Old Dogs, Engineers, and Rubik's Cubes

ThomasNet solves a customer experience puzzle using old knowledge in new ways

The adage that "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" has been taken to task probably ever since it was first uttered. ThomasNet.com turned that whole idea on its ear with the newest round of upgrades to its website in 2014. In essence, instead of trying to teach old dogs (in this case seasoned engineers) new tricks, ThomasNet invited them to dinner and picked their brains.

This is not meant to insult seasoned engineers by casting them in the "old dogs" slot; this is a purely an analogous reference and has nothing to do with their hygiene or eating habits. It has everything to do with leveraging the wealth of knowledge and experience these individuals possess to improve the user experience on the company's website.

The Rubik's cube of user experience

Another old adage says that, in business "If you're not moving forward [improving], you're moving backward." Unfortunately, this school of thought sometimes prompts change for change's sake. Not so in the case of ThomasNet, which has been reinventing itself ever since its inception in 1898.

The story began when Harvey Mark Thomas published a directory of industrial product information first known as *Hardware and Kindred Trades* and then the *Thomas Register of American Manufacturers*. Thomas's initial offering begat more than a century of success due in no small part to a willingness to change and improve to meet the evolving needs of procurement professionals and engineers who buy industrial and commercial products. Both the *Thomas Register* and its sister publication, the *Thomas Regional Directories*, have also been shrewd enough to take advantage of emerging technology and moved their databases to a digital format operating as ThomasNet.com.

In its current form, ThomasNet.com provides a free, cloud-based platform for supplier discovery and product sourcing as well as online catalogs; downloadable computer-aided design
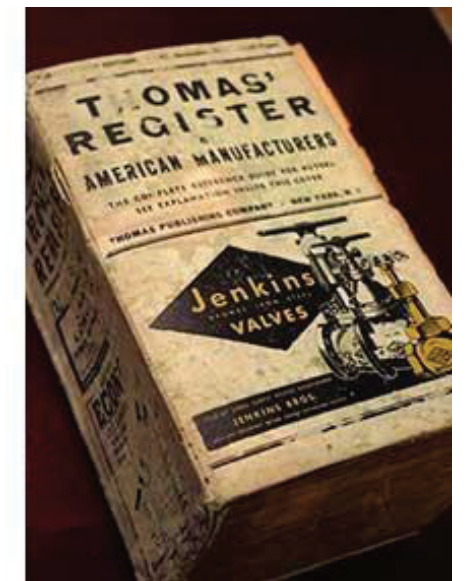
(CAD) models and drawings; custom quotes; a custom-manufacturing, job-shop finding service; news; and press releases. These build on the company's hallmark database of 700,000 North American manufacturers, distributors, and service providers. Many of these suppliers have provided in-depth profiles, which include capabilities, equipment lists, product information, brands carried, demographics, video plant tours, and product demonstrations. Not resting on the laurels of its digital birth, ThomasNet.com continues to adapt to satisfy the needs of modern users.

Gone are the days when simply knowing who could provide what was good enough. Long, long gone, and the demands of a global manufacturing environment have changed the user-experience riddle from a two-dimensional puzzle into a Rubik's Cube.

Users of ThomasNet.com vary greatly, ranging from Fortune 500 businesses and small and medium-size manufacturers, to government and military, to state universities. With such a wide cross section of site visitors come a wide variety of needs. Some of the needs are obvious, e.g., component specs and availability, and company profiles. Other needs may not be so apparent, e.g., relevant component periphery and relevant supplier certifications and organizational diversity.

Another challenge for ThomasNet.com is the fact that the people accessing the website vary greatly. They range from procurement and supply chain professionals to engineers, and from entrepreneurs to plant supervisors. How, then, to develop a website that can deliver exceptional customer experience for such a diverse customer base?

Meet the "old dogs"

ThomasNet.com's approach to creating such a successful user experience includes leaning on a "village of engineers" to develop and continually upgrade the company website. It draws on the shared experience of electrical and mechanical engineers to advise and support in their area of expertise.

Ed Edwards, Audience Outreach Manager-Thomasnet

"We have great relationships with thousands of trusted suppliers," says ThomasNet's audience outreach manager, Ed Edwards. "These relationships allow us to tap into a wealth of information possessed by their engineers as well as our own engineers on staff. The engineers have a unique knowledge of component usage that helps web designers develop an outstanding taxonomy and search structure for the site. Engineers can provide esoteric but relevant information. And that is huge for non-engineer users. It can provide insights into issues and raise their understanding of how components that they don't routinely source are specified."

New tricks

Realizing that simple graphic design face-lifts do not add real value for its customers, ThomasNet.com vice president, Tom Greco, has led the charge on several functional changes to the company's website resulting in significantly enhanced customer experience.

In the spring of this year, ThomasNet.com announced a relaunch of its upgraded website. **"**We work hand-and-hand with buyers from businesses big and small to understand their buying process," says Greco. "What we've uncovered are the difficulties they are having in supplier discovery and the deficiencies in tools they are using, like search engines, to support the process. The ThomasNet.com platform is continuing to evolve in both content and functionality to not only satisfy these unmet needs, but also save them time in the process."

Tom Greco, Vice President-Thomasnet

The new features reflect a true understanding of the evolving needs of 21st-century customers.
• Custom quotes: This new application features smart RFQ (request for quote) forms that allow buyers to easily define the capabilities they require from shops specializing in welding, cutting, finishing, fabricating, and other services. Completed RFQs are submitted to the ThomasNet.com engineering team, which acts on behalf of the buyer to identify up to five job shops qualified to handle the job.
• Supplier company diversity and certification/quality information: This feature eliminates buyers' needs to consult several resources to find suppliers to meet diverse spend goals, or to find companies with quality and other certifications. ThomasNet.com includes one of the largest databases of minority, woman-owned, veteran-owned, and other special-category businesses for direct and indirect spend. Users also can find companies classified by 80 different certifications or registrations, such as ANSI, ISO, Nadcap, SAE, ITAR, C-TPAT, FDA, FAA, and MIL-SPEC. They can access detailed supplier information, downloadable certificates, and other supporting proof of ownership and certification.
• A product sourcing application, which uses both proprietary search technology and product taxonomies to locate an exact product from more than 100 million items.

The relaunched site also includes a "shortlist" feature and a more balanced presentation of all applications, as well as a more comprehensive "first search" capability.

So it is that ThomasNet.com provides another example of using old knowledge in new ways to improve the quality of its customer experience. And without teaching old dogs new tricks or reinventing the wheel, ThomasNet.com has managed to pull together research specialists, designers, and engineers from across the globe to create something new, improved, and most important—very useful.