VIGC, The Flemish Innovationcenter for Graphic Communications, A unique Network of Innovative Manufacturers and Users

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Introduction

The Flanders region has always had an affinity with the graphic arts industry. Already from the early days of printing, Flanders was in the center of the printing world. Christoffel Plantin was the first successful commercial printer (second half 16th century). In his print shop in Antwerp he published more than 2450 books.

And also now the Flanders region is important for the graphic arts. We have both important manufacturers of technology, like Agfa, Barco Graphics, Xeikon, Artwork Systems and world famous printers like Brepols, Carta Mundi, Proost.

The Beginning of VIGC

Although the graphic arts are quite important in the Flanders region, there has never been an institute for the graphic arts, like e.g. Fogra in Germany. Certainly in an ever faster moving industry, there is a need for information and guidance.

It was 1996 when the mayor of Turnhout gathered the printers located in his city. The European Union had decided to make funding available to this region to support the industry and with the graphic arts being the largest industry in Turnhout, the mayor wanted to do something for this industry.

After some discussion, it was decided to start with a center that would follow up on all new technologies and inform companies on the evolutions. It was also said that the center would assist companies with the implementation of new technology and with technical issues. For this reason, large investments were made in lab equipment.

For several reasons the initiators decided that VIGC would be a not for profit organization, with member companies. Already from the start there were manufacturers involved, next to the printing companies.

The Mission and Services of VIGC

The focus of VIGC is the whole value chain of graphic communication and everybody who participates in it. The mission of VIGC is to reinforce company competitiveness' through support of innovations, both in processes and in products. The ambition is to become the knowledge center for graphic communications.

To reach its goal, VIGC provides several types of services, every one of them covering one step in the process of innovation.

The first service is Trendwatch. New technologies are followed up and information is spread throughout the network. Either on a collective basis or individually. E.g. when somebody of the VIGC staff visits an important conference abroad, during the weeks after it, there are 'after parties'. These are presentations where the staff gives an overview of what they have seen and heard on the conference or exhibition. This can also be done on an individual basis. Even assignments to look for a specific subject are given.

These after parties are a perfect networking opportunity for both users and providers of technology. It is also a very cost effective way to stay on top of what is happening.

The second group of services is Training. Here VIGC fills in the existing gap off high-level, specialised trainings. Our main targets are the manufacturers and suppliers of technology. For this service VIGC partners with the Rochester Institute of Technology (US), the world reknowned institute.

VIGC also provides general seminars and multi-client studies on hot topics. Customs made trainings are another possibility.

Another group off services is Consultancy on the one hand, and Research on the other. Here we provide information to companies and assist them in implementation of new technology or in the research preceding it. In these services, our lab plays an important role.

GraphicBrain.com

Everybody is complaining about the information overload on one side and the difficulty to find the right information on the other. VIGC will fill this gap with its new, Internet-based service GraphicBrain.com. It is a knowledge management system, specifically oriented to the graphic arts industry, both to users and providers or developers of technology.

GraphicBrain.com consists of several parts. First there is a dedicated web spider. It spiders only those websites which are relevant to the graphic arts industry. Different from all the other search engines, our spider 'fetches' the entire website, not just the first 2 or 3

levels. And it is updated very frequently: press releases are spidered on a daily basis, the rest of sites on a weekly or monthly basis, dependent on the update frequency of the site.

GraphicBrain.com not only spiders all the 'commercial' sites, i.e. sites of providers of technology, it also spiders other interesting sites. These can be personal homepages or sites of organisations and institutes.

Next to these sites, GraphicBrain.com also fetches 'research related' sites. The research departments of big companies like e.g. IBM, Xerox, Microsoft, Philips, have their own sites where they publish research topics and findings. And there are of course lots of really interesting websites of universities where they publish research findings, reports, … These are also spidered and can be found in a special 'chapter' within GraphicBrain.com. For these sites GraphicBrain.com not only spiders html-pages (and all its variants), it also collects pdf-documents. A unique service!

The second part of GraphicBrain.com is the 'physical' database. During the existence of VIGC, we have downloaded hundreds of white papers, collected even more conference presentations, found executive summaries of interesting reports, … These are all stored in the database. It is our intention to get agreements with publishers to put their magazines in it, of course in a secured way.

The third part is discussion groups. They often contain very interesting information, but it is a hard job to find the right information… In discussion groups there really is an information overload. That's the reason why we use our powerful knowledge retrieval software to get the right information out of it.

Al this information is aimed both to users and providers of technology. With the build-in 'community' features (i.e. personal agents and virtual communities), people with the same interests can get into contact with each other.

For GraphicBrain.com VIGC has partnered with innovative companies. The hart of the system is provided by Autonomy, a spin-off of the University of Cambridge (UK). The asset management system behind GraphicBrain.com is MediaMine (Belgium). It uses a native xml-database to manage all the information. And the hosting is done by a specialised company, called Host-It (Belgium), which is directly connected to no less then 5 Internet backbones, with a bandwidth of more than 15 Mbps.

Conclusion

Although VIGC is still very young, it already provides a broad spectrum of services, both aimed at users and providers of technology. In this VIGC brings both parties together, to strengthen the development and the implementation of innovations.

Biography

Steven De Weirdt has a degree in psychology and communication sciences. He has been active in purchase and sale of second-hand printing machines worldwide for about 7 years and has joined VIGC as account manager in September 2000.