

INFORMATION TERRITORIES

ANSWER: BATMAN, BINGO AND CD-ROMs

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**As I write, I am sitting in the lobby of the
Adam's Mark Hotel, site of 'Dialog Update
Eighty Nine: The Spirit of St Louis. Take Off
with Dialog'.**

St Louis is a city of the old and new. There's the Mississippi, old houses, and a gaggle of glittering office towers to remind the visitor that St Louis is progressive and modern. It's a fitting city for Update 89 (26-28 September), the update, I believe, which marks a turning point for the online information industry. It's the update at which the forces of marketing balance the commands of the searchers.

In online's Golden Age, database producers talked about their databases to attendees who knew how to search. Updates were small, select affairs. Sure some of the presentations were speed-talking demonstrations; others were masterpieces of spontaneity, with text and illustrations cobbled together in wee, dark, post-party hours. Then Dialog management quoth, "Hold enough". So a few years ago, updates headed into the unfamiliar waters of marketing and quickly found shoals like those on the banks of Old Man River.

In the early 80s, the gears of change finally engaged, and Dialog field people gave the presentations. Database producers sat in the audience perched on the edge of their chairs, hoping that they would get a chance to answer a question about their database. "Too dull", attendees said. "Boring", others sniffed.

Gears clanked, and we entered the tricky area between marketing and searching. Dialog's new formula is something old and something new, something borrowed and something blue. Attendees could select from Batman, how-to's, lectures, CD-ROMs, news, Bingo, handouts, product reviews, and more . . . much, much more. Like CompuServe, Dialog is hoping that maxi-marketing will make me and others search online more often. . . much, much more often.

Something old

The good news is old: database producers can speak again. Actual database producers

talked about their files, offered search tips, and announced forthcoming enhancements. Upwards of 450 online searchers flocked to product reviews. Super-searchers like Predicast's Judy Hedden and newcomers like UMI's Carvon Hudson went one-on-one to reveal the strength of their firm's databases.

Dialog did its homework too. The rooms were intelligently labelled, a rarity at seminars in the US. More amazingly, the equipment worked, and the Dialog staff kept the speakers on time. Dialog employees cheerfully answered attendees' questions and made sure that everyone, even late-comers and room hoppers, received handouts. In short, individual effort filled some of the potholes in the programme flow which have jarred producers and attendees in the last two years. Over the three-day span, some glitches snagged the attendees' attention, but these were relatively minor and infrequent. I am delighted to see that this side of Dialog's personality has not been transformed by the union with Knight-Ridder.

One scheduling decision posed a problem for those database producers without new online files to announce. Attendees had to choose between learning about the new-kid-on-the-block databases or enhancements to established files. One Super-file database producer observed, "It would make more sense to run sessions about new databases and improvement in established databases at different times". Sound observation indeed.

Dialog followed a proven approach to sample searches as well. Each Update attendee received a thick, typeset book jammed with excellent search examples, tips and technical information. This spiral-bound Gargantua groups search-related information in four main sections: 'Refresher', a crib-sheet for new searchers; 'Dialog Focus', with details about such new features as Homepage, what one database producer described as "a potential revenue killer for producers"; 'User Track', a series of presentations by Dialog

users who have wielded the light sabre of information with authority; and 'Product Reviews', searches provided by Dialog's suppliers.

Something new

Dialog has added sessions which previously appeared on the programmes of the Pemberton or Learned online trade shows. Dialog's marketing thrust emphasizes applications of information, not just searching skills. Update 89 possesses a *souçon* of seminar.

Dialog relies upon its senior staff to present the news and developments from their side of the arch. These presentations are billed as 'Dialog Focus'. Since the much-heralded PAPERS database, consisting of a couple of dozen Knight-Ridder titles isn't fully operational, the big news for my money is the growing collection of Dialog files which provide a cocoon for the searcher. These include the new Homebase, where "a search strategy can be created and SAVED, and then EXECUTED in the database of interest".

Another new Update 89 feature was a much-needed room equipped with online-ready PCs and CD-ROM equipped PCs. The equipment lured a steady stream of tire-kickers and customers. Online searchers at this Update, it seemed to me, were more interested in online information products than in CD-ROMs. Nonetheless, Dialog's CD-ROMs were available to anyone who wanted to experiment.

Something borrowed

Dialog borrowed the outside-speaker format from Messrs Pemberton and Hogan. Inviting well-known online experts from a range of organizations, Update 89 introduced the 'User Track'. Among the many gems in these sessions were two diamonds, Jan Alvis of Proctor & Gamble Co and Barbie E. Keiser Barbie E. Keiser Inc. Each of these information experts combine brains, presence, speaking

skill and hands-on anecdotes to make their respective talks instant hits. Overall, the 'User Track' offered a valuable adjunct to the search mechanics unpinning the vendor and 'Dialog Focus' sessions.

In the US, marketing library services has been attracting increasing attention in the last three years. Interest in this topic outside the States remains modest. Library trade shows have offered marketing sessions and attracted standing-room-only attendance at Special Libraries Association programmes this year. Two US newsletters cover the topic. Chris Olson's *Marketing Treasures* and Sharon LaRosa's *Marketing Library Services* provide different and valuable information on a wide range of library/marketing topics. Following the market at a three-year distance is not bad for Dialog, which offered its version of Marketing 101. Mary Corcoran did her homework and turned in one of the best presentations by Dialog staff at this Update. She prepared and orchestrated sessions which drew large crowds and favourable comment from attendees.

Something blue

My motto is, "Give me data or give me death". I am not impressed with Benny Hill humour. When Update 89 began with Batman, I raised my eyebrows and lowered my head. Make no mistake: the crowd went batty. I no longer doubt that show business has a role to play in the drab, dull world of databases. The caped crusader was, according to official Bat Sources, one of Dialog's CD-ROM marketers. CD-ROM sales calls will be interesting if the Batman wardrobe becomes chi-chi. Holy Code, Batman!

After Batman . . . Bingo. I don't know if Bingo is popular outside the United States. The game is simplicity itself. The American rules are sanctioned, I believe, by a consortium of churches which sponsor Friday night Bingo games in all 50 states. A few Red Indians in Florida have the spirit too. They run a wide open Bingo game on government land

to help keep Florida green. Millions of Yanks pay \$0.25, \$0.50, or more per game card. A big-voiced MC pulls numbers from a barrel, calls them out, and players scan their cards for a match. When a player gets five beans in a row up, down, across or diagonally, he screams, "Bingo!". Those who get Bingo take home cash.

Dialog cashed in on this mother lode of excitement and created Dingo. Dialog-Bingo. *Dingo*. Get it. I could only make it through an early morning game for about 45 seconds before I had to flee to the lobby. When the first scream of "Dingo" reached my ears, I knew that marketing was winning the hearts and minds of the searchers. Rich Ream told me, "More than a dozen Dialog searchers will use the Dingo game to help train new searchers in their organization". I usually support online searchers 100%, but I will continue to play Bingo in church where it belongs.

Full verification of my insight came at the database producers' dinner. I cadged a ticket and hopped on the Dialog bus which would carry us to the St Louis Zoo, site of the party. "World famous, but I don't know why", narrated our bus driver. The Zoo, of course, had locked its cages for the day when we arrived at 20:00, but Dialog obtained access to a pavilion featuring a blend of animals and Macintosh PCs. Fortunately, more animals were alive than Macs. After about 10 minutes of mousing around, I was hungry and ready for dinner. When the waiter brought me my dinner, I asked, "Endangered species?" He replied, "Nope, we ran out of that earlier today".

For dessert we had 'Wheel of Fortune'. For readers unfamiliar with this TV programme, 'Wheel', as its fans affectionately dub it, is a highly-rated US game show. It combines rare intellectual challenges and drama by marrying dumb luck and guesses. The basic concept of "Wheel" is painfully shallow: a contestant spins a roulette wheel, gets money, and guesses a consonant. Vowels cost dollars. When the contestant can

deduce the word or phrase correctly, he wins fabulous prizes.

Prime-time 'Wheel' showcases Vanna White, author and *Playboy* photo subject. Vanna's foil is the rabbit-brained MC, Pat Sajac. A ubiquitous Mary Corcoran gave a fine impression of the irritatingly vacuous Mr Sajac.

A hirsute Dialog male donned a gay frock and played Vanna White. Vanna, it appeared to me, embraced the role with enthusiasm. To whip the database producers into a veritable frenzy, Vanna coyly flirted with dashing Mike Hunter from Trintex. Mike was oblivious to Vanna's overtures, an indication of the sound strategic principles at the database producer level. In truth, I tried to escape but was trapped. Busses wouldn't leave until the show was over. Dialog finally exhausted its supply of golf balls, 'lunches with Libby' (the best gift I might add), and 'Rockin' with Rich' prizes. By 01:00 I was tucked in my Adam's Mark bed. I was unable to sleep for fear that Batman and Vanna would enter my dream shouting, "You've just won one hour of free time on File 411".

Sunset

And now it's over. Update 89 is history. The arch is red-gold in the sunset. A flicker of flame spits from East St Louis. Not to worry. It's just another shooting or an abandoned building exploding in fiery urban renewal. Meanwhile, the online industry gropes forward.

I hope that next year's update builds upon the innovations of Update 89. The location is rumoured to be some place warm. I hope it's not game show hell or a sunny East St Louis, Louie.

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