DIVING INTO THE DIGITAL AGE
BUDDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE LIBRARY

BY **David Cunnington**

Libraries add value by selecting published information that is relevant to their customers, making it physically accessible, and by assisting them to find information that will meet their unique subject interests. In the higher education sector, libraries also aim to develop information literacy skills for students to make them lifelong learners. Until recently this model of academic library services has operated within the paradigm of published paper products that are selected collaboratively, mostly by librarians and academics, secured in physical buildings, sometimes lent or made available for copying, with librarians acting as gatekeepers, mediators and instructors. This has been a successful, if sometimes constrained, environment for teaching and learning, and one that is familiar to all universities.

The rapid arrival of the digital and online revolution has given this paradigm a solid push. It has liberated libraries and the information transfer business by allowing these added values to move beyond the library's walls. No longer do customers have to come to the library, the library can now come to them. No longer are customers and librarians limited to what is stored within their physical collections. Libraries have moved from "ownership" to "access". They have moved from providing information 'just in case' to delivering it 'just in time'. The revolution has shaken the very foundations of the 'traditional' library.

There is a simplistic view that accompanies many revolutions. It is one of looming redundancies. However, the value-adding that libraries have always provided are today even more critical for information seekers: — selection, physical access, intellectual access. Libraries now perform an increasingly crucial role in filtering relevant resources from an ever-expanding published information resource that contributes to our civilisation's extra-somatic memory. Libraries are now capable of providing physical access to digital resources online, to anyone, anytime, anywhere. Librarians have an even greater role to play as "knowledge navigators" and "intellectual cartographers", describing and mapping these resources so that customers can make sense of this accumulated information and knowledge. Librarians have moved from being gatekeepers, to being gateway makers.

The reality of course is that libraries are in a transition period. The University of Melbourne Library, like most academic libraries, is not yet, and will never be, totally digital or virtual but 'hybrid'. While we wait for better online tools that will allow us to exploit our traditional added values, our customers are metaphorically "banging on the doors" wanting access to the complete digital library now. This has been the rationale for the development of the Buddy gateway at the University of Melbourne Library.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
WHY WE CHOSE "BUDDY"

Buddy n. colloq. comrade, mate.

One of the most often asked questions is: "Why did you call it Buddy?" We wanted something that would appeal to our undergraduates in particular, and decided that acronyms, classical references and fancy techno-names usually presented the Library or information technology view of information systems. Customer-focus for this Library means shifting away from the idea of training customers to use our "systems", towards designing services that enhance the way they actually use libraries.
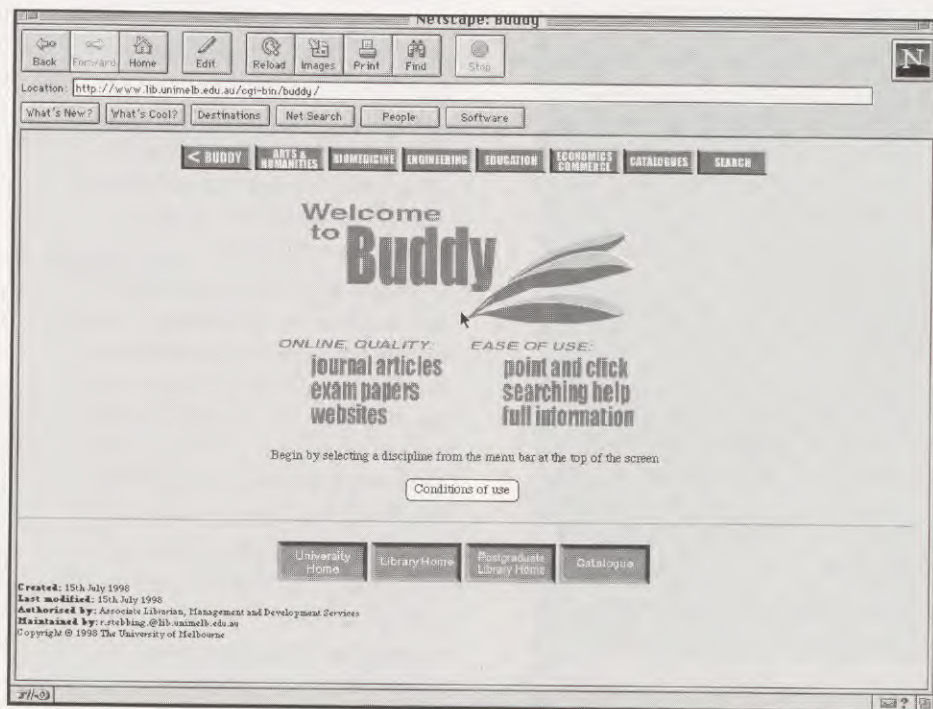
Buddy is a World Wide Web based gateway that provides access for the University of Melbourne community to the rapidly growing collections of digital resources: networked and standalone databases, full-text electronic journals, exam papers, web sites, external databases and local digital collections. Taking advantage of our customer's familiarity with the World Wide Web, Buddy is an "electronic shelf", providing physical access to information resources that have been selected to ensure a "tightness of fit" with the teaching, learning and research needs of our customers at the University. It is the first of its kind in Australian libraries.

Currently the Library provides over 50 Buddy machines in five of its largest libraries — Baillieu Arts and Humanities, Brownless Biomedical Library, Giblin Economics and Commerce Library, the Engineering Library, and the Education Resource Centre. An additional 30 Buddy machines will be installed in the newly renovated Lower Ground Floor of the Baillieu Library in 1998. And from mid-1998 anyone connected to the University network, either on campus or via dial-up, will have access to Buddy from laboratories, desktops and from home. Academics, researchers and students can, from their web browsers, easily find out what electronic resources are available from the Library, connect to them, and download or print the information they need.

Buddy uses simple web-based tools and scripting to provide direct physical links to around 2,500 of our electronic products. This is a standard approach for many libraries, although technically it presents a myriad of problems of connection and maintenance. The web-based Buddy has been developed out of our existing experience with a Windows based prototype that has been operating in five of our largest libraries since September 1996.

The real innovation is the capability of Buddy to provide intellectual access in this web-based environment. One of the common problems that information seekers report is the overwhelming

amount of information that is available. Even though a careful selection process has been applied by the time electronic resources appear on Buddy, the task of connecting quickly to the most appropriate title can still be difficult. Most information seekers, if they can, ask the librarian. Through experience, training and sheer day-to-day contact with customers and products, it is the librarians who know the resources, and who are skilled in adding value in the important "negotiating space" between customer and information. The main constraint in this model is the availability of humans at the time when the user realises that they are needed.

Buddy seeks to provide an online solution to this constraint by providing a tool where this knowledge can be made available at the time when it is needed. Buddy provides a framework for librarians (and ultimately academics,

researchers and students) to "map" their knowledge of information resources, and therefore make it available anytime, anywhere. Buddy does this in a number of ways to provide customers with access to the resources that are specific to their disciplines:

- Librarians construct menus of resources that are appropriate to each subject library. Customised pages are delivered to these libraries using subject profiles that are maintained by site librarians. This ensures that the resources presented match the unique subject perspective of customers from different disciplines. Once linked to a local Buddy site they can if they wish connect to any of the other subject Buddys. This means that they always have access to the local knowledge of the librarians and customers in that discipline.

- Librarians select the individual resources for these menus by choosing titles from the central Buddy database. Site profiles can be modified as often as needed depending on the feedback from customers about the

resources. This ensures that the most relevant electronic products are presented to the customer as soon as they connect to Buddy.

- Keyword descriptions of individual resources are made by the librarians at the site. Descriptions apply for a specific resource and menu item only, so that the same resource can be described differently depending on subject discipline. This ability to customise descriptions means that the customer is provided with information about a resource that is relevant to their own area of study.

- A remarks facility is available for each resource so that librarians — and eventually academics and students — can add natural language information about the resource, including recommendations and hints on the appropriateness of specific resources to local courses.

- In addition to this localised knowledge, Buddy also links from the specific resource to any instructional material that has been produced, either in-house, by publishers, or from any other quality source. This provides additional on-the-spot help for the customer on search strategies, syntax or other detailed information about the product.

Buddy has been designed using standard web programming that enables remote and customisable input from librarians. The central database is constructed by importing records, either from our existing catalogue or from available web-based lists. Buddy builds lists of records dynamically by interrogating incoming requests and then applying the appropriate subject profiles. This ensures that the records presented to customers contain authoritative catalogue descriptions and can be accessed simply by pointing and clicking in the web browser.

Customers can also create their own lists of electronic products using keyword searching of the database. This use of profiles and keyword searching of a centralised database provides a sustainable and easily maintainable system for

our Information Technology staff. The installation and configuration of new products and software upgrades is managed centrally by the Buddy programme, so that physical maintenance by our technical staff is minimal. Usage statistics are also gathered centrally and provide a very important set of data for use in the selection of resources. Customer comments can be made from any of the Buddy sites and both the comments and responses from Library staff are accessible to customers.

Buddy is now a recognisable gateway for accessing electronic products provided by the Library. More electronic resources are being added daily. Through the introduction of the prototype in 1996 Buddy already has acceptance as a "helper" in the learning process, both by customers and librarians. The new web-based Buddy will provide access to our electronic resources by complementing our existing catalogue until better tools are designed to "mass customise" the knowledge and expertise of librarians. At a time when libraries are more heavily used, have access to more resources, and face an uncertain financial future, Buddy is one way of delivering specialist knowledge in what continues be the intensely human activity of information transfer. ❖

David Cunnington is the Manager of Information Development and Marketing at the University of Melbourne Library and coordinator of the Buddy project. Since 1994 David has been involved with the introduction of the Internet and other electronic information resources into the services of the University of Melbourne Library.