

FINDING & BEING FOUND

The existence of the World Wide Web has made it easier than ever to locate new creative talent in the world, and just as difficult as it has always been.

My career as a creative individual depends on finding and being found. As a writer I would like potential employers and collaborators to read examples of my work and be enthused enough to track me down and make me an offer.

As someone who often commissions others, who searches for people to work on projects with, and who writes about such individuals, I want to be able to do the tracking and easily contact those people who look interesting.

These ambitions are just as hard to satisfy if you are located in one of the world's great centres of art and commerce as on its periphery. It is as difficult to know where to begin, who to try to see, where to send your samples in a city like London as it is when living far from such centres of population.

Conversely, if it is your job to find talent, if they do not come directly to you then you must go to them. And the ones who know to come to you are those who are either already established and well-known, or who are represented by established and well-known agents. They are often the ones you are least interested in.

The ones you really want are all out there, somewhere else.

THE BENT PYRAMID OF WORK.

Magazines and advertising rely on the continual shock of the new, and are voracious consumers of previously unknown talents.

The process is shaped like an inwardly bent pyramid. A handful of people will rise to the top and develop a small stable of regular clients on whom they can rely on for a living. They are the stars in an unofficial star system, with ways of

seeing or thinking that are so distinctive, and simultaneously so commercial, that they will always be assured of a place.

The rest will occupy the lower zones, rising and sinking in visibility throughout their careers as clients come and go, as trends sweep across the world stage and then vanish just as fast.

These people are the jobbers, the journeymen, the juniors still evolving, and their population includes many whose talents may be unique but only applicable to a small range of projects, deemed distinctive but whose time has not yet come, but who yet might bring a unique stamp to just the right commission that, in the hands of one more established might lose its character and be submerged into uniformity.

THE WORLD IS SMALLER & DENSER.

The Web has shrunk the globe more than mass air travel, television or print ever did. To learn about goings-on in a place the other side of the world, type keywords into Google (www.google.com) and get thee hence to whatever websites appear in the results.

The same applies to people. Try typing a name into the search field, and see what comes up. Try your own name—you will be surprised and may well discover a long lost relative or two.

But go looking for something more specific and unknown, such as an artist, an illustrator, a photographer, a type of writer whom you have imagined into being and given the size of the world could quite easily exist, and your search is difficult to the point of impossibility.

The reason is that the web and its search engines are still primitive, and have their limitations. The web may well become analogous to the human mind, a giant connections machine, some day but that time is still far away. The best of our current search

engines work on the basis of how many other sites connect to any given one, the relevance of the words contained in its pages and the keywords embedded in its code.

If a website's creator neglects its keywords or the text is not descriptive enough, or the site simply lies within those vast drifts of the web that are poorly connected to the rest of it, then it is easy to miss what you may be looking for.

Then there is the fact that far too few people, especially those of a creative stripe, have personal websites of any kind. Not everyone wants to learn HTML and master the complexities of running a website the traditional way.

SOLUTIONS WITHIN REACH.

And nor should they have to. Forward-looking companies like Apple Computer have made solutions available like iTools, a service that anyone who owns a Mac can use to build their own website, without knowing anything about design or coding.

The recently born weblog movement presents another way of being on the web, combining easy-to-use, though still evolving, desktop software where you write your daily posts with dedicated servers to upload to. Or you can use your ISP's servers if you choose.

Software developers like UserLand (www.userland.com) are fuelling this revolution with products like its Radio UserLand desktop website solution and the Radio Community Server, low cost or free, usable with little or no knowledge of HTML and FTP, powerful enough to use in a more sophisticated way with deeper knowledge of the tools provided.

Since its release early this year Radio UserLand has helped radically boost the ranks of active bloggers, garnered much-needed publicity for the movement, led the development of new Internet standards like XML-RPC, SOAP, RSS and OPML, and is now pioneering the exchange of RSS feeds between weblogs and major web destinations like THE NEW YORK TIMES.

In the process the paradigms of web publishing may be in the beginnings of rapid flux. As Dave Winer has recently opined, "...in a few years the home pages of the surviving professional sites will be weblogs."

Maybe so. But there is far more to weblogs, and Radio UserLand, than daily posts to a web diary. A diary-style weblog can be expanded beyond plain text to include images on its

homepage, and the rest of your site can be composed of familiar forms such as essays and stories, gallery pages, Flash movies and PDF documents should you wish it so.

DIVERSITIES, NOT MONOLITHS.

Something good seems to be occurring between weblogs and Google. Type the name of a known weblogger and the word "weblog" into Google's search field and see what you get. I tried my nom de 'blog, karlpeter3, and my weblog appeared top of the page. That is not necessarily the kind of result you would get with a conventional web page.

Weblogs are linked to the peer-to-peer (P2P) web communications movement that products like Napster spawned as a side effect. Many people have been giving thought to better talent-finding and exposure, but most of this occurred before P2P struck home, and the solutions were monolithic and top-heavy.

In the centralized thinking of the time, pre-dotcom crash, people chose to launch new companies loaded with sales staffs and technicians to build and maintain huge sites full of databased images and information. These things were expensive to run and had barely sustainable business models. The income was supposed to come from sponsorship, advertising and small percentage fees on transactions.

I undertook a proof of concept of such a project in the later part of the 1990s for British Telecom, but even then the flaws were irritatingly obvious. Nowadays such a concept would not attract venture capital much less seed funding, it is so far out of step with the times. Yet the times demand a solution allowing for better searching and being found now more than ever before. New talent is as much in demand today as it was back then.

ANOTHER GO AT IT.

Now, however, the solution is going to have to take into account the weblog phenomenon, the P2P revolution since it has grown beyond hype and is turning into solid reality, and the new Internet standards Userland has pioneered. Something entirely unexpected is bound to be coming down the turnpike too, and our solution must be flexible enough to absorb that.

I have a few thoughts about how it might just work this time. 🙌