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### Case Study: Novel technology boosts sales

David Neal [01-07-2004]

Abebooks is an online source for second-hand, collectable and antiquarian books. As its operations expanded, like many firms with online systems Abebooks wanted to find new ways to get value and custom from its increasing databases of products and sellers.

The business was set up in 1996 as an antiquarian bookshop linking to just four sellers. Now Abebooks links to over 12,000 sellers - 2,500 of which are in the UK.

The company decided that an improved search system could soon pay off by helping customers to more easily find the books they were looking for, while also presenting them with recommendations for related and similar items.

Sarah Stein, Abebooks' product manager for buying, says that the rapid growth of online business meant it was easy to make a case for improving the web site's search systems.

"Initially the site was used by hardcore collectors, but now it is much wider," she says. "There are now some 55 million used, rare and out-of-print books in our searchable database, with about 20,000 added every day and approximately four million unique visitors in a week."

Stein adds that there are a number of reasons for the rapid success of the business but the main one is that users recommend the site to their friends.

"Word of mouth has been the best method of growth," she comments. "Fifty percent of users say that they have come to the site because it was recommended to them."

However, such growth can cause difficulties. Jayson Miynard, chief information officer at Abebooks, notes, "The larger a store gets, the harder it is for people to see the impulse buys."

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To improve matters, Miynard decided that a better search system should be deployed, and eventually chose technology called InFront, from catalogue and e-commerce search company Endeca.

Miynard says Endeca's technology was attractive because it could provide guided navigation and drill-down search options, and could also link to related items and present books within their context.

"We believe that there is a distinct correlation between search and people's attention span and that managing this helps to increase [sales]," says Miynard. "We have a very big inventory with a lot of unique items. Endeca lets you find your way to the information that you are looking for, and recommend other, related items."

Users of the web site can now refine results by using relevant search criteria such as the booksellers' geographical location, the edition of the book, and other options such as condition and whether the item is signed or not. "Endeca has given us a huge performance gain and it has let us see more clearly the actual spread of what people are buying as well as how they are buying them," Miynard adds.

Another useful feature of the system is the ability to cull information from the site's database of booksellers. Endeca enables regular stock updates, so when users are searching, any new material posted can be included in search results.

This new technology is helping Abebooks attract more users, and build up business, according to Stein.

"When we first started we would receive small cheques in the post from sellers. Nowadays we still get those, but the mailman's sack is a lot bigger," Stein adds. "We are all very surprised and are wondering how much bigger it will get."

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