and its competitors, it's to be nimble. These companies don't take their successes for granted. They're always working on improvements, not only for existing practices, but also for the next big thing.

Google has clearly embraced this concept: Google Labs currently has more than 20 prototypes on which it encourages public experiment and review -- News Alerts, Scholar and Google Maps all started there. The fact that many new web applications stay in beta for so long indicates that people are willing to accept a less-than-perfect product if it's continually improving.

At my firm, we had just barely completed the scanning and indexing for our online memo bank -- no small task at thousands of documents and several years of work -- when we realised that what we had developed wasn't sufficient. Our users complained that it was glitchy, hard to search and we knew they weren't using as much as they could be. What had initially seemed like a huge improvement over file folders with a cross-indexed naming scheme suddenly seemed unimpressive and antiquated. We knew we'd have to do a total revamp and relaunch. We decided to take full advantage of our library software and add metadata, full-text searching and an improved user interface -- in short, we added the characteristics needed to bring it up to today's standards for online searching. At first it was disheartening to think of starting over again, but we had to listen to the feedback from our users, otherwise we'd be the only ones using the memo bank.

Future-think

Embracing improvement means looking at new technologies as well. There have never been more technologies -- especially free or inexpensive ones -- at our disposal. Nowadays we expect popular websites to have RSS feeds, and we cringe when they don't. We crave interactivity, and it's unusual to visit a site that doesn't allow commenting or feedback. To keep up with the internet, we've got to embrace the concept of Web 2.0.

Steve Matthews, Knowledge Services Director at Clark Wilson LLP, does. He was charged with creating a corporate intranet for his firm. He envisioned a portal that incorporated many different aspects of Web 2.0, especially blogging and RSS feeds, and accomplished this using the open-source CMS Drupal.

The intranet features mixed and scraped RSS feeds from external sources. For example, one is comprised of major industry players' press releases and announcement feeds. It also enables each user to blog, leave comments on content such as contacts in the expert directory and assign categories to content on the fly, which results in that content's inclusion in various other locations and feeds within the intranet. Plans for tagging are in the works, too.

"It's about selecting technologies that are on the public internet that are applicable and appropriate behind the firewall", says Matthews, who notes that many pitfalls associated with these technologies on the Internet, such as spam and vandalising, are virtually non-existent within the small, private community of the firm. And, since Drupal automatically tracks usage, Matthews has the statistics to prove that the intranet is a vital part of the firm's communication.

Keep it simple

Another way to emulate popular web tools is through language. Thinking about your communication, both written and oral, is critical in creating a welcoming and un-intimidating information centre. Flickr has mastered this skill. Saucy, but not glib. To the point, but not dull. Users are drawn to its plain language, which is free of jargon and condescension. It's even got a sense of humour and playfulness -- just read the personalised multilingual salutations on the homepage.

It's both easier and harder than you'd imagine creating this tone in your communication. We've been conditioned to think that bigger words are better, and long complex sentences sound more intelligent. Escaping that mindset can be a challenge, but there are abundant online and print resources available to guide you through the process. (Use keywords 'plain English' or 'plain language' on the internet or an OPAC.) One area we strive to think about our language choices is in our department's monthly e-newsletter.

Lawyers read all day long, but we want our newsletter to stand out among all the other paper and email. We make a concerted effort to write in a tone that's friendly and approachable, and we're always looking for content that will be of interest to all members of the firm. We try to keep our communications free of jargon, interesting and enjoyable.

The newsletter contains useful information, including summaries of new books in the library and important new cases, links to useful websites, information on upcoming continuing education events, recent additions to various internal databases, humorous anecdotes and news, and a trivia contest that involves using the Internet or our intranet to solve. I think we're doing a good job: last month, a senior partner



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demanded an advance copy to take home on the long weekend.

Man over machine

As popular and successful as certain web tools are, there will always be advantages to working with humans. Information professionals depend on this interaction, so it's a worthwhile exercise to identify what we can do that computers can't.

One of the most frustrating obstacles in computerised research is the 'zero result' query - a search that yields no or irrelevant hits. In the fields of legal and business research, our users encounter it frequently. This leads to self-doubt and uncertainty about the effectiveness of a search, but sometimes the answer is that there is simply no answer!

Information professionals can confirm this might be the case. We can provide the back-story, details about the information or the lack thereof. Mary Ellen Bates calls this concept 'information topography analysis', which is a fitting description and also a nifty way of writing research cover sheets.

I recently began (and have since received thanks and appreciation from users) a cover sheet with completed research requests, indicating where I searched, a summary of what I found and any interesting aspects of the research. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that not only does this produce a better-quality product for the user, it is a good organisational tool for me. It tells me if I've missed any obvious resources. It can be educational too: the user sees that you didn't just search Google but went to deep and invisible web resources.

In our library, one of the biggest challenges is that our users want us to read their minds. They want us to fill in the blanks, read between the lines and know that when they say they saw something on last night's newscast, it was actually in last weekend's newspaper. These problems, as frustrating as they can be, are often the most satisfying to solve. And the key to sleuthing these solutions is to know the people asking.

One of our biggest advantages over computers is our ability to form relationships with our users. The better we know them, the more likely we are to be able to fill their requests -- which doesn't mean just giving them the answer they need, it also means giving it to them in a format that they can use. Cookies, caching and 'remember me' settings will never be a substitute for an intimate knowledge of a user's preferences. Certain users always want an email, others never do. We know who works from home on Fridays, and won't get the research package if we leave it on his chair, so a PDF version with live links is in order.

Lastly, real, live people are the ideal when it comes to customer service. Even the most extensive FAQs on a website are no match for talking to a human. Have you ever tried to find Amazon's customer service

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telephone number on their site? It's famously unpublicised, although it has now been published on several personal websites.

Getting help in real time shouldn't be so much work, so you should make it as easy as possible for your users to get in touch with you, in the manner they prefer. Your users should know that regardless of how they get in touch with you, be it via email, phone, IM or in person, they'll receive excellent service. In our library, students are some of the heaviest users. They need help finding books, cases, statutes and regulations, and most of all, they need reassurance that they're headed on the right research path. Sometimes they just need to talk something through out loud to make sure that it makes sense.

We like to be the soft place where they can fall, ask 'stupid questions' and take a break from a maddening project. When they need a sugar boost, they can grab some candy from our jar. When they need a distraction,

they can challenge our 20 questions toy. Only humans are capable of compassion and reassurance, which are often all a user wants.

Information professionals have more competition today than ever, but getting creative and thinking about why your competition is successful can inspire you to emulate them in some ways. Taking the time to assess which of your users' needs are being met through web tools enables you to develop fresh ways of delivering your own services. As power users of all sorts of web tools, we forget exactly why we like using them, and looking at them from the perspective of our users can be enlightening. So, the next time you have a few minutes to spare, check out some new web tools, and see what your old favourites are up to!

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- "Strategic Corporate Communication" 13th - 15th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e711>>
- "Managing and Maintaining a Decentralised Intranet" 13th - 14th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e731>>
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Netherlands:

- "Global Information Industry Summit" 14th - 15th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e707>>

United States:

- "ASIDIC Fall 2006 Meeting" 10th - 12th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e720>>

United Kingdom:

- "Internet Librarian International" 16th - 17th October <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e661>>
- "Your Library Gateway to Better Knowledge Management" 31st August - 19th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e723>>
- "Exploiting the potential of unstructured information" 11th - 12th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e713>>
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- "Conducting an Information and Records Audit to Ensure Good Governance" 14th - 19th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e721>>
- "Researchers & Associates Summit" 21st September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e714>>
- "AUKML 2006 - The 21st Century Information Professional" 22nd - 24th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e688>>
- "Finding the right digital partner for your business" 25th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e724>>
- "Business Development for Digital Agencies" 25th September <<http://www.freepint.com/go/e725>>

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A look back at what FreePint covered at this time in previous years:

- FreePint No.190 8th September 2005. "Analysing User Behaviour: A Case Study" and "The Slow Movement" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/080905.htm>>
- FreePint No.167 16th September 2004. "Information Sources For Education On The Web" and "Copyright - how to stay legal" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/160904.htm>>
- FreePint No.144 4th September 2003. "Searching Free Design Databases on the Web" and "Informing the Asylum Debate" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/040903.htm>>
- FreePint No.120, 5th September 2002. "Offshore Funds" and "From Fortune 500 to Handelsblatt's European 500 one year on - another look at some useful European and International Rankings" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/050902.htm>>
- FreePint No.95, 6th September 2001. "Railways Online in the UK" and "From Fortune 500 to Handelsblatt's European 500 - a look at some useful European and International Rankings" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/060901.htm>>
- FreePint No.70, 7th September 2000. "A Web of Mental Health" and "Top Sites on the Web for Aeronautics and Aerospace Science and Technology" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/070900.htm>>
- FreePint No.45, 9th September 1999. "File finding, file filing" and "Intranets and extranets" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/090999.htm>>
- FreePint No.21, 3rd September 1998. "Tricks with local newsgroups" and "Legal Resources on the Web" <<http://www.freepint.com/issues/030998.htm>>

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