



Eric Reiss

An Information Architect by Any Other Name

Editorial

The mere fact that you are reading this Journal tells me you're different. You will inherit the earth. Not because you are meek, but because you recognize the importance of information architecture.

Never in the history of the world have so many ordinary people had access to so much high-quality information. No longer the exclusive purview of monks and monarchs, the Internet, combined with high-speed mobile networks and smaller devices can deliver both state secrets and sushi tips to your handtop (is "handtop" a word, yet?).

In short, there has never been a greater need for people who understand how to organize this information. You.

Is information architecture dead? No way! It ain't even sick. Let me share some personal observations about our field.

A Glorious Start

I had been practicing information architecture for decades when a colleague plunked Rosenfeld and Morville's "Information Architecture for the World Wide Web", the "polar bear book", on my desk. I was "officially" a copywriter at an ad agency at the time and was glad to discover my activities had a name. Before then, I had created "interactive structures", "content dispositions" and "comflow diagrams" for the folks in our fledgling multimedia department. Yet, as far back as 173, I was mapping out adventure games (yes, boxes and arrows kinds of stuff). It was all information architecture - even if Richard Saul Wurman hadn't yet given it a name.

The first IA Summit took place in 2000 in April, in Boston. It was amazing to meet so many others who were facing challenges similar to mine. Many lasting friendships were formed and in many ways, I think of the Boston Summit as the cradle of our civilization.

But Then We Got Cocky

After a rousing start, the dot-bomb exploded and by 2002, there was widespread distrust of any unusual business-card title from someone involved in interactive communications.

Some of the leaders within our fledgling community subsequently proclaimed they were no longer information architects. Rather, they became self-styled “business analysts” and made a point of distancing themselves from the IA community. Sadly, few of these provocateurs actually knew much about business analysis and today most of them are again part of the IA scene. This is good. We need these people – particularly if they have picked up a little business savvy.

And We Now Attack That Which We Don't Understand

This past year, we've seen some very smart people say some very silly things about the advertising industry. But make no mistake about it, not understanding our industry is not the same as being evil or stupid. Caveat lector: advertising agencies will undoubtedly become major employers if they ever figure out how online communication actually functions; they have a lot of in-house talent but don't yet know how to apply it and tend to misuse the information architects that they do hire.

With the advent of user-generated content in general, and social media specifically, the need for our talents has increased many-fold. Alas, most advertising folks still look upon the web as just another broadcast channel, which it is not. If a traditional agency wants to look like they're web-savvy, they sometimes hire (or appoint) a “digital ninja” – who invariably get into fights with the old-time creatives – copywriters and art directors. And though digital ninjas may know a thing or two about content, they generally don't know much about organizing this stuff.

When agencies wise up and start hiring people who really are in the know, our understanding of the communications shift from a focus on demographics to that of individual behavior will be our trump card. And the more we know about advertising models (such as AIDA, for example), the less chance there is that advertising folks will call us stupid and evil. Ultimately, it will be our understanding of disciplines both within and beyond IA, that will ensure us a place at the table around which the big decisions are made.

Old Wine in a New Bottle

This brings us to the “content strategists”, the “Ministers without Portfolio” of our industry. The pun is intentional: content strategy deliverables are virtually identical to the stuff information architects have been creating for the past decade.

A confession: I’ve had “Content Strategist” on my business card since about 2004. Oh, I was doing IA, certainly, but the alternative title was less threatening to clients who were used to dealing with offline communications and wary of the online crowd. But, rest assured, my next batch of business cards will say “Information Architect” – I do believe our time has finally come.

Is IA Now UX? No!

Finally, we’ve recently seen some of our community’s leaders suggest that service design, interaction design, or user experience are what IA is really about. Although IA, interaction design, and service design are important, complementary disciplines, I strongly feel that they fall under a collective umbrella called “user experience” – which is probably not a discipline.

To suggest that “user experience” should become the new name for “information architecture” is absurd. If anything, the term “user experience” is currently even more obscure to the business community than information architecture.

When it comes to names, I urge you to embrace “information architecture”. We cannot gain traction in the business community without standing together – this is the social equivalent of quorum-seeking behavior in bacteria. Google it.

How We Provide Tangible Value

Although business analysts, content strategists, digital ninjas, and some advertising copywriters understand the “boxes” (e.g. “content”), only information architects can create meaningful “arrows” (e.g. connections between chunks of content) – the connections that guide and help people make wiser decisions. For years, we have heard that “content is king”. If this be the case, then “context” must surely be the kingdom. And we are the undisputed masters of this realm.

I wish you a prosperous 2011. You have every chance to make this one of the most memorable years yet, to promote yourself, and to promote our discipline. Don't let anyone take this opportunity away from you.

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Guest Editor

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