



Searching is not finding

The book "Chercher n'est pas trouver" (Searching is not finding) do not mean to be the ultimate search engine user manual. If searching for information could be more pleasant or more rewarding when being a search engine specialist, the fact is that finding information on the Web is not really a matter of mastering Google or whatever other search tool.

As (information) professionals, we need to be proficient and competitive, being able to quickly find information that lead to better decision making. Our ability not to waste time in searching information that do not exist (i.e. not available where we are searching) but to infer intelligence that is not expressed is also part of the competitiveness equation. But these skills are not more natural than those in accountancy, finance, organization... They all need to be trained and practiced.

The good news is that finding information on the Web is not particularly difficult. It is about unveiling some kind of cleverness and know-how you already have. More than in the mastering of specific search engine syntax, the key lies in the methodologies and the strategies deployed to collect, organize and analyze pieces of information in order to create intelligence. It is a matter of understanding how search engine are built and are working, how and why people are publishing documents or disclosing information.

The book "Searching is not finding" aims to bring us to a new mindset that will help to get the most useful information in the shortest delay in a way we could not anticipate. Anyway, most of the readers claim that this book has changed the way they are searching for information...

1 NICE TO KNOW INFORMATION VS USEFUL INFORMATION

In most cases, information monitoring activities are focused on *nice to know information* in other words *interesting information*. This information enriches our common knowledge (of a subject/market), but do not lead to any kind of decision making. For sure, the feeling of knowing lots of stuffs is great and enhance our ability to make good (intuitive) decisions. The fact is that the universe of interesting information is endless while the number of strategic decisions a leader has to make is quite limited. For this duty, managers need *useful information* rather than *interesting information*.

Useful information help to answer a question at the time it rises. Of course, interesting information we previously got could become useful but most of the time. Questions arise because we need to make a decision and we do not have any clue of what strategy to adopt. Or we would feel much more comfortable with complementary information. It is generally admitted that well informed people make better decisions than poorly informed ones. But the limits between sufficiently informed and infobesity is quite fuzzy. And the ROI of a continuous process of gathering interesting information is quite difficult to figure out because we never know in advance what could be a potential useful information.

As such, none information is useful, the usefulness comes by destination. It is directly related to the results of the decision we will make based in it. This means that even before searching for an information, we need to know what information we are looking for, for what decision, what results and what benefits. The starting point of any searching useful information process begins with a questioning process.



And this way of doing will deliver us a secondary benefit, not the least, being the fact that ROI is not an issue anymore. Nevertheless, before engaging any resources in our search project, we will continue to compare the cost of ignorance and those of the informed decision and decide for the most profitable path.

2 DOCUMENT VS INFORMATION

Most of us have been educated to build keyword based queries. This is the result from an old time, when documents were stored in (electronic) libraries in association with index cards (metadata) intended to facilitate the retrieval. Basically, keywords were used to describe document's content. And despite their shortcoming (they are subjective, not necessarily shared by everyone, nor present in the documents) and the technology evolution, they are still well present in librarians mind.

Web search engines, like Google, are not document based, they are full-text tools meaning they are build to find all words in automatically indexed documents. Furthermore, even if Web search engines have keyword search capabilities, assigning keywords to document published on the Web is not a common practice. It is rather the fact of e-merchants instead of those of people sharing information and contents.

Often, in common speeches, the confusion between document and information is made. One word being used as synonym of the other. Therefore, it is always useful to remind some facts about documents and information. A document is made of information on a medium. A document can carry multiple information and an information could be carried by multiple documents. This make the process of finding a (specific) document rather different than the one of finding an information.

Nevertheless, old practices remain and we are still advised to build keyword based queries and nobody explains us that by essence keywords are leading to documents not information. Reality is that finding (useful) information from keywords is somehow a matter of luck.

3 DON'T ASK GOOGLE, GIVE GOOGLE THE ANSWER

Google is a full-text search engine whose duty is to find in its document base the ones containing the character strings or the sentences provided by the users. As close as possible.

The fact is that when we build our queries, most of the time, we adopt a questioning posture. By example "*what is the definition of competitive intelligence?*" leads to natural keywords like *competitive intelligence definition*. The answer that will most probably be returned by the search engine will be made of documents containing the three keywords, stating possibly "*I know the competitive intelligence definition*" or "*this is a wrong definition of competitive intelligence*" or any other speech about the competitive intelligence.

At this stage, it is important to figure out that the default searcher posture is about to ask questions ("*what is the company strategy?*") while publishers main posture is about to give answers ("*the company strategy is...*"). We understand now that if we formulate a query to Google as "question", we will get "question" as result, not "answer". From where my main advice: **Do not ask Google, give Google the answer!** In other words, if we want to get an information, we need to express our query the same way the publisher would disclose the information he knows.



I bet, if you were asked about your company strategy, i.e. by a journalist, you would not give any too explicit answer. Yet, you could disclose some important pieces of information in your speech that will be reported by the journalist using a wording like (*I had the pleasure to interview Mr X - the company manager says - as from the management...*). This is the same for all of us and understanding this point is the best way to quickly find the mostly relevant pieces of information.

4 FIRST ADVICE: UNDERSTAND THE WEB

For sure, being Google proficient helps finding documents but does not constitute a strategy for efficiently reaching useful information. When we are asked to unveil company strategies, natural search clues are made of company names and the (key)word *strategy*. Our ultimate hope is then to find documents describing in full details the company strategy. Helas, such documents do not exist. Instead, we will most probably find two other kinds of documents. The first one will be issued by the company itself, explaining how they conduct the best strategy to conquer the world. But no interesting insights will be disclosed. The second one will be files containing your keywords somewhere, not necessarily linked together, with no evidence they are related to your interest. Our duty is then to read the documents in order to qualify them and extract relevant information.

This way of collecting information is based on some wrong assumptions. Firstly, the all-powerful of the keywords. No, keywords are not close to the information you are looking for. Managers can disclose strategical facts without saying "strategy" nor even company names. Secondly, Google do not understand the questions and do not manage to give the best answer. Google just manage to provide a decent answer that fits best its own (commercial) interest. The fact is that search engine's basic purpose is to find, within the documents they know, the ones matching the search clues, as close as possible, and to rank the results (in the form of the hit list). Lastly, most of the time, the answer (information) we expect is not the result of an outstanding query but will emerge as the result of the analysis of multiple pieces of information obtained from multiple searches.

5 REMEMBER: INFORMATION HAS NO VALUE!

The myth of a *strategic information*, of a big value that makes rich the one getting it the first or that makes the success of a project, is in the air. That's why so many enterprises are monitoring their environment and why so many vendors are pushing their prospects to do so. The bad news is that such an information do not exist. On the contrary, most information do not lead to benefits, except the pleasure of knowing something new or before the others. So, we would better learn to live with the idea that information has no value.

The value of an information comes from the confrontation with another information or from the question it will answer. In fact, the most critical point when looking for some information is the ability to formulate the good question. This formulation could come from the answer to three interrogations we should address before initiating no matter steps to obtain information: what, so what, now what!

- What is our problem, what are we trying to solve or to build?
- What is the expected impact or benefit?
- What action will we take when getting the information?



6 THE INFORMATION GOOGLE DOES NOT KNOW!

It is cool to get relevant information. But single information, like what we get from Web queries, never answers complex questions. The most interesting information comes from our understanding, our ability to emphasize one or the other information, our cleverness. That's why it is important to collect lots of pieces of information and to organize them in order to make a picture emerge. Just like a puzzle. The tools that suit best this purpose are probably the mind mapping softwares. They help to aggregate, organise and concentrate all the available information. And this staging makes conclusions more obvious and makes us discover information that Google does not know.

As such, produced mind maps are too rich. Built on rather vague queries from elements of interest we have picked up, the maps will contain lots of information, possibly useful to answer a great variety of questions. Nevertheless, our first analysis will be performed from these maps. Richness is not an issue. It is quite easy to discard any non relevant information. A lot easier than the efforts needed to find again information we did not collect, considering it as not relevant. First analysis will occur on (mentally) filtered maps.

In a second stage, it is useful to more precisely focus on the asked questions. As we are involved in strategic approaches, it is conceivable that some management tools (template) could facilitate the analysis processes. Depending the situation, the Business Model Canvas (company/product strategy), the Strategic Canvas (competitive benchmark, resources allocation), the Empathy Map (how does he perceive the situation)... or the more conventional SWOT (company/production competitive positioning), PESTLE (environmental knowledge) or whatever could help. The process consist in feeding the chosen template with the now known information and try to read the story behind. In a further stage, it is a good idea to complete the picture by searching for the missing information on the Web. And it is always a good idea to submit and discuss the template and the findings with colleagues. They will learn a lot from the exercise and, in return, they obviously will share the tacit knowledge they have on the subject.

7 OUR OBJECTIVE: VALUE FOR MONEY!

Although we can get lots of information free of charge, it does not mean we get it at no cost. At least, someone has to spend time in searching for the information, and it is well known that time is money. Thus it is a good practice to speed up the process and try not to waste time and resources in useless or inefficient searches.

We have to keep in mind that our goal is to help a making decision process rather than to get specific information (certain quantity of). Never forget, decisions are always marked with risk (risk-free decisions are not decisions, they are certainties). The purpose of information is to lower the risk, but the more intelligence we request, the more it will cost. The challenge is then to reach a good balance between risk and cost. In this sense, it is good to remember the Pareto law (80-20) that teach us that the few first efforts (20%) will bring us the most results. Up to a certain point, searching for more information makes sense and it is of a good practice to stop searching when the quality of the results declines. It is not clever to figure out making all decisions on the maximum information. Instead, we should consider that decisions derive from a skilful mix of knowledge, intuition, information, reactivity... The intelligence gathering should reinforce the decision making process at a decent cost, not slow it down.



8 CONCLUSION

At the end of the journey, they are three main messages to retain from this book:

- for the knowledge workers, the competitive advantage do not lies in the ability to search for information but in the ability to provide accurately intelligence that help the decision makers (quality, time, cost)
- the value of an information derives from the value of the decision we make based on it; knowing this value in advance help determining if it is worth searching;
- the use of templates for organising and analysing pieces of information helps finding intelligence that Google do not know;
- finding information on the Web is not a matter of deep search engine knowledge, it is a matter of empathy (do not ask Google, give the answer to Google).

9 ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE BOOK

After having spent his young professional years as programmer and business analyst in the early '90s, Pierre-yves Debliquy has been hired by Arthur Andersen as business consultant. This position introduced him to the emerging concepts of datawarehouses and document databases (Lotus Notes). His next employer was a leading actor in archiving, text and image recognition and search engines. From the last years of the century, as a support activity to his job of document management consultant, he started to develop Internet based competitor and technical intelligence activities.

In July 2000, Pierre-yves Debliquy launched his own company with the aim of moving his business from document management to competitive intelligence. The evolution has been completed in 2006 with the creation of Brainsfeed, a project that proposed services around competitive intelligence (consultancy, training, conferences, education...)

From January 2011, he has been hired by SPI (Territorial Development Agency in Liège - Belgium) CI Adviser, in order to help local SME's in their path of discovering and implementing CI spirit and activities.

During all these years, he always had the desire to contribute to the development of his practice. Therefore, he performs a permanent activity of self-improvement, resulting in daily posts on his blog (<http://blog.euresis.com>), development of new methodologies and services for the managers, trainings and lectures in conferences. He also wrote 2 books.

Pierre-yves Debliquy, expert in competitive intelligence

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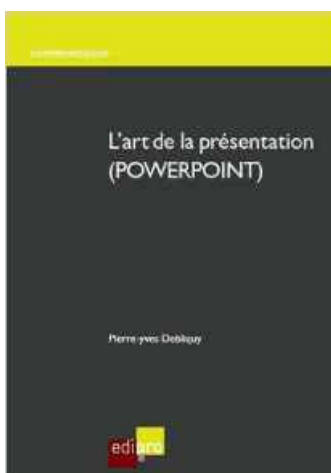
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