



Evaluating Econtent Today

The information consultancy Jinfo (jinfo.com) published a 33-page report, sponsored by Springer, in June 2020 that was both unsurprising and a wakeup call: “Jinfo Survey—Challenges Facing Information Teams” (media.springernature.com/full/springer-cms/rest/v1/content/18299240/data/v1). Based on a global survey of 108 corporate information specialists in a variety of industries, this report looks at attitudes toward open access (OA) content and the metrics used to define value. What I found most noteworthy were the responses about how information managers evaluate their content portfolio. The most frequently cited factors include cost per use, volume of content accessed, unique content, functionality, and price stability. This isn’t surprising; these are tangible metrics that directly address the issue of whether the content is a cost-effective selection for the library.

I was struck, however, by some of the factors that were cited as usually *not* part of the evaluation process, including interoperability with other products, the availability of APIs, and text and data mining (TDM) rights. These are all aspects of content acquisition that require evaluation of the impact of the content on other groups within the enterprise. Factoring in product interoperability or non-Boolean exploration of content makes the evaluation process more challenging and less straightforward.

This emphasis on metrics that focus on library operations and functions is related to the survey responses regarding the challenges faced by information professionals. The most challenging aspects of respondents’ relationships with their users and stakeholders were executives’ lack of understanding of the value of information skills and the role of information services, plus the related issue of effectively communicating with executives and managers. The biggest organizational challenges were the reduced spending power of their content budgets and siloed information within the enterprise. All of these challenges come down to a lack of understanding of and support for information services—signs that the library has not yet sufficiently engaged the hearts and minds of its users and stakeholders.

As a longtime infopreneur, I recognize the challenge of effectively communicating the value of information services and of finding how to engage our clients’ hearts and minds. As Seth Godin blogged, “The cost of something is largely irrelevant, people are paying attention to its value. Your customers don’t care what it took for you to make something. They care about what it does for them” (seths.blog/2020/05/cost-and-value). In

the info pro context, our users don’t care about the strategic evaluation that went into evaluating and licensing a particular source, or the work that goes into user support and training. They just want to be able to get the information they need to make a decision, move forward on a project, or accomplish a strategic goal.

As we face the challenge of explaining the cost for value-added information—especially in the context of OA sources—it is more important than ever for info pros to find new and creative ways of connecting information resources to end users. As I noted, I was disappointed to see the survey results showed a relative lack of focus being placed on non-traditional considerations such as APIs and TDM licenses when content is being evaluated. Yes, these considerations require a lot more work on the part of the library staff; there are no “standard” licenses for TDM, and making use of APIs requires the active and ongoing support of an IT staff already stretched thin. Libraries face the additional burden of more employees working from home who expect to access licensed content from their den just as they could from their office.

As Godin notes, our clients only care about what we can enable them to do, not how much work it took to make the magic happen. In order for us to break down internal information silos and build strong financial and strategic support for information services, we must stretch ourselves to find new ways to become irreplaceable to our users. We have to look at our digital content differently. In addition to evaluating the user interface and unique content, we have to go further, constantly asking ourselves and our patrons what else could be done with this content.

In order to answer that question, info pros need to learn more about their users’ workflow—when during the process they need external information, how they usually gather that information, and what they do next with the information they acquire—and then consider in what new ways licensed content could be used to facilitate that workflow. Users may not think to ask for an API or for help in integrating the library’s content into an internal decision-support tool. It is our job as proactive librarians and info pros to help introduce users to new ways of leveraging the library’s content.

Mary Ellen Bates (mbates@BatesInfo.com, Reluctant-Entrepreneur.com) is glad she has a boss who understands her value.
Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).