Online Information 2004: New or More of the Same?

Sometimes I get this familiar feeling, and I know that many of you do as well: It's December, it's Olympia, it's Online. Same old, same old. Except this year, it's actually starting in November and it cuts into a major U.S. holiday, the only U.S. holiday that isn't religious —unless you belong to a cult that worships perfectly cooked turkey and mashed potatoes to die for. So why would I give up my family dinner to fly across the pond from Indianapolis to London? Is the Online show really all that special?

OK, let's get a few facts straight before I begin to answer those questions. The official name of this conference is Online Information 2004. It runs from 30 November to 2 December, with pre-conference workshops on Monday, the 29th of November. It's produced by VNU Exhibitions. You might remember the producer from some of its previous corporate nomenclatures, such as iMark or Learned Information. If you've got a really long memory, the conference was originally the International Online Information Meeting.

None of that answers the question as to why you should venture over to Olympia to sample the exhibition hall and the free presentations or even to pay for a delegate badge. I chuckle when I'm told that the exhibition hall is shrinking. It is, I'm not disputing that. But it was oversubscribed during the dot com boom with companies that had very little relevance for information professionals. Consolidation in the industry, with companies such as Thomson and Reed-Elsevier buying smaller companies, is another reason for the smaller number of exhibitors. Today's exhibitors, however, are companies with products that we will actually use. It's a good opportunity to accost known vendors and become acquainted with newer vendors. With over 200 exhibit stands, there's got to be something on offer that you don't know about.

As for speakers, it's clear that the definition of "online" is changing. The focus is not just on searching, but on managing what we find, melding together internal and external data, and creating new access and payment models. Only on the first day of the conference is there a keynote speaker who will address the entire group of delegates. That's Jacob Nielsen, the Danish usability expert who co-founded the U.S.-based NielsenNorman Group. It's hard to find anybody anywhere in the world who is quoted more on the topic of Web site usability than Nielsen.

For the remainder of the conference, there are keynotes for each of the three tracks, making for nine additional keynote speakers. You'll have to choose which ones you wish to hear, since they have overlapping time slots. On Tuesday, your choice is among Steve Arnold predicting the future of search, Roger Everden examining the value of information, and Graham Smith looking at compliance. Not being a U.K. resident, I'll opt either for Arnold or Everden. The afternoon of the search track features a session on trusting what you find. I'd better show up at that one since I'm one of the speakers. The Eureka Forum features a panel of search experts, three from the U.S. and one from the U.K., and promises a lively exchange of tips, techniques, and revelations.

Wednesday's keynotes are Howard Rosenbaum, Indiana University, speaking on knowledge management, Michael Keller, HighWire Press, on open access, and Lou Rosenfeld, consultant, on information architecture. Hmm, three Americans. I'm tempted to hear Rosenbaum, even though his office is less than an hour's drive from mine. What about the rest of the day? I think I'll concentrate on information architecture.

Thursday's keynote lineup is quite international: Janice Lachance, U.S., on managing complexity and change; James Robertson, Australia, on intranets and content management; and John Lervik, Norway, on enterprise search. Since this is the last day, I think I'll need something upbeat and energizing. Maybe Robertson, since he's the only one of the three I've never heard. Plus the whole track on intranets, blogs, and portals looks interesting.

Online Information has more than just speeches and exhibit stands. This year VNU has introduced roundtable discussions during the lunch period, a chance to exchange views with other information professionals. Then there are the international forums, should you understand French, German, Italian, or Spanish. Or come to the Nordic Forum on Thursday afternoon: it's in English.

Is the online show all that special? Yes, it is, at least it is to me. There are companies exhibiting that never come to the U.S. The perspectives of attendees are interesting and thought-provoking. It provides the opportunity to meet people who are just as passionate about online as I am. I can always have turkey and mashed potatoes with my family at Christmas.

Marydee Ojala
Editor of *ONLINE*: The Leading Magazine for Information Professionals, and an experienced business researcher
marydee@xmission.com