FreePint®

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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, 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

It's easy to talk about how to give good customer service. We can all give examples of good and bad customer support, and how we would do things differently if we ran so-and-so company. It's also easy to present an annual award recognising good customer support teams, which we've done since 2002 at the annual Online Information show here in London.

But it's actually really difficult to provide good service; day in, day out; year in, year out. We're finding this with Researcha, the new service which took over from FreePint Financials at the beginning of this month, to sell data on UK and European companies <http://www.Researcha.com/>. Most of the sales (and therefore most of the customer support questions) have originated from customers in time zones completely different to our own. To provide good support we've, therefore, had to get up early in the morning (to support customers in Australasia at the end of their day) and work late (to support customers in the States and other time zones that are behind our own). It's been quite a strain and quite an eye-opener.

A company information provider that is a past master at providing excellent customer service is Bureau van Dijk Electronic Publishing (BvDEP). They were the deserved winners of our annual 'Best Customer Support Team' award in December <http://digbig.com/4gxyd>, and Robin Neidorf provides some insights into how BvDEP provide such good service in today's tips article.

We're just entering a particularly busy month in the information calendar. April hosts the must-visit event for independent information professionals -- the annual conference of the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) <http://www.aiip.org/>. It takes place this year in Miami, Florida, and we'll be attending as usual. AIIP always provides excellent customer service, which, for a volunteer-led association, is quite an achievement. The other annually-attended-in-April event is the Factiva Advisory Board, which also provides us with a valuable insight into a company that knows a thing or two about customer service; they won the first FreePint award back in 2002.

So, March and April, like November and December, are busy months in the face-to-face, up-early/bed-late information calendar. These are the months when we learn the most about giving good customer service, and it's great to be working in such an interesting and dynamic industry. We hope you feel likewise.

Cheers

William Hann
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Karen Loasby is an information architecture team leader for BBC New Media..

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

My Favourite Tipples

by Karen Loasby

- I wouldn't be without the fantastic <http://www.informationdesign.org/> newsletter for information designers and information architects.

- 'Guess the Google' is an application that makes you guess the search that generated the images. I use the trickier ones to show my users the limitations of free text <http://digbig.com/4fkft>.

- Connotea is nice combination of a del.icio.us style bookmarking application, with the ability to pull in bibliographic data from sites like Amazon and PubMed <http://www.connotea.org/>.

- I find this 'Glosso-Thesaurus' continually useful for explaining away the CV, thesaurus and taxonomy confusion <http://digbig.com/4gtyg>.

- WordCount is great for proving to our developers that the librarians know many more obscure words than they do <http://www.wordcount.org/>.

Web Alerts reviewed in VIP

Read three in-depth reviews in the February 2006 issue of VIP. Web Alerts, a current awareness and data warehouse service; The Mobile World, a statistical data and analysis tool; and Factiva Search 2.0, which offers new clustering and visualisation features.

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Market Research services compared

Ever wondered how aggregators of market research reports measure up? The March issue of VIP provides a comparative review of MarketResearch.com and Market Research (Profound) on Thomson Business Intelligence. The April issue will compare individual market research publishers.

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

Blogs and Social Media Forum, 17 May 2006, Hilton London Metropole Understanding the Impact of Blogs, Wikis and RSS.

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These are just a selection of the jobs in the current edition of the Jinfo Newsletter <http://www.jinfo.com/newsletter/> and over 164 in the Jinfo database <http://www.jinfo.com/>

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<http://www.jinfo.com/go/j5048>

VIP: Business information product reviews and news analysis

VIP, a monthly publication, offers in-depth, unbiased reviews of business information products, plus commentary by editor Pam Foster.

Over 1,000 senior information workers read it, with information budgets from GBP 45k to GBP 1.7m. If you fit this profile and you don't read VIP, then you're at a disadvantage:

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Another two weeks have passed - I can't believe it is the end of March already. The FreePint Bar is getting busier and busier and as a result I can only include a few of the postings in this summary. But did you know that you can view all postings using the Bar Browser <http://web.freepint.com/forum/bar/browser/>, by category or date? You can also search for past postings <http://www.freepint.com/search/>; you never know, your question may have already been answered.

Perhaps you can offer some words of advice to this FreePinter who wants to be their own boss and go freelance? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38325>. Another is already working freelance in Saudi Arabia, and she has been asked to find professional law librarians/legal researchers based in USA, Canada, Hong Kong, Germany and France <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38590>. Can you help? Yet another is trying to find professional consultants "in the field of building protection against bomb/terrorist attack, blast protection of doors and windows, etc." <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38526>.

FreePint's sister publication VIP is giving readers just what they've asked for, with an in-depth comparison of two market research report aggregators: MarketResearch.com and Market Research (Profound) on Thomson Business Intelligence. VIP is only published digitally, which avoids the delays and problems of postal delivery; a FreePinter is wondering if anyone else in London has experienced problems with receiving their Harvard Business Review through snail-mail? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38477>.

Do you know where to find the names of large and technologically advanced call centres in the Washington DC area? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38453>. How about any websites that publish annual reports of the largest companies in a variety of countries? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38568>. And do you know where to find 10-year forecasts for unemployment trends? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38489>.

Moving on to a couple of technical questions: someone is asking about adding metadata tags to MP3s using ID3v2 frames <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38545> and another is trying to track online advertising <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38378>.

And last but not least:

"Women and Advertising" - Do you know of any good resources of advertising aimed at women and how women are portrayed in ads? <http://www.freepint.com/go/b38486>.

That's it for this week but don't forget to check out all the postings at the Bar Browser <http://web.freepint.com/forum/bar/browser/>.

Blogs & Social Media Forum

Wednesday 17 May 2006
Hilton London Metropole

Understanding the Impact of Blogs, Wikis and RSS - Join the debate at the new conference from the organisers of Online Information.

Effective communication is a challenge for everybody in today's organisations and social media is all about communication. Knowing what's being said both inside and outside your organisation is critical and must be understood and managed effectively. But what exactly is involved?
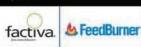
Examining the impact of wikis, blogs & RSS, the one day forum will combine expert industry insight from leading thinkers in the field of social media technologies with real life case studies covering:

- Choosing the medium, wikis, blogs, RSS - where is the value?
- The risk and reward of using social media
- Find out how these tools can be used in organisations for business benefit both internally and externally through real life case studies
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- Understand the cultural challenges surrounding the use of social media
- Hear about ways you can use podcasting as a business tool
- Future predictions - what lies ahead for social media and web 2.0?

The Forum is breaking away from the traditional conference format to help maximise interaction and networking with an open space workshop format - see website for further details at www.socialmediaforum.co.uk

Secure online booking and early bird discounts available at www.socialmediaforum.co.uk

"Can I have a little service here?: Being a great Customer and getting what you need from vendors"
By Robin Neidorf

Robin Neidorf is the founder of Electric Muse, a US-based research and communications consulting company that specialises in bringing information and communication together. She provides editorial support to FreePint by commissioning reports and articles, and working with authors to communicate their ideas as effectively as possible. Robin is the co-author of "E-Merchant: Retail Strategies for E-Commerce" (Addison Wesley, 2001) and the forthcoming "Teach Beyond Your Reach: An Instructor's Guide to Developing and Running Successful Distance Learning Classes, Workshops, Training Sessions and More" (Information Today Books, 2006). She can be reached at <editor@freepint.com>, or via her website, <http://www.electric-muse.com>.

For the past four years, FreePint has sponsored a competitive award in recognising excellence in customer service. The award is announced and presented, along with an etched pint glass, at the gala evening of the Online Information event in the UK.

In reviewing each year's nominations, we are always interested in reading what FreePinters consider to be part of good customer service. Among the common characteristics in citations of excellence are these:

* Informative * Courteous * Oriented to problem-solving * Available * Committed to customer education * Respectful

On the one hand, we want it all - a vendor who can meet our information needs and treat us like fellow human beings. On the other hand, the citations tell a between-the-lines story of all the customer service out there that fails to live up to a pretty basic standard.

We all want to feel valued by the companies with which we do business, and we want our questions answered now (or, even, better, before we are aware of having them!). Yet global companies offer a range of products and services to purchasers with widely ranging needs and experience. Short of building product development and customer service teams that are omniscient and omnipotent, how can a company consistently deliver customer service that goes beyond satisfactory and into the realm that engenders undying loyalty among customers?

We offer these suggestions to companies, supplemented by the wisdom of Bureau van Dijk Electronic Publishing (BvDEP), the winner of the 2005 FreePint Award for Best Customer Service. Louise Green, the Marketing and Communications Manager for BvDEP, exemplified the qualities that customers cited among the company's strengths (cheerful, cooperative, responsive and committed to achieving a positive outcome) in providing this insight. In fact, upon hearing that her thorough responses via email obviated the need for a phone call, she responded, "I thought that might be the case, but I didn't suggest it. I didn't want to seem at all uncooperative."

Louise's response makes the point for all workers, anywhere, who interact with others. Customer service isn't just about your customers. It's also about anyone you interact with in a professional setting. Your boss. Your colleagues. Your partners. Your competition. Your subordinates. Your students. Provide them with great 'customer' service, and your future is yours to shape.

Learning from customers

Smart customer service involves listening to customers and responding to their questions, ideas, and emerging needs. That 'feature' you built into your software just might seem more like a 'bug' to a user. When customers complain, they're telling you about unmet needs. Do you learn from your customers, or simply tolerate them? Do you solicit their input, or do you dread their requests?

When the relationship works well, the vendor or service provider stands to benefit at least as much as the customer. Customers are the source of great ideas about product development, new approaches, and rising challenges that require solutions. Great customer service is an in-gathering system that collects valuable data and turns it into the raw materials for improvement.

At BvDEP, Louise reports, customer support staff have '... direct access to our programmers and product developers,' enabling them to get answers straight from the source on how to help a customer work on a particular technical problem. That close contact also enables support staff to share information about technical issues or design components from a customer perspective.

We users can be an unpredictable bunch, trying things with products that programmers can't believe we'd even think of. When our experiments cause things to go haywire, however, and they help us clean up the mess, they gain valuable information about what users really see in that interface and how they really dive into the content. A close liaising relationship between customer support and product development helps bridge the gaps between intent and experience.

Communicate

Learning involves two-way communication, and great customer service demands that a vendor push information outward to customers regularly and in a service-oriented fashion. No one wants to get constant product update announcements; many customers, on the other hand, may welcome periodic invitations to explore product features that will help them accomplish their business goals.

Communication is often mistaken for the medium that facilitates it. Emailing and telephoning is not communication; they are both tools that allow communication - connection between people - to happen. The most effective communication occurs between people who have some history and relationship, even if it's a virtual one.

"Our sales people manage their own accounts," even after the ink is dry on the service agreement, says Louise of BvDEP's approach. "Customers have a familiar point of contact who oversees their account and is responsible for their satisfaction."

Lest sceptics believe that this approach is mere rhetoric, note too that BvDEP support staff boast lengthy tenures with the company - an average length of service of 6 years in an industry that often chews up and spits out workers with gusto. Shaun Owen, who manages the support team, has been with the company for a decade. Thus, communication within the company is enhanced, as well as communication between vendor and customer. "It's much easier to impact our philosophy when we've still got people around who remember the value placed on our initial customers," explains Louise. "Customers appreciate the fact that they often speak to the familiar people even on the helpdesk lines."

What's more, BvDEP avoids automation at the customer interface. Call the helpdesk, and you speak to an actual human.

Educate

Many products that information practitioners use are complex - certainly even basic word processing systems require orientation and familiarity before their use becomes second nature. (Remember the first time you tried to email an attachment to someone?). When using a complex product, customers need formal and informal education to maximise their investment of time no less than money.

The current thinking in best practices for adult learning is that applied education situations are the 'stickiest' - they are more likely to be of recognised value, and they are more likely to stay with the user. At BvDEP, helpdesk staffers are recognised as educators, helping to answer on-the-ground questions about applications of the product to a particular user's situation.

Louise comments that the company is known for the helpfulness of its helpdesk - but it's not just her opinion. One of the FreePinters who nominated BvDEP for the FreePint Award commented: "Top-class telephone support for extremely difficult installations. They combined a light-hearted and friendly approach with knowledge that just

seemed to be overflowing out of their heads. Every problem I came across they had a swift and accurate answer."

Customer support responds to questions, but it also offers opportunities to deepen a user's engagement with a product and a company by waking up the user's awareness of the multitude of ways the product can enable work to flow. That's an educational function, as much as a technical one.

In addition to ad-hoc education of helpdesk calls, BvDEP educates customers with web-based and site-based training, tutorials, and purpose-designed training manuals.

As anyone who has sat through a boring lecture knows, education is much more than subject knowledge. Training and education is a strategic investment in helping customers understand and best use a product.

Being a great customer

Relationships - even business relationships - must be a two-way street, if they are to be viable over time. A vendor-customer relationship works best when both sides take responsibility for useful and productive interactions. Part of getting great customer service is being a great customer.

Choose carefully

You can get clues about the kind of service you'll receive early in your interactions with a company. Pick vendors who exemplify in their sales cycle the kind of qualities you are looking for in customer service, and you are more likely to get those qualities throughout your relationship.

Warning signs that you are entering a bad relationship come early and often. Does the company share information willingly? Do its representatives seem genuinely interested in solving your problems, or are they just trying to make commission? Pay attention to those clues.

At a recent conference I attended on behalf of a client, I visited another vendor's stand to review an interesting looking product. The staffer at the stand literally grabbed the literature out of my hands, demanding to know why I wanted them. Odd, I know, but she had the idea that my 'exhibitor' badge might indicate that I was a competitor, conducting some kind of corporate espionage. While I was truly interested in the functionality of the product, and could have recommended it to many other clients, her behaviour suggested to me that this was not a company that was likely to deliver excellence in customer service, no matter how innovative their product. Somehow the culture didn't seem quite what I was looking for.

Be clear about your needs

It's very hard for a company (or a consultant or a colleague) to help you if you don't really know what you are looking for. Asking for one thing when you really need another (or not asking for anything when you really need something!) can get in the way of the kind of service you receive. You and the supplier will become frustrated, which is never good for anyone's relationship. We expect our suppliers of products and services to communicate clear and openly with us, peer to peer. To get good service, we have to be willing and able to do the same.

Be educable

So what if you aren't clear on what those needs are? If you don't know what you need, or even if you (think you) do, keep your mind open to the possibility of new information, new education, based on the vendor or service provider's expertise. Let a colleague share a new process approach, and be willing to try it, even if your own way has worked just fine for years. If education is part of giving good service, then being educable is part of being a good customer. When you ask for training, pay attention; don't check your email during the webinar. And show up if you reserve a seat. Stay on topic for the training programme; bring up off-topic questions during breaks or after the main programme.

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If you have a suggestion for an article topic, or would like to write for FreePint, then please contact <penny.hann@freepint.com> or read the notes for authors at <http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>.

And your piano teacher all those years ago was right - you also have to practice in order to get better. Schedule time to practice using new products and services, so that your training questions have a chance of not falling into the 'crisis' category. Training doesn't work if you don't apply what you've learned.

Conclusion

All relationships take time and effort to cultivate. Providing customer service and being a good customer are no different. Put in the time, and the relationship has a chance to deepen and grow. Neglect the garden, and the weeds grow thick.

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"Competitive Intelligence: Gathering, Analysing and Putting it to Work"

Reviewed by Arthur Weiss

Arthur Weiss is a UK based management consultant specialising in competitive intelligence and strategy. He first started working in competitive intelligence in the late 1980s and in 1995 he founded AWARE, a CI consultancy offering clients CI research, analysis and training. In 1997 he offered the first training course on using the Internet for Competitive Intelligence (at the Online Information Conference) and has continued offering training courses on this and other CI related topics. Arthur has written and presented on competitive intelligence, marketing and Internet related topics globally and can be contacted through AWARE's web-site at <http://www.marketing-intelligence.co.uk>.

Before writing this review, I was curious to see if there were any positive synonyms for the word "critic" - but found none. Synonyms given were detractor, opponent, enemy and censor. The single antonym given, fan, is a better word for my feelings on this book.

So what is it that I like about the book? Well, the first thing is that I appreciate the welcome change of reading a book explaining competitive intelligence from a British perspective. Most "how to" competitive intelligence books are American, and reflect US conditions. Second, the book is well written, following a logical path covering why companies need to do competitive intelligence; competitive intelligence theory and industry analysis; ethical issues; data collection; analysis; to communicating the intelligence and protecting the organisation from others with "intelligence counter-steps". I also liked that the book was not afraid to slay some sacred cows. For example, instead of the simplistic "competitive intelligence cycle" normally shown as the CI process model, Murphy presents a sequential model, with feedback steps. I have often felt that the traditional cyclical model was weak - especially as, in its normal presentation, it ignores feedback steps, present in Murphy's version. The copious use of footnotes giving sources used, along with interesting and sometimes amusing case examples, are other plus points.

The book is particularly strong in its discussion of financial analysis of company accounts - giving a comprehensive coverage of UK legal forms, company filings and how the same can be interpreted. I know of no other competitive intelligence book that is as thorough in this area, making Murphy's book a unique reference to a topic that will not be covered in US competitive intelligence books and, hitherto, could only be learnt through financial and accounting texts. The book also includes good sections on: forecasting; business environmental monitoring; the assessment of information quality; and analysing corporate cultures, describing a number of approaches to this oft-ignored subject.

Could the book be improved? Possibly, but with almost 250 pages before four appendices giving resources and terminology, it would be difficult. Two chapters that should be extended in any future edition are those on human-source intelligence and foreign sources. In comparison with the depth of coverage afforded some other topics, especially financial analysis, these two sections seem weak and incomplete. The latter, especially, is a drawback, as it means that the book is really only relevant for those with a specific interest in competitive intelligence on UK companies. With many companies now competing in a global marketplace, the ability to be able to research across borders is a crucial skill for competitive intelligence professionals.

The rationale of a business textbook is to teach the reader new concepts and give ideas for better practice. However, the ultimate purpose is to be readable. If a book is not readable it doesn't matter how many great ideas are in it. Studies have suggested that most business book purchasers never read beyond the first few chapters. You won't find "Competitive Intelligence" un-put-downable. If you want that then Jackie Collins or JK Rowling or ... (tick the box for the fiction writer of your choice) ... would be a better bet. However it is also not difficult to read, and is written in clear and precise language.

I have worked in competitive intelligence for many years and have a good understanding of its theory and practice, to the extent that often when I read a book on CI, I groan as I've seen it all before. With Murphy's book, I did not need to groan; I learnt things I'd forgotten and a few things I don't think I ever knew. If UK competitive intelligence is your bag, then this book should be in it!

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- "Competitive Intelligence: Gathering, Analysing and Putting it to Work" ISBN 0566085372, published by Gower Publishing Limited.

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- "At the Interview"

Read these articles and more at: **www.jinfo.com/newsletter/**

"Low-Profile Regs You Don't Want to Miss: The Re-Use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2005"

Reviewed by Sue Broughton

Sue Broughton is an Information Officer at West Berkshire Council, monitoring and providing training in Data Protection, Freedom of Information, records management, information management, the website and its content management, and any other related areas (such as the Re-Use of Public Sector Information) which turn up. She runs a small email forum (not on a website) for officers in other local authorities who, like her, are working to make sense of the access to information legislation and ensure it is applied appropriately, fairly and without bias across the public sector. If you would like to join the forum please email Sue at <scbroughton@westberks.gov.uk>. In her spare time she is a science fiction fan (hence the LoTR references!).

The worst release time for a thoughtful and thought-provoking foreign film shot by hand in black-and-white is a simultaneous release of The Lord of the Rings. Compared with the blockbuster Freedom of Information Act, the Re-Use of Public Sector Information Regulations is a heart-warmer from Uzbekistan.

As the law firm Walker Morris pointed out in a press release in October 2004, the Regulations were published in December 2003 but 'have attracted little attention' -- something of an understatement, I feel. If not for Freedom of Information, the Re-Use Regulations would have been film of the month if not of the year, but by July 2005 when the Regulations came into force, everyone was recovering from the shell-shock of training for, and dealing with, all the implications of FoI; and the Regulations got bypassed.

Adding to the deafening silence of its debut, the Re-Use Regulations were not a mandatory statute. With FoI, authorities faced a tight schedule of processes from 2000 onwards; the Regulations, on the other hand, included no requirements to have created Asset Registers beforehand, no mandatory requirements to train or inform staff, and no penalties if the Regulations were not immediately implemented. They also arrived with little if any fanfare, and, in comparison to the full-blown press interest in Freedom of Information, with no press coverage.

The final "straight to video" element for the Regulations is one of the least catchy names in the history of legislation - shorten it down to its initials, and the closest thing you can say is "rupture" or "pounds per square inch". Without a sexy acronym, what do the Regulations have going for them?

What Regulations?

In case you missed the press release, the Regulations issue from the European Directive on the re-use of Public Sector Information, approved by the Council of Ministers on 27 October 2003. The Directive's main objective is to promote the re-use of information (that's "documents" to most people) held by public sector organisations:

- Re-use means re-use of a document outside of the public authority (or outside of another public sector body, if the document is transferred to them) and use for something other than its original purpose.

- Requests for re-use must be in writing, (letter, fax, email), providing the name of the applicant and an address for correspondence, specifying the document requested and stating the purpose for which it is to be used.

- Responses to a request for re-use must be made within twenty working days. Responses should be made as soon as possible. The time can be extended for complex documents or where a document is exempt (outside the legislation).

- The Council may charge for re-use, but the charge must not exceed the sum of the cost of collection, production, reproduction, and dissemination of the documents and a reasonable return on investment.

- The authority should list all main documents for re-use as an Asset Register. The items included should be documents or datasets identified as having some re-useable added value, and in which the authority holds copyright.

For anyone who trained staff in the implications of Freedom of Information, you can understand the Regulations as, effectively, a balance on the seesaw of information provision, and a reason for a sigh of relief. While training Council staff on FoI, one of the most common questions I fielded could be paraphrased as, 'What do we get out of it?'. FoI puts a burden on local authorities in that they may carry out quite complex pieces of work and then find their end result requested under FoI; essentially they have to provide for free (or at a very minor cost) work that has cost considerable time and effort and which would, in a commercial arena, be commercially valuable. The Re-Use Regulations have recognised and to a great extent can plug this loophole for local authorities.

But it's not all directed at benefits for local authorities. Commercial companies stand to benefit as well. Many lack access to, and knowledge of, the work local authorities have done, which companies can re-use as a basis for, or even as a major part of, their own commercial research or planning. Local authorities often don't recognise the knock-on benefits of reports and other research which has been carried out for internal processes or for government performance indicators, and they may not publish the material they produce or make it available externally. Commercial companies are unlikely to request information on-spec under FoI, so this sort of valuable information can remain unrecognised - used once for a specified purpose when it could have value to commercial organisations, independent of its use to the local authority.

The nuts and bolts

So how do the Regulations work? Any information currently published by an authority or available through a government or public organisation's website may be used by individuals for their private research or study, but use by commercial organisations has always been more problematic because of copyright or intellectual property rights. The Re-Use Regulations will now enable authorities to monitor and benefit from certain types of re-use, while creating a process to permit commercial organisations to re-use the information and thereby benefit themselves. Information which is used commercially and is out of the context of the original creation of the document or information must be acknowledged. And where the authority chooses to use the Regulations information can be licensed or supplied for re-use at a charge, and under certain conditions of use.

Unlike FoI, adoption of the Regulations is not mandatory. Authorities may still choose to provide all their published information free of charge or only at a publication charge. In such cases, however, the authority is unlikely to identify the information it holds that commercial companies might be able to re-use.

On the other hand, an authority that implements the Regulations is likely to provide the information-seeking public with a much closer look at what documents the authority holds, and how they might be re-used commercially. The Re-Use Regulations require adopting organisations to create an Asset Register which lists documents for commercial re-use. Unlike the FoI Publication scheme, this is a list of documents, not of classes, although it could be linked to a Publication Scheme -- and the Asset Register itself will form a class within the Publication Scheme. Each document can be identified as carrying certain re-usable information (the Register, again unlike FoI, is for documents, not information) and against its entry in the Register can be placed terms for its re-use, such as via a licensing system.

To look at a specific example, statistical data updated every month, quarter or year could be identified as a licensed product. A licence would entitle a commercial organisation to the update every time it was published, and might be renewable every year or five years, depending on the nature of the information. Or it could be a one-off charge, so a report could be placed on the Register with a single re-use charge enabling any commercial organisation which purchases it to re-use it in whatever way it chooses.

From the commercial viewpoint, the Re-Use Regulations are akin to the key to the candy factory. Assuming that authorities recognise what is of value, they will organise and register information about documents with commercial value in a single place, rather then having them scattered across an authority, and often unpublished. A good Asset Register will summarise possible re-use as well as providing information on costs. There are implications for the operation of higher level-business interaction through the process as well - an email forum to prior commercial clients to advise them of new items added to the Register would be an excellent proactive process for both authorities and commercial organisations, and could promote closer interaction in the creation of information through feedback.

Markets and budgets

However, once an authority has started the process, anything requested which is not on the Register may need to be reviewed for inclusion, because the other facet of the Regulations is the one which will sell this to management: money. Commercial organisations recognisably pay commercial prices for information that saves them research costs or other expenses and over time, authorities have an opportunity to create an additional revenue stream.

At present the legislation is so new that discussion of rates and licensing fees has not attracted much attention, and authorities will probably be cautious, at least initially, in pricing their material for re-use. Two things are certain, though: fees will definitely be more than what authorities currently get (nothing, or the cost of duplication); and costs under the Regulations will represent savings for commercial organisations over what they would spend for the same information in the commercial world. As a result, the commercial world can benefit from the knowledge and skills of the authority's services and staff, while the authority realises a positive impact on its budget.

As noted, the Regulations plug a loophole in FoI and in particular will enable authorities to address concerns over how information will be used when supplied: FoI does not permit authorities to ask the purpose of a request but the Re-use Regulations do. By adopting the Regulations, an authority's standard FoI receipt-of-request letters could carry a basic statement about copyright, intellectual property, and the charges for re-use. Information could be provided electronically through websites, with password-protected sites for licensed users that enable authorities to summarise documents but ensure that unimpeded access is only available to those commercial organisations that have paid for the privilege. The process is already recognised by many commercial organisations such as British Standards Institution, where transactions are carried out online.

Next steps

With these considerations in mind, what needs to be done on both sides to move the Re-Use agenda forward?

Local authorities must designate a 'champion' to take the process forward and promote it to management. They will need to consult with other

services to list all main documents for re-use within an Asset Register, and to establish from the list of main documents a set of standard charges and charges for specific documents (if required), as well as a set of conditions for re-use which they can publish to the authority website. Training and information will ensure that all staff understand the process and view the Asset Register as an evolving document, ensuring that it doesn't become a dinosaur at the moment of creation. The authority will also require licensing conditions, procedural guidance for complaints and standard letters. Where partnership agreements exist, they must include information on how to manage requests to re-use information the partnership produces, and any consultation or research report must include copyright and re-use statements.

Commercial organisations must become involved at grass roots level by providing good indications of the sort of information which is useful, valuable and viable for re-use. Even if the authority hasn't yet started reviewing the Regulations, now is the time to ask if there is a timetable for take-up, and to indicate that your organisation wants to come on board and would welcome access for re-use to certain classes of information. Such feedback will enable authorities to re- think their information creation and provision to ensure it has a commercial viability if this is possible within statutory requirements. The results may surprise you both, and may yet turn the Re-Use Regulations into the sleeper hit of the century.

Useful links

Walker Morris Solicitors, press release, October 2003:
<http://www.walkermorris.co.uk/content.aspx?id=181>

Office of Public Sector Information website:
<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/>

EU Directive on Public Sector Information: the next big thing! Tim Turner and Ibrahim Hassan, ActNow, June 2005
<http://www.actnow.org.uk/ReUse%20Directive.pdf>

APPSI Annual Report on Public Sector Information, LGCnet press release, August 2005
<http://digbig.com/4gwfy>

Events

Germany:

- "The European conferences on e-Government"
  27th - 28th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e559>

Ireland:

- "The European Conference on Research Methods"
  17th - 18th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e560>

United Kingdom:

- "Open Source and Sustainability" 10th - 12th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e630>

- "Vol-Info AGM" 11 April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e684>

- "BCS IRSG Industry Day" 13th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e680>

- "Internal Search Engines - Empowering Users to
  Rapidly Access the Information they Need" 21st
  April <http://www.freepint.com/go/e679>

- "Advanced Internet Search Strategies: searching
  beyond Google" 26th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e640>

- "The Library & Information Show" 26th - 27th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e664>

- "The IPLC (Information Professional Learning
  Conference), May 2006" 9th - 11th May
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e631>

- "Blogs & Social Media Forum" 17th May
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e687>

United States:

- "IT Project Portfolio Management 2006" 3rd - 5th
  April <http://www.freepint.com/go/e648>

- "Longitudinal Patient Data 2006" 3rd - 5th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e649>

- "FYI Miami: Focus On Our Clients" 20th - 23rd April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e632>

- "Search Engine Meeting" 24th - 25th April
  <http://www.freepint.com/go/e626>

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  business information, provision and use"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/070405.htm>

- FreePint No.157 1st April 2004. "Intrusion on
  privacy by electronic surveillance and personal
  data gathering" and "Skills for Career
  Success"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/010404.htm>

- FreePint No.134 3rd April 2003. "Genetically
  Modified Foods: Official Information Sources" and
  "Information Systems - Never Just
  Technology"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/030403.htm>

- FreePint No.109, 4th April 2002. "The War Against
  SPAM" and "Finding Chemical Information on the
  Web - the User's Viewpoint"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/040402.htm>

- FreePint No.84, 29th March 2001. "In the Footsteps
  of Miss Marple - Female Detective Fiction Online"
  and "Quest for Liberty: History of
  the United States of America"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/290301.htm>

- FreePint No.59, 30th March 2000. "Virtual Visits:
  Links to museums and the like on the WWW" and
  "Internet Development in the Middle East"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/300300.htm>

- FreePint No.35, 1st April 1999. "UK Immigration
  Sources on the Web" and "The Internet for
  Competitive Intelligence"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/010499.htm>

- FreePint No.11, 2nd April 1998. "The International
  Marketing Power of Domain Names" and "Job
  Hunting on the Net"
  <http://www.freepint.com/issues/020498.htm>

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