



Knowing When to Say ‘When’

As a longtime “infopreneur,” I have had to develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty—starting with the loss of a predictable paycheck. Since I started my business back before the dawn of the web, I have had plenty of practice pivoting by evolving new services, describing myself in new terms, and finding new ways to add more value to my clients. In fact, I firmly believe that everything info pros do needs to be reevaluated every 5 years with the assumption that change is necessary, even when the specific direction isn’t clear yet.

Nowhere is that comfort with ambiguity more valuable than when we are searching online. In simpler times, when digital content was comprised of bibliographic databases and controlled vocabulary, we had a fairly good idea of what constituted a “comprehensive” search. We knew the size of the database; we had advanced search tools at our disposal; and we had documentation on specific techniques to use for that file. We knew what we were looking at and how much we could expect to find. The point of diminishing returns would be pretty clear—we would keep finding the same records in multiple search approaches, or no combination of searches would retrieve more than a few items on a topic.

If searching in a value-added online service sometimes feels like putting together a complex jigsaw puzzle, research in the rest of the digital world feels like four-dimensional chess. The uncertainties about what and how we search far exceed any certainties we have about the outcome. What format will we find: an authoritative blog post, a government committee report, a YouTube clip, or a social media profile? How much time should we spend in each of those information universes, and what constitutes “comprehensive” when we can never know the amount of content in any given resource?

To further complicate the issue, insights can come from unexpected sources. An analysis of the names and locations of research funding sources in articles from the last few years on a topic could indicate what countries or organizations are investing in a new technology. Google Trends (trends.google.com) can suggest when and how people search for, and therefore are thinking about, a topic. Newspapers are offering content and resources not available in print, including annotated transcripts of speeches, infographics and other visual material to explain complex concepts, and even databases of misleading statements by government leaders.

Adding to the confusion is the need for info pros to provide more than what we retrieve. Fee-based services such as

Factiva and, more recently, ProQuest Dialog, offer basic data visualization tools for analyzing search results—charting frequency of news coverage across time, highlighting the most prolific authors on a topic, or even looking for correlations between a company’s share price and news coverage.

Clients only ask us to do what they think we can do. When they conflate libraries or information centers with collections of static content, they limit their requests to retrieval of information from those collections. Part of the reference interview has to involve raising clients’ awareness of the wide range of resources we tap. Better yet, we need to move away from a list of information sources we can search or the types of documents we can retrieve, and focus on our clients’ outcomes. Once we understand what will happen to our search results after we give them to our clients, we have a better grasp of what approach and information formats would best move our clients toward their desired outcomes.

Reference interviews are invaluable for another reason: They help us prioritize each research project in order for us to put an appropriate amount of time and effort into each job. There is far greater ambiguity regarding when we have found “most” of the available information on a topic; we can no longer rely on our gut sense to tell us when we have found enough. Since one could conceivably spend an almost limitless amount of time on any project, looking for just a few more good items, we need other markers to help us decide when to say “when.”

With the logarithmic expansion of available information and data, info pros must include more pause points in our research process. We need to spend *less* time on our familiar sources—whether that’s Google Scholar, LexisNexis, or LinkedIn—and more time exploring what else we could do to facilitate the client’s outcome. We should remember that our clients may not know to ask us for what we can provide. We must become comfortable with knowing that we can never claim to have done a comprehensive search, and that there is always something we won’t have time to find. For info pros, that’s painful!

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