

## Taxonomy Boot Camp

by Heather Hedden

In its third year, Taxonomy Boot Camp ([www.taxonomybootcamp.com](http://www.taxonomybootcamp.com)) is the only conference dedicated to the field of taxonomies. It is organized by Information Today Inc. (ITI), the publisher of magazines and books in the information science field. ITI will be familiar to ASI members as the official publisher of the "Indexing Specialties" series as well as other ASI publications. ITI also puts on a number of conferences with associated trade shows, typically on each of the coasts, in various sectors of the library and information technology industry, and Taxonomy Boot Camp is its newest.

This past year's Taxonomy Boot Camp conference was held at the McEnery Convention Center in San Jose, California, November 8 and 9, 2007. This was the same venue as 2006, but the first year's conference was in New York. Since vendor exhibits are an important part of ITI conferences, Taxonomy Boot Camp is never held in isolation, but rather co-located with an additional ITI conference, KMWorld & Intranets, to ensure greater trade show attendance. KMWorld & Intranets, named after two of ITI's magazines of the same names (KM standing for Knowledge Management), was held November 6 – 8. For the first time, a third ITI conference, Enterprise Search Summit, which was previously held only in New York, was co-located with the other two. Dubbed Enterprise Search Summit West, it immediately preceded Taxonomy Boot Camp on November 6 and 7. Finally, there were pre-conference workshops on taxonomies and related topics prior to all three conferences, held on Monday, November 5.

### Sessions

What makes Taxonomy Boot Camp unique is that all sessions are held in a single room with no consecutive tracks, even though the

number of registrants at slightly over 200, comparable to the ASI national conferences. This solves the problem of deciding what sessions to attend, and also results in more sessions being packed into each day. There were a total of 24 sessions, including the keynote and a longer four-member panel presentation, over the course of the two days. Most sessions were only half an hour long. In any conference, you find that some of the sessions are worthwhile and some are not. By being able to attend more sessions, this increases the number of sessions that come across as worthwhile.

The name Taxonomy Boot Camp would imply that the conference is aimed at those new to taxonomies. This might have been the case three years ago, when taxonomy was a new field within corporate knowledge and information management. Sessions addressed a mixture of levels, and attendees, too, had varying degrees of background in taxonomies. To achieve a common level of basic understanding, an initial session was held at 8:00 am the first day, entitled Taxonomy FAQs. This provided a good overview for people new to the field and a nice review for those already familiar with the concepts. More in-depth introductions to taxonomies were also available as pre-conference workshops.

Rather than focusing on various aspects of the techniques of creating taxonomy terms and relationships, which might be too basic for some or too advanced for others, many sessions were either case studies, discussions of technology, or presentations of related topics, such as social tagging. Several of the presentations were clearly focused on the process and procedures for managing enterprise taxonomies (taxonomies used within a large company or organization). Although ASI members are not likely to be employees of organizations implementing enterprise taxonomies, these sessions were still valuable,

for ASI freelancers may end up working as consultants or contractors on enterprise taxonomy projects.

While two sessions focused on automatic indexing, it became evident in other sessions that corporate taxonomies were being used by human indexers as well. "Tagging with a Taxonomy" presented by **Joseph Busch** even presented a detailed breakdown of costs for "tagging" (i.e. indexing) using a multi-faceted taxonomy, and proposed a rate of \$0.75/minute.

Besides sharing access to the exhibit, another benefit of co-locating Taxonomy Boot Camp with KMWorld & Intranets was being able to share the same keynote speaker on Thursday morning. **David Snowden**, an internationally renowned consultant and lecturer on knowledge management, was an excellent speaker who gave an entertaining and thought-provoking talk on "Tags, Categories, and Knowledge Sharing."

### Exhibit

The KMWorld & Intranets and Enterprise Search Summit West exhibit, which offers free passes to the public, ran Tuesday evening, November 6, through Thursday afternoon, November 8, the first day of the two-day Taxonomy Boot Camp conference. There were about 50 exhibitors, mostly those providing enterprise search engines, but also a few multi-user taxonomy tools. Vendors included Microsoft, Google, Dow Jones, Autonomy, Schemalogic, Endeca, Convera, and FAST. While some of the products were for creating taxonomies (Wordmap, Synaptica, Data Harmony's Thesaurus Builder) and others were search engines with taxonomy development modules, all were priced and targeted at the multi-user level. There was nothing for the independent taxonomist. Those vendors providing taxonomy tools or modules, however, might also provide taxonomies. Therefore, the

independent taxonomist could consider some of the exhibitors as potential employers or contract clients.

At the exhibit on Wednesday and Thursday there were an additional six 15-minute presentations in a corner of the exhibit hall. Like the exhibit, access to these presentations was free, so one could easily spend a free day visiting the exhibitor booths and attending these mini presentations. Except for the two lunch break sessions, though, the exhibit hall presentations conflicted with the main conference sessions. I found the lunch break session "Taxonomy Management Tools" presented by *Michael Shulha* of Earley & Associates quite worthwhile.

## Networking

The conference provided a good opportunity to network. Since the conference is relatively new and not associated with any membership association, and since attendees came from such varied backgrounds, many attending for the first time, there was no sense of an inside, closely knit group. Instead, attendees were very open to introducing themselves to strangers during breaks and meals. Both the breakfast and lunch on

Friday featured optional discussion-themed round tables (getting started with a taxonomy, large scale taxonomies, tagging and metadata, etc.), which people could join if they wanted. Unfortunately, ITI does not provide a list of attendees' names, which would be beneficial for networking. This is because the conference has corporate sponsors, who, in addition to the exhibit vendors, would use such a list to send marketing literature to attendees.

There is an independent Yahoo discussion group, Taxonomy Community of Practice, through which some of the attendees (including myself), who had not met each other previously, discussed and arranged a dinner out at a restaurant together on Tuesday night. I also found a hotel roommate through this discussion group, and through her I met more interesting people.

Another benefit of having co-located conferences was simply having a much larger pool of people with whom to network, whether during the joint keynote session, the coffee breaks and meals, or the exhibit hall. For example, I met in the joint keynote session a knowledge management professional who had spoken at our local ASI chapter meeting last spring. Some attendees were registered for Taxonomy Boot Camp only, whereas others attended one of the two prior conferences as well.

The majority of conference attendees work in positions managing taxonomies used for information management and search within their large organizations, mostly companies but also a few from government agencies. These include the range of industries: finance, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, engineering, consulting, computers and software, etc. A smaller number were from media and publishing companies which are content providers. There were also a number of independent consultants in the taxonomy field. (It was with this latter group that I did the most networking.) Examples of attendees included people who oversaw the taxonomies for the video database of Fox Television, the historical images of General Motors, the public website of the healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente, and the intranet of Novell.

By a show of hands approximately half of the attendees had a background in library and information science. Others might have had business or technology backgrounds, which are other common paths to taxonomy

these days. The presenters came from across a similar spectrum of backgrounds and also included some of the software vendors.

## Worthwhile to Attend?

ITI offers various registration packages for different combinations of conferences and pre-conference workshops. Unfortunately, even the Taxonomy Boot Camp conference alone is rather pricey for the independent freelancer, at \$1095. This includes breakfasts, lunches, and one evening reception, but no dinners. A hefty volume of the printouts of all presentation slides was also included as part of the registration.

The Platinum pass, which includes admission to all conferences and a choice of morning and afternoon pre-conference workshops was \$1,995. The pre-conference workshops, some of which looked quite worthwhile (although I did not attend to verify) included, among other topics: "Taxonomy 101," "Developing a Taxonomy within an Enterprise Context," "Getting Started with Business Taxonomy Design," and "Taxonomies & Search: Using Taxonomies to Improve Search." Unfortunately, it was not possible to register for the pre-conference workshops alone or pre-conference workshops and Taxonomy Boot Camp without also the other two conferences of Enterprise Search Summit West and KMWorld & Intranets. The pre-conference workshops were held on Monday, whereas the Taxonomy Boot Camp conference did not start until Thursday, so it was assumed that one should attend the Tuesday and Wednesday conferences as well.

Conference presenters can attend the four days of conferences (excluding workshops) free. Be warned that proposals from first-time, unknown presenters might not get accepted, as I found out when my proposal was turned down in 2005. If you can get a presentation proposal accepted, though, this is an excellent deal.

If you can get an employer to subsidize your registration and/or travel, I highly recommend attending Taxonomy Boot Camp, whether you work on taxonomies already or merely have a curious interest. If you have to pay yourself, obviously you have to consider your own financial situation. If you live locally or have local friends or relatives to stay with,

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## ***Taxonomy Boot Camp (continued from page 33)***

then you wouldn't be paying much more for Taxonomy Boot Camp than for attending an ASI conference across the country with its flight and hotel expenses. (Since the Taxonomy Boot Camp is based in the convention center and attendees stay at various hotels, you don't miss networking by not staying in the "conference hotel.") If taxonomy work is a major component of your career, then I recommend attending at least once.

I met one freelance indexer member of ASI attending the conference, ***Victoria Agee***. She provided the following comments.

This was definitely a conference worth attending for anyone working with taxonomies, but the novice may find that they have to prepare in advance to get the most out of the sessions. Judging by the quality of the Boot Camp presentations, I think the preconference workshops on taxonomy would probably be of real value. It is unfortunate that this is difficult and costly to arrange due to the way the co-located conferences have been organized. The FAQs session on Taxonomies and Metadata was well done and helpful, but too short to bring the novice up to speed. Although this was one of the best organized conferences that I have attended, I'm not at all certain that this would prepare one 'to create and implement a taxonomy' as the advertising states. It certainly is a place to begin if you are wanting to be involved in taxonomy development. 

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**KEY WORDS**