

Chapter 13

Discovering Authoritative Reference Material: It's all about "Location. Location. Location."

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ABSTRACT

For reference publishing, recent revolutions in digital communications undermine the success of traditional methods of information delivery and retrieval. The need to present online reference material for easy discoverability presents challenges and opportunities for technological advancement – for data management and website design. Equally, reference discoverability demands that we foster a greater understanding of what today's researchers need, and incorporate that knowledge into modern publishing tactics.

INTRODUCTION

The attraction of any property and the success of many businesses can be summarized in three words: "Location. Location. Location." The last decade's disruptions to publishing have produced both danger and opportunity for reference pub-

lishers, inspiring us to reconsider the position of our publications within the scholarly landscape. Advances in the Web and other digital communication tools have given rise to new methods for conducting and circulating research. Traditional print-based publishing practices for disseminating reference materials are challenged by growing demands for digital delivery, as today's students, faculty, and other users conduct their research

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almost entirely online. Free, social reference media, such as Wikipedia, inspire publishers to find innovative new ways to direct readers to authoritative, citable scholarly content. New tactics must be developed so that today's students and researchers can find trustworthy reference content when it is needed most. When one click of a mouse can either direct or detour a search, we need to be mindful that, on the information superhighway, the signpost *is* the location.

Despite recent revolutions in communication and scholarship, the driving missions of academic publishing and librarianship have not changed. Students of all stripes continue to thirst for knowledge, search for answers to questions, and seek definitions to new terms – and these needs must be met with first-rate, authoritative content. We must therefore incorporate quality reference publications into the new online communication tools employed by today's users. As we continue to move our products online, publishers must both cultivate and comply with techniques for ensuring that our products are findable on the open Web and within library systems. These new demands pose a challenge for publishers, but also open up potential for publishers to reinvent the value they offer academia.

“Discoverability” has become a charged buzzword in publishing circles. Despite the buzz, we must not forget our duty – the successful dissemination and retrieval of information by our readers. The measure of how successfully our content is discovered is not found exclusively in usage statistics or rankings of search engine optimization (SEO). Our true success metrics are relative only to meeting the needs of scholars, in various disciplines, at various stages of their careers, around the world.

For reference publishing, our collective success rates are much lower than is sustainable – either to meet our underlying mission or for successful business practices. Dictionary.com and Wikipedia are standard open-Web fare for online reference queries and may be excellent products for quick

answers or to begin one's research. However, authoritative reference works more fully meet the requirements of scholarly research, for valid citations and other standard practices, as scholars at all levels advance our academic discourse. Publishers must therefore compete with the usability and accessibility of many mainstream online information tools.

In three parts, this chapter will define the primary obstacles and opportunities of online discoverability for reference publishers. The first two sections articulate common burdens and benefits in meeting new demands for achieving product visibility, both on the open Web and within library services. The third outlines topics not typically raised in the context of discoverability – important aspects for students, faculty, and other end users successfully finding the authoritative reference content they need – topics that go beyond optimizing technical functions of online search. The objective of this chapter is to summarize real experiences of publishers in achieving successful online discoverability and draw some conclusions about our next steps.

1. FINDING AUTHORITATIVE REFERENCE CONTENT ON THE OPEN WEB

Historically, instructors and librarians acted as the primary signposts, guiding students to academic content appropriate for their research needs and training young scholars how to judge the authoritative nature of reference publications. Today's students still seek out these resources, but far less frequently than in years past. Mainstream search and information tools on the open Web are the primary starting points for a great majority of students who make up the prime target audience for reference publications. Project Information Literacy reports that 84% of students encounter the most difficulty starting their research, but only 11% look to librarians for assistance. Instead of

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