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The Leman Report - the final day of the Web 2.0 Expo

Wow. I saw and learned so much at Web 2.0 Expo San Francisco 2009 that here it is several days after the conference and many words from me on the event and it is only in this post that I am finally getting to hitting the highlights of the last day of the conference, Friday April 3.

As was often the case at this conference, the morning of the keynotes was the weakest part of the conference. Heather Gold's shtick fell rather flat. She seemed determined to be amusing, but it just didn't go over that morning for many in the audience. The title of her routine was, **"Authenticity is the New Authority"** and was basically about being true to your true self and being who you are. Well, the person I was during her talk was a bored one eager to move to on something more substantive on tech topics.

It is de rigueur at these sorts of conferences to feature top execs from Google who ooze benignity and good will towards the world they are quietly endeavoring to control entirely. Vic Gundotra and Web 2.0 guru Tim O'Reilly chatted amiably and not particularly memorably save for Gundotra's anecdote about his young daughter asking, "Daddy, where is your phone?" when Gundotra used the phrase, "I don't know" in a conversation with another adult. The little girl equated a cell phone with immediate answers.

Scott Heiferman of **Meetup** expended quite a bit of energy on attempting to convince the audience that we were all engaged in something or other very important and world changing and all that and I don't remember anything much of what he said.

"A Conversation with the Founders of Threadless" was mildly entertaining in that they were endearingly self-mocking about their stumbles and screw-ups and not infrequent cluelessness of what they were getting into with their T-shirt design community and wacky but so far successful business model. They were the classic tech-savvy slackers and seemed both flattered and confused to be onstage at a major conference. They provided a nice contrast to the swagger and pomposity of many of the keynoters that week.

chartbeat
Peter Hershberg's demo of the incredible Web site monitoring tool **Chartbeat** was by far the most interesting part of the keynote morning. If you are ever in need of heavy duty, real time analytics about your Web site check out Chartbeat. It's an impressive tool. **Way cool.** I don't think the average blogger would need it, but certainly mid-sized businesses and up would want to take a look at it. It was so good that the next speaker, Jeff Veen of Small Batch, Inc., was agog and in deep wow mode. Veen was an excellent speaker who drew upon on historical examples such as Charles Joseph Minard's chart of the losses suffered by Napoleon's army in the **Russian debacle** to illustrate how data can be presented powerfully.

Then we all went off to the sessions of the day.

I attended **Building Sites Around Social Objects** by Jyri Engestrom of Google. Engestrom was soft-spoken to the point of being soporific. But his talk was substantive and his point that successful sites have a clear raison d'entre and provide an immediate benefit to users is an obvious one that is surprisingly ignored by many in Web land.

Also edifying was **Mashups with Atoms: Ubiquitous Computing and Web 2.0** by Mike Kuniavsky of ThingM Corporation. He illustrated how computing is entering every realm of our lives, down to our very physiology. As someone who works in a medical setting, I found his example of the simple but serviceable design of the **Health Buddy** device especially interesting.

It is interesting how many of the speakers at Web 2.0 seemed to regard having to speak as a bit of bother and Kuniavsky responded to questions with curtness and superciliousness. Well, excuse us for expressing interest in your topic, guy.

I then went to a panel discussion, **Social Media Buyer's Guide**. It was fascinating to hear from those in businesses of widely varying size (e.g., the enormous CISCO down to a smallish solar technology company) how they go about determining what sorts of social media they feel they need to deploy and what questions they ask of vendors. Many of the panelists expressed frustration at how many of those peddling social media products won't provide basic pricing info up front and who don't seem to know the basics of their prospective clients' needs or their own products very well.

I wandered around the exhibit hall. I enjoy chatting with vendors if a tool looks intriguing. I usually ignore what looks like pricey enterprise software and go for what looks affordable for libraries, nonprofits and small hospitals.

Kindling is kind of a cute program, for instance. It states that it is an idea management and collaboration tool for groups.

Cazoodle is a nifty little search engine and could develop into something quite powerful. I am most intrigued by the fact that it has emerged out an incubator facility of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Good for Associate Professor Kevin Chen-Chuan Chang. Now that is innovative teaching: providing real-world experience for students that also benefits the wider search community.

I picked up some free copies of the useful **Website Magazine** and was surprised that more tech publications didn't take the opportunity to showcase their wares at the conference. Where were the many outstanding magazines of **Information Today?** I got free copies of many of those at one of the Internet Librarian conferences and have been a loyal, paying subscriber ever since.

I didn't make it to the last sessions of the conference, as I had a plane to catch.

Overall impressions. I learned a huge amount at this conference. I would think almost anyone who deals with Web sites (think libraries and hospitals and businesses of virtually any kind) or marketing would have benefited from attending. One thing that distressed me was what an afterthought design for the disabled was. That should be given at least three minutes in any presentation on software, given how many people have some sort of impairment that renders computer use difficult. The lack of awareness on this aspect of Web design is truly shocking given how many sorts of disability there are and the legal penalties in many sectors if your site is not maximally accessible to the disabled.

Who was not at the conference? Healthcare–save for a contingent from the VA and a very nice man from the NIH and some people from health plans there was little representation for that industry. Science was nowhere to be seen. Academia—nope. It was pretty corporate in attendance and a mix of start-ups and mid-sized social software vendors plus the usual behemoths: Microsoft, Google, eBay.

It may be that as Web 2.0 has hived off into subgroups (Science 2.0, Library 2.0) there is less need for a mega conference on the theme of Web 2.0. But it behooves us to get out of our bubbles sometimes and see software programs demonstrated that could be adapted to our fields and to meet ingenious developers and encourage them to think of how their programs could be developed for healthcare and science. So much talent is being wasted on developing powerful tools but marketed for mundane or inane uses. Take the **Microsoft surface** computing system. It was neat to be able to actually see one in operation. But the young woman who was demonstrating it had no idea if it is being marketed in the physical rehabilitation sector. Seems like that would be an obvious use. I was indeed surprised by how much money Microsoft put into its displays and courting of media and how little information you actually got from their representatives.

Case in point. I was invited to a dinner with some of their marketing people that was advertised as featuring a presentation on recent developments in search. After several servings of dumplings, I asked somewhat impatiently if there was indeed to be any such talk. No. It was all very unproductive schmoozing with the attendees having very little idea who anyone else was or why we had all been brought together. I excused myself to go to the much more useful Birds of a Feather Session on HealthCamp. I later chatted with a search guy who said that that was standard operating procedure for Microsoft. They don't really want to hear that their branding of Live Search is a mess. "Happy talk" with staffers in Chinese restaurants at company expense seems to be the order of the day. There was so much else going on at the conference that I kept trying out how to extricate myself from this pointless affair. But even tedious events have their uses vis-à-vis learning what to avoid at conferences, and the *Web 2.0 Expo was an excellent one.*

The end! Thanks, Hope, for such excellent coverage!

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One Response to "The Leman Report - the final day of the Web 2.0 Expo"

1. *Govind Kabra* Says:
   April 10th, 2009 at 12:16 pm

   Thanks for your kind words on Cazoodle. We do find university roots as our key advantage. Makes it easy for us to recruit and collaborate.

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