

Being relevant in a Web world

OCLC's Open WorldCat pilot now in progress

By Brad Gauder

According to one U.S. state librarian, OCLC is on the right track with one of its newest efforts to help libraries regain their relevance. The Open WorldCat pilot, a year-long initiative, is testing the effectiveness of Web search engines like Google and other Web sites to guide users to library-owned materials.

“Libraries need to be relevant, and what OCLC is doing with this pilot will help more people realize that they are while increasing libraries’ visibility,” says Jan Walsh, Washington State Librarian.

“The Web has created a huge shift in how people seek information, so it’s important that we get into the space where potential library users are,” she says. “Google is now in the content profession and so we need to remind people that their libraries have always been in that profession. The Open WorldCat pilot is one way we can do that.”

If you ask a typical college student where he or she begins searching for information to complete an assignment, chances are the answer will be Google or another popular Internet search engine, according to recent research. Research by Pew and Harris Interactive studies confirms that the majority of college students now start with commercial search engines when conducting research for most or all of their assignments.^{1, 2} These and other studies concern the library community and the OCLC cooperative for several reasons:

- Many resources on commercial Web sites don’t undergo the scrutiny that library acquisitions do, so users risk using resources that are unreliable and/or outdated.

- Web resources often don’t offer the breadth of resources that users need.
- Users are more often bypassing the expertise and resources available to them from their local libraries.

“While popular search engines offer immediate gratification, they often lack the quality and depth of information that information seekers need,” says Frank Hermes, OCLC Vice President, Cooperative Discovery Services. “Our purpose is to make their libraries’ collections and expertise available in a fast, efficient manner.”

OCLC’s Open WorldCat pilot aims to address those concerns and redirect information seekers to their libraries to find the trustworthy resources they need for their research. But instead of pulling library users from the Web sites they tend to visit first, OCLC has found a way through the pilot to put libraries on Google and other Web sites.

Extending WorldCat beyond the library environment

The roots of the Open WorldCat pilot date to 2000, when OCLC first established agreements with a small number of Web-based booksellers and bibliographies to test the linking of library resources to commercial Web sites. These linking agreements remain in effect, enabling users of sites that include Abebooks, Alibris, Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA), BookPage and HCI Bibliography to enter geographic information to produce lists of libraries that own desired items. Currently, links on these sites yield an average of 50,000 searches per month on WorldCat for libraries that own items.

Encouraged by the results of the efforts with booksellers and at the urging of the OCLC cooperative, OCLC pursued development of the Open WorldCat pilot.

OCLC spent a year conducting market research with various constituencies including OCLC Members Council and advisory committee delegates, other leaders in the library community and working librarians. The research clearly indicated it was time to test the viability of an OCLC service that could guide users from search engines and Web sites to libraries to locate needed items.

The Open WorldCat pilot marks the first time that OCLC has made WorldCat's unique resources available from outside the library environment. It officially began in June 2003 and will run through June 2004. OCLC will analyze data collected during the pilot and decide by mid-2004 whether or not to implement it as a service.

The pilot's main goal is to make libraries more visible. It does this by pointing current and potential users to library collections for the materials they want. Thus, the pilot promotes

the value and relevance of libraries on a scale far beyond what individual libraries or consortia could accomplish.

“I am very interested in the Open WorldCat pilot as part of OCLC's strategy of ‘weaving the Web into libraries and weaving libraries into the Web,’” says Stephen Rollins, Dean, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.

“If a student starts with Google, the academic library should have a presence at that starting point. When a student or researcher starts an information search, the library presence should be obvious.”

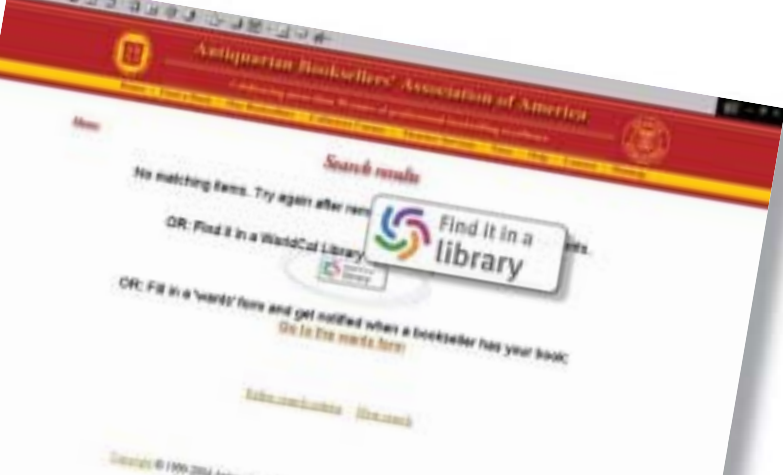
A user who searches Google for information will see a “Find in a Library” link to abbreviated WorldCat records for relevant items held by 100 or more libraries that have cataloged the items in WorldCat.



Photo courtesy of Jan Walsh

“We need to establish ourselves as a premier cultural heritage institution, and OCLC is helping us do that with the Open WorldCat pilot.”

—Jan Walsh, Washington State Librarian



While the terminology varies depending on the external Web site a user is searching, all of OCLC's partners in the Open WorldCat pilot provide direct links to abbreviated WorldCat records for items available at libraries that have cataloged the items in WorldCat.

How the Open WorldCat pilot works

The Open WorldCat pilot provides information seekers with access to abbreviated WorldCat records, representing the items most widely owned by libraries that have contributed to WorldCat. For Google users, the pilot provides access to a subset of 2 million abbreviated WorldCat records. All academic, public and school libraries that have contributed to WorldCat (about 12,000 libraries) were automatic participants in the pilot.

The pilot has three primary components:

1. The subset of abbreviated WorldCat records harvested by Google. When matching records are found, they are identified as available from WorldCat and include a link to the end-user interface (see below) to help users find libraries that own the items they want.

2. Links from other Web sites, such as Abebooks, Alibris, ABAA, BookPage and HCI Bibliography. When a user searches for an item by author or title using one of these Web sites, a link or button appears that the user can follow to identify libraries that hold the desired item.



Photo courtesy of Stephen Rollins

"The more obvious our presence in our user community, the more likely our users will retrieve the best resources in their areas of interest."

—Stephen Rollins, Dean, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage

3. An end-user interface that directs users to libraries. The interface design helps users determine quickly which libraries hold the items they need. A user enters a ZIP/postal code, state, province or country to retrieve a list of the nearest libraries that hold the desired item. This list includes maps of library locations and links to library Web sites and online catalogs.

For the month of January, the pilot logged nearly 93,000 inbound clicks that originated from the Google, BookPage, Alibris, ABAA, Abebooks and HCI Bibliography Web sites. This represents an 80% growth in monthly inbound activity from December 2003 to January 2004.

For the duration of the pilot, the service is provided to participating libraries at no charge. Libraries that wish to join or withdraw from the pilot may do by submitting the form available on the pilot Web site: www.oclc.org/worldcat/pilot.

The pilot is also open to other types of libraries that were not originally included. Libraries that already contribute to WorldCat can complete the feedback form available on the pilot Web page to join the pilot. Libraries that do not use OCLC for cataloging should contact OCLC or a regional service provider for information on how to add their holdings to WorldCat and thereby become eligible to join the pilot.

Mr. Rollins notes that his library plans to promote the Open WorldCat pilot over the university's listserv and Web sites. "We are also discussing how to provide home delivery when a book is requested," he says.

Helping libraries remain relevant

"Libraries are still relevant," says OCLC's Chip Nilges, Director, WorldCat Services. "What we're doing with the Open WorldCat pilot is integrating library resources with the open Web to make library resources more accessible to information seekers."

Ms. Walsh notes that current library users aren't the primary target market for a service like the Open WorldCat pilot—it's people who no longer use their libraries and those who never have used them. "We want these non-users to say, 'Oh yeah, I could get this from the library' when they search for information on Google or another search engine."

"Twice in recent years our governor has proposed closing the state library and the survival experience has significantly deepened our staff's commitment to being relevant," explains Ms. Walsh. "We need to establish ourselves as a premier cultural heritage institution, and OCLC is helping us do that with the Open WorldCat pilot."

A decision about whether the Open WorldCat pilot will become an official service from OCLC will be made in mid-2004. Ms. Walsh is cautiously optimistic. "While I'm in awe of this pilot and think it's a huge, positive step for OCLC, I have to keep in mind it is still a prototype. So let's see how it goes."

Mr. Rollins also supports the pilot's intent. "If [the] Open WorldCat [pilot] is successful, then it will place academic libraries in the same space as Web users and that will be a very good thing," he says.

"The more obvious our presence is to our user community, the more likely we will see support from our user communities in terms of donations to the library or lobbying for adequate funding. The more obvious our presence in our user community, the more likely our users will retrieve the best resources in their areas of interest."

1. OCLC White Paper on the Information Habits of College Students, June 2002.

2. Jones, Steve, "The Internet Goes to College," Pew Internet & American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=71>.