

About the Inbound

Introduction

I have mused about skills in multi-sensory communications¹ and offered the hypothesis that “Inbound communication skills must be as strong (stronger?) than outbound communications skills.”

I am motivated towards this hypothesis by the growth in data, information, and knowledge made available through the ubiquity of the internet and the ease of producing content and placing it on the internet.

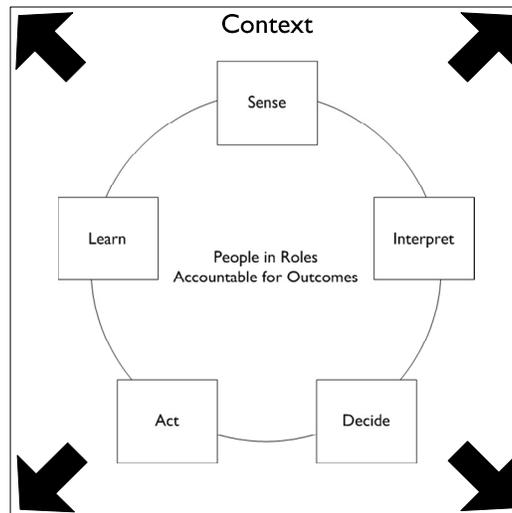


Figure 1 SIDAL and Context

This growth in the context in which we lead our lives may very well be outstripping our capacity to sense, interpret, decide, act, and learn (SIDAL²). I have previously blogged on this matter³ and Tom Davenport has started a related discussion thread on Harvard Business Online.⁴

I was provoked earlier today to begin this note when I was investigating the Internet Scout Project.⁵

“Since 1994, the Internet Scout Project has focused on research and development projects that provide better tools and services for finding, filtering and delivering online information and metadata.”

¹ James Drogan, 7th Annual Symposium on Communication and Communication Intensive Instruction: “New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication.” Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, April 27, 2007, 2007, <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/storage/Schwartz%20Symposium%20Seven.pdf>, [June 1, 2007].

² SIDAL is adapted from Stephan H. Haeckel and Adrian J. Slywotzky, *Adaptive Enterprise: Creating and Leading Sense-and-Respond Organizations* (Harvard Business School Press, 1999) 0875848745.

³ James Drogan, Homer, Great Books and Modern Life, <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/droganbloggin/2006/12/28/homer-great-books-and-modern-life.html> [June 14, 2007]

⁴ Tom Davenport, What Media Are You Consuming?, http://discussionleader.hbsp.com/davenport/2007/06/what_media_are_you_consuming.html [June 14, 2007]

⁵ Internet Scout Project, <http://scout.wisc.edu/index.php> [June 14, 2007]. After review, I don’t think this site goes where I want to go.

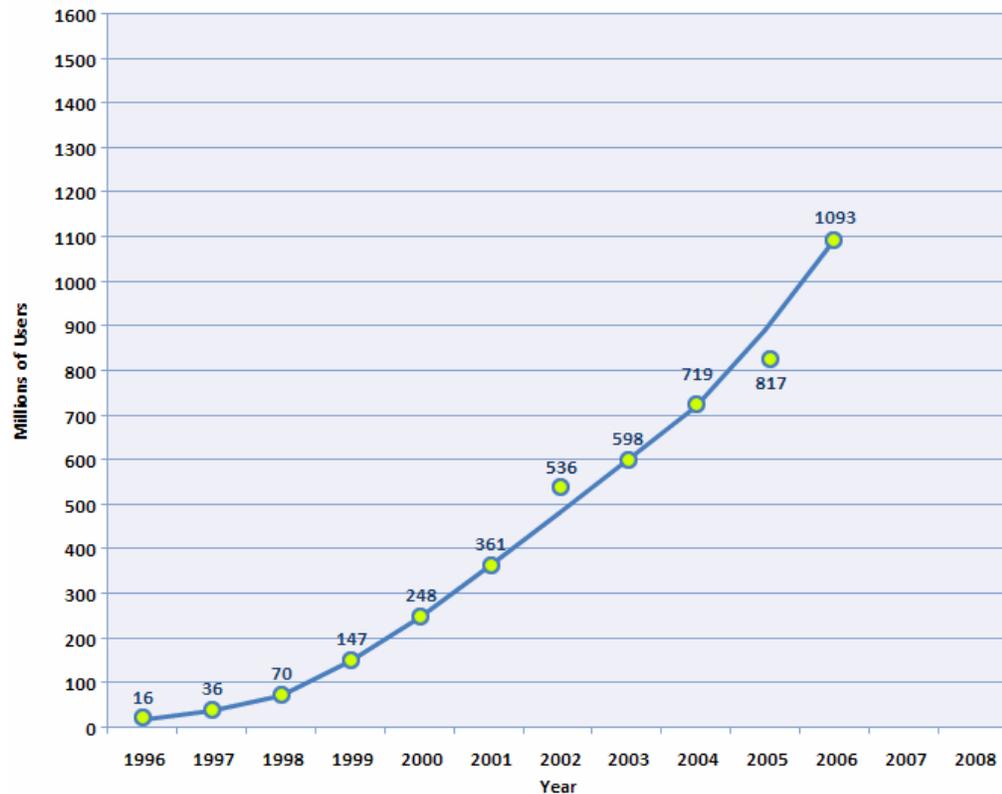
The Inbound Issue

If the inbound issue is one of coping with the rapid, chaotic grow of data, information, and knowledge that is prompted, on the one hand, by the ubiquity of Internet, and on the other, by the ease with which content can be generated, what characterizes this issue.

A. *Breadth and depth of data, information, and knowledge - more and more*⁶

1. Users

**Internet Usage Growth
1995 - 2006**



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2. Traffic

"How Big Is The Internet?"

*Good question. To give you an idea, when Bill Clinton was inaugurated as President there were 200 domain hosts in use (200 numeric addresses in use and only eight (8) of them ended in .com or .net! As of January 1, 2004 there were 194,000,000 domain hosts in use.*⁸

3. Pages

⁶ Drogan, 7th Annual Symposium on Communication and Communication Intensive Instruction: "New Rules: Convention and Change in Communication." Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute, April 27, 2007].

⁷ Internet World Stats, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm> [April 8, 2007]

⁸ Metamend, <http://www.metamend.com/internet-growth.html> [April 8, 2007]

"Google 3.083 billion pages."⁹

"So How Fast Is The Internet Growing?"

Research shows that the known Internet - the Internet excluding the Deep Web is growing by more than 10,000,000 new, static pages each day. In contrast, the fastest growing search engine database is increasing at about 10% of this pace."¹⁰

How, then, does one quickly find that data, information, and knowledge (hereinafter, these three terms are limped together and called data) that is relevant?

Well, it depends upon the decision one is trying to make and the manner in which that decision is to be made.

It starts with an understanding of a few basic questions.¹¹

- 1. What business decisions must be made and why? Here we are seeking to write declarative sentences that look something like "We need to make a decision about ... because it will affect how we ..." These need to be decisions of significance to the firm.*
- 2. How will these decisions be made and why? By how I mean the general approach to making the decision. For example, a decision on which container to move next will be based upon a) the value of the goods to the shipper and 2) the value of the shipper to the organization. It's useful to also write declarative sentences to help answer these questions.*
- 3. What data is required and what will be its source?*

This initial step in building the desired management system can be done in a simple format. An example is:

- I. Decision*
 - A. Method*
 - 1. Data*

At this stage of the building of the management system one might think in terms of 12 or so major decisions. Audit this description by working from the lowest level up to the top. That is:

- 1. How does the data support the method used to make the decisions?*
- 2. How does the method used enable the decision to be made?*
- 3. How does the decision relate to the critical success factors of the organization?*

It seems reasonable, therefore, to look upon the skills required to find the relevant data as being in two general areas.

- I. Building the filters that will allow for the selecting from the torrent of data that which is relevant. This is akin, I believe, to the design and construction of nets used in fishing. In fishing the design and construction is a function of the size and species of fish, and where and how the net will be deployed.*

In our case, the design and construction of the filter depends upon the decision to be made and the method to be used for making the decision, and the manner in which the filter will be deployed.

⁹ Ibid. Only about 10% of the Internet is accessed.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ James Drogan, 8. Management System, March 1, 2007 2007, <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/storage/8.%20Management%20System.pdf>, [June 14, 2007].

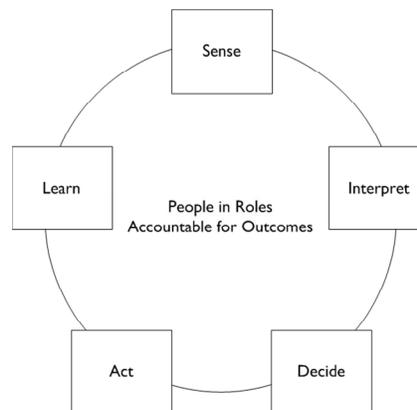
Many of us may already be doing something like this when we turn on firewalls, designate sites as generators of junk mail, or devise rules for handling messages based upon other characteristics of the messages.

2. Interpretive skills. Here we are asking whether the data that has been caught in our filter truly has value to the decision we need to make. This is similar to crab and lobster fishing wherein crustaceans not meeting a certain length are returned to the water. It may be instructive that crab and lobster fisherman do this by hand.

In just about any discipline one can name, there are those (e.g., Warren Buffet and Charlie Munger in business; the late Martha Graham of dance) individuals who have stood head and shoulders above their peers. I suspect their success has and had much to do with their extraordinary sensory and interpretive skills.¹²

Current State

Let's return to the SIDAL diagram a moment.



Suppose we had the empirical data that would allow us to adjust the size of the rectangles and the width of the lines connecting the rectangles to reflect the amount of formal education we provide to students on the application of the principles of communication in this areas. For example, what degree of focus do we put on communications as it applies to connecting act and learn?

My suspicion is that we would find a preponderance of the evidence indicating that our focus is predominantly in act and decide area of the chart, those activities where the premium is on outbound (i.e., written and oral) communication.

It's clear that SIDAL works in a clockwise fashion. Therefore, the quality of the communications associated with any of the tasks is a function of the tasks preceding it. Without adequate focus on the inbound, then we run the risk of producing eloquent gibberish.¹³

Well, somehow and from someone, students must be learning something about sense, interpret, and learn. How could this be happening?

I suspect that it happens in an *ad hoc* manner and those who are autodidacts are best at this. They observe how their teachers deal with sense and interpret and perhaps mimic them. This may be good stuff, but it exposes them to a limited to range of options and therefore may not be the right stuff.

Now it should be clear that I am writing this from the point of view of a teacher. Let me further qualify that by saying that most of my teaching experience over the last five and one-half has been with graduate students in business courses. It is this experience that leads me to my observations.

¹² I don't mean to discount the decision, act, and learn skills by this comment. History and the present are littered with those poor souls who sense and interpret, but then do not put the results of this into action. I would put many politicians in this category.

¹³ This is perhaps too strong of a statement, but I will let it stand for now.

On that basis, then, I am uncomfortable with the current approach to teaching students about sense, interpret, and learn. I have previously argued that “ethics is too important to be left to the ethicists” and “that communications was too important to be left to communications courses.”

I’ll generalize that in the context of SIDAL. That is, the elements of SIDAL are too important to be left to those courses that are supposed to teach students about these specific items. The elements of SIDAL ought to be present in every class in an unambiguous manner.

Recommendation

Garbage In, Garbage Out.¹⁴ While this phrase was coined during the onset of the information age, it has existed forever. One cannot even hope to produce good output from bad input.

Yet, I fear, that is our hope in dealing with the inbound side of communications. Hope needs to be replaced with clear action.

1. Make the SIDAL education overt. Perhaps five one-hour modules would be in order dealing with the what, why, where, when, who, and how of each of the phases.
2. SIDAL is shaped by the areas of interest, and the role and responsibility of the decision maker. For that reason, education in these areas cannot be left to general purposes classes (other than at an undergraduate introductory level). My experience is that one should make no assumptions as to the level of understanding of these areas possessed by incoming students. Hence, my comments (above) that “the elements of SIDAL are too important to be left to those courses that are supposed to teach students about these specific items. The elements of SIDAL ought to be present in every class in an unambiguous manner.”
3. Draw upon examples as much as one possible can.¹⁵ Different points of view from practitioners in the field are extremely valuable to the students.
4. Rely less upon the traditional case study as a method of teaching. This approach does away with any emphasis on the development of sense and, I suspect, somewhat compromises the development of interpret. Teach from a more realistic point of view. For example, the assignment might be as simple as “Exporting corn originating from growers in the Midwestern “Corn Belt” of the United States to Japan, South Africa and the European Union.”¹⁶ Let the SIDAL lessons flow from this point of departure.
5. Encourage the development of personal SIDAL cycles.

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June 16, 2007

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¹⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garbage_in,_garbage_out [June 15, 2007] for the origins and application of the phrase.

¹⁵ James Drogan, Keeping Current, 2007, <http://jmsdrgn.squarespace.com/storage/Keeping%20Current.pdf>, [June 16, 2007].

¹⁶ Larry Howard, "Tmgt 9100 Capstone Syllabus Spring 2007," 2007.

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