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What's 'Research' Anyway?

My whole identity was shaken on Sept. 28, 2012, when I opened up my morning paper to the comics and read *Blondie* (blondie.com/comics/september-28-2012). In it, Dagwood tells his boss, "I'm an expert researcher—if there's one thing I'm good at, it's research." The last panel is Dagwood furiously Googling, sweat coming off his brow. Yep, everyone can call themselves researchers now.

When even a lagging technology indicator like *Blondie* equates "research" with a Google search, we know we are dealing with some serious misconceptions. Most non-info pros have no idea what we do in addition to simply typing in queries and reviewing results. They do not see the planning that goes on, the modifications and pivots we make midway through a search, and the analysis we add to the results when we are finished searching.

I recently developed a series of learning modules about online research and had a chance to spell out the thought processes we online searchers go through. That reminded me of what we take for granted—what we think about, the questions we ask, the sources we choose. There is a lot of hidden value that our clients do not realize is included in our "research" services.

We can handle ambiguity. Let's face it—the days of softball ready-reference questions are gone; our clients are asking us for help finding information they cannot find themselves, which means the request may be vague, ambiguous, or overly broad. We know that part of our job is gathering enough information to know what we are missing.

We are super searchers. We know how to take advantage of the advanced features of search engines and finding tools. We customize our search interface to ensure we construct the best search strategies possible. We know when finding nothing is meaningful and when it just means we have the wrong spelling of someone's name. Likewise, when we get too many search results, we have techniques for focusing our search without unnecessarily limiting our results.

We use professional online services as well as the resources our clients use. Even if our clients have access to a value-added information service, we can probably find valuable material our clients can't find themselves. And we know when to stop Googling and start paying for in-depth information.

We think both globally and locally. We consider whether a question requires insights outside our country or region, or whether it needs the on-the-ground perspective of a local newspaper reporter. We think about whether to use non-English-language resources or even whether to conduct primary research to get deeper insights.

We look for clues, not answers. We know there may not be a single, authoritative answer to a client's information need. When we cannot find enough material on a topic, we expand the search to similar, parallel, or related areas.

We look broadly. When we are exploring an industry or a trend, we look beyond the usual sources. In fact, one reason I love the long-tail search engine Million Short (millionshort.com) is that it gets me to the lesser-seen sites. Likewise, professional online services excel at providing access to a wide range of professional and trade publications in a single search.

We pull the pieces together. Unlike a Google search, we do not provide data dumps of information. We organize the material we find, highlighting key points and insights, summarizing the findings, and making the collection of information easy to navigate.

We think ahead. We proactively meet with project teams and strategic groups within our organization to find out what their current concerns are and set up electronic clipping services to keep them updated. We know that our clients may not even know what to ask for, so we take the responsibility to probe for unmet information needs.

We ask questions. We constantly question what we are finding. Is this resource reliable, or does it have an undisclosed point of view? Is there another way that this concept would be expressed? Who else cares about this idea? What am I *not* finding?

We poke around. When we are using a new information resource, we look for links to advanced search features, and we actually read those help files and FAQs. We look at the search results page to see what insights we can glean from the search filters and focusing tools. We evaluate this resource's unique features and decide when to use a more familiar source.

As you interact with your clients or patrons, remember that they may have a Dagwood-esque view of what research entails. Consider how you can describe your services and your information center in ways that highlight the depth of preparation and analysis that goes into your research.

Mary Ellen Bates *(mbates@BatesInfo.com, Reluctant-Entrepreneur.com) no longer describes herself as a researcher.*

Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).