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For anyone that has spent time talking with peers online via a social network you might get the feeling that the web community is screaming out for easy access to personal, accurate, relevant and immediate information. We are seeing this with the popularity of Twitter, Digg, Facebook and the like. With so much happening so fast, it might be worthwhile asking; Where is this technology heading?

For marketers the convergence of social technologies and search technology may define a new way of examining what customers are saying and help translate the findings into useful insight which might assist with building a more compelling user experience online. Sentiment analysis aims to determine attitude, and is being used to provide greater context and relevance to customers. Like-minded peer and friend networks from all walks of life, often referred to online as "tribes", may have more of an influence on what we wish to see in our search results than our old friend the Google page rank.

Listening to customers is not exactly something new, but can be a challenging and costly exercise. Sentiment analysis might help a digital reconnaissance team to gather relevant customer data, and may have the potential to automate, augment and/or reduce the cost of some traditional approaches to customer segmentation, qualitative and quantitative analysis.

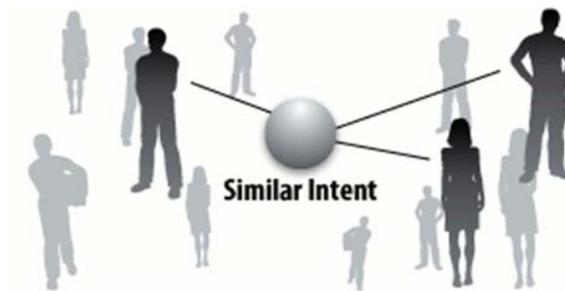
A recent book by Stephen Baker called *The Numerati* explains how marketing intelligence companies like Umbria Communications can sift through the blogosphere and empower organisations with up-to-the-minute information that then might be used to help them with better product enhancements, more accurate and detailed segmentation of customers and much more. If a specific "tribe" is talking about your product or your competitor, you can find out and importantly you can assess how they are feeling.

Personal search can also be harnessed by companies directly. Making use of the mature technologies available today and empowering your web audience to make use of guided navigation will help prompt the user to find the information that is most useful and relevant to them rather than scrolling through pages of potentially irrelevant results. The benefit over time is that a community can mould the experience towards something that meets their needs.

William Shakespeare wrote; "Words are easy, like the wind; Faithful friends are hard to find". The more information we are willing to provide, the greater the potential for an online community to offer the results that we are looking for, but there is a real danger with privacy and security concerns. If a technology can be used to predict your behaviour and profile you specifically, whilst at the same time gaining access to some detailed personal information that is common with online social networks, then the threat is more severe and the potential impact on people's lives much greater.

Obstacles presented in the form of organisational process may give online innovators the feeling that they are being presented with unnecessary hurdles preventing them from harnessing new technologies. Jilted feelings about compliance and legal constraints aside, if you don't want to "nuke the fridge" on your next online deployment perhaps social search may be worth a look as the real benefits are only just starting to become apparent.

Collective Intelligence



Get ready for the next wave of website architecture

'Smartening up' your website is now so much more than a careful redesign. Website architecture is evolving. There are big changes coming in terms of how information can be arranged and searched on your website.

Let us help you understand what new opportunities these developments will bring to your business so you can:

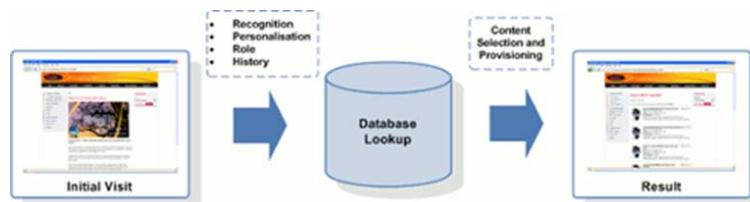
- Keep your website relevant as your customers' needs change
- Respond better to changes in customers' behavior
- Keep ahead of your competitors

Prepare to give your users more

You may think your current site looks just right. The design is first class. The site's functional. And visitors can find what they're looking for when they visit. But there will come a point in the future when what you've done won't be enough. Some of your current users will be gone. And new visitors to your site will arrive ...then leave. What might they be getting elsewhere?

Welcome to the world of collective intelligence, where websites are capable of responding to users needs with much more flexibility. If you're not harnessing this technology, your competitors will be. And this will cost you in the end.

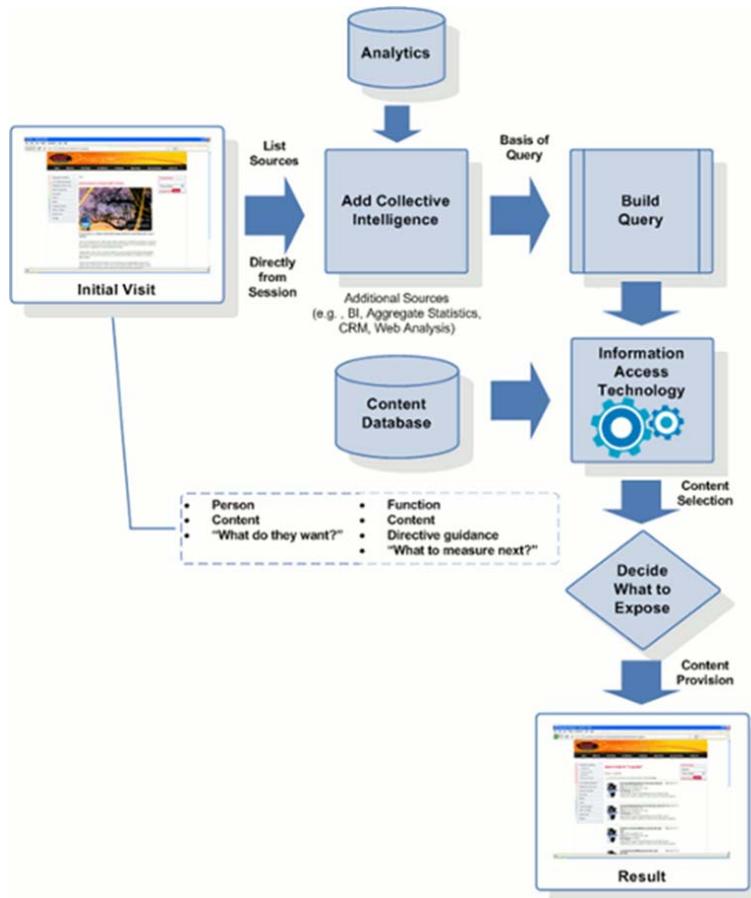
How websites work today



The way most modern websites are designed today is using an approach established in the late 1990s. It's stable and well-understood website architecture. But this approach can fail your business because it's rather rigid. When a visitor to your site changes behaviour or needs something your site was not originally designed for, their experience will be less than ideal.

For a site to stay relevant, it needs to be capable of reacting dynamically to visitors' changing needs. The current design approach does not allow for an understanding of the usefulness of each piece of content and the context in which that information is useful.

How websites will work in the future



In future, websites will be capable of responding to users needs more flexibly. This will be possible through a combination of search technology, content analytics and software available over the web. By gathering and manipulating more information, from more sources, a website can respond to new and changing needs.

This new architecture will also be capable of providing you with more detailed information about why new patterns of behavior are occurring and what this new behavior means for your business. For example, perhaps buyers are beginning to care more about product features than they do about price. Think of the implications this would have for how you approach your marketing.

How does collective intelligence work? - understanding the user experience

Collective intelligence uses a combination of search technology, content analytics and software available over the web. Used in combination, these technologies can allow the site to respond more flexibly to a user's changing needs.

So how does it work from the user's perspective?

As before, a visitor comes to your site and initiates a session. The website still accesses its look-up database for information about this user, however now the website can draw on other sources of information to make inferences about that user.



The site does this using collective intelligence patterns. By looking at what similar users, with similar needs have done, and analyzing this information, the site gives a much more meaningful response to the user.

What type of information might the site draw on?

- Recommendations and information from social networks involving the user or website
- Purchases made by other users with a similar profile
- Pattern matching based on similar behaviours

What's different about the information presented to the user?

- The search results presented to the user have a relevance rating, much like an Internet search today. The difference is the results will consist of the best response to the user given the intelligence gathered up to and including the last click.
- The response will primarily consist of content, but is capable of providing other things relevant to the user, like invitations to events, or special offers.
- Rather than giving the user a one-size-fits-all result, it might also offer other information. It could connect the user with other people who might provide advice on how to get the best out of the recommended product.

Benefits to your business

A website using collective intelligence is capable of providing lots of important information about users evolving behavior and changing needs.

- Analysis of users' behavior on the site, by area
- More feedback from the user
- Better understanding of the marketplace

This stream of information continually refines the queries and results. It helps determine what options your site should offer users.

What to do next

Now is the time to begin planning for a gradual transition to a new design, harnessing the technologies which will provide your users with this greatly enhanced experience. We will work with you to create;

- a list of the technologies and sources of information that could make a difference
- a step-by-step plan for incorporating new technologies into your existing site - focussing on what will have the biggest impact
- a plan for your information access technologies, optimised for the content on your site
- a web strategy to create an engaging experience for your users. The most successful experience might include selected functions, content positioning, and social or collaborative components.

We'll also help you;

- look into internal applications that might provide insight. Possibilities include your demand management system or marketing analytical applications and CRM
- Evaluate content aggregators that might provide insight into your users.
- Assess which information access technologies might help your website. For example, advanced technologies for presenting results and information can add significant value.



The good news

Implementation of information access on your current site is not an exercise in high cost, large development, or long payback. Typically implementation to return of many of the related technologies takes less than a one month.