



WWRSD: What Would Roger Summit Do?

I recently received an email query from someone considering becoming an independent info pro. His background was in IT, and he was adept at designing databases and search engines. He wanted to know if those were the key skills he would need to become an info entrepreneur. Had he asked me that 5 or 10 years ago, I would have told him he had just the right set of skills. I know of very few infoentrepreneurs who don't have years of expertise in using the fee-based online services: Creating effective queries and retrieving content cost-effectively have always been critical info pro skills.

Today, though, building an effective search query is just one of the areas of expertise that are necessary (but far from sufficient) for info pros. With Facebook and Twitter just an app away and Siri able to do our Google searching for us, information has become a commodity. In fact, this morning I checked the day's weather from my phone as I turned off its alarm; I literally conduct searches before I get out of bed in the morning. Clearly, searching ain't what it used to be.

In preparation for a recent panel discussion at the SLA annual conference with Roger Summit, the founder of Dialog and an information visionary, I was reflecting on the impact he had on our profession. Back in the 1960s, online searching meant arranging for a computer programmer to design a query of a database, execute the search, and ship the results to the requester.

Roger had the vision to imagine research databases being queried interactively by users, using an intuitive (well, *relatively* intuitive) interface. In other words, he disintermediated the resource, giving access to searchers who no longer needed to understand the underlying mechanics of the data retrieval process and who could now focus on finding the best information available.

Fast-forward 50 years and Dialog, along with its competitors, still provides online access to information to searchers and, increasingly, the ultimate information consumers. The changes in the search world have been dramatic—300 baud modems, anyone?—but I have not seen any innovations that remotely match the leap from batch-mode processing to interactive queries. If a 30-year-old Roger Summit were presented with today's information world, what would he identify as the key problem?

As I asked myself that question, my mind went to IBM's Watson, an artificial intelligence computer system designed

to understand and interpret natural language questions. In a field test of sorts, Watson was a competitor on the TV quiz show *JEOPARDY!*, playing against two human *JEOPARDY!* champions. It won, hands down, although some accuse it of cheating since it was able to respond to the questions more quickly than mere humans. Bitterness toward our new computer overlords notwithstanding, I watched the show in amazement, thinking of what info pros could do with this kind of tool. (And, seriously, something this powerful should not be in the untrained hands of the general public!) I have dreams of a Watson in every library and with every online resource, specifically calibrated and fine-tuned to best address the information needs of the clientele.

I can see the future now: I tell my 2015 version of Siri to Watson the topic of innovative uses of crowdsourcing for product development. Siri and myWatson™ discuss the details; I have already dictated my initial thoughts to Siri, so the two algorithms negotiate the specifics of what I need. By the time my coffee has been delivered to me by my Roomba, I have a new cloud file open with a report and analysis of product development crowdsourcing. I thank myself once again for having learned how to program my own Watson, rather than having to rely on the generic one available on the meta-web.

Returning now to 2012, what did Roger Summit himself say that he would develop today? Watson, Roger said, was "merely" a better search tool, albeit one with a lot more capabilities than we currently have. No, he would create an *empathy engine*.

How are online resources queried now? Not usually by end users, because they often don't know what they don't know, and they need an info pro to help them articulate what they are looking for. And what makes an info pro good? Empathy—the ability to listen to the user, discern the underlying question, find out how the information could be best presented, and then translate that into effective search queries.

As usual, Roger was right. Watson will eventually become just another tool to help us conduct our research. Imagine what services info pros could create with customized empathy engine interfaces on their internal resources, on fee-based services and—why not dream?—the web. Watch for the new Dialog, this time with embedded insight.

Mary Ellen Bates (mbates@BatesInfo.com, www.BatesInfo.com) worries about her Siri's search skills.

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