INFORMATION SEEKING PRACTICES OF A FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR: A CASE STUDY

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OUTLINE

- The Illustrator: "Merida"
- Information Needs
- Information Encountering and Information Seeking Strategies
- Formal vs Informal Information Channels
- Barriers to Finding Information
- Conclusion

THE ILLUSTRATOR: "MERIDA"

- Freelance illustrator living in Calgary, AB
- Graduated from Sheridan College in Oakville, ON with a B.A.A. in Illustration in 2012
- Currently working full-time in retail but hoping to support herself as a full-time illustrator
- Has found only five illustration jobs at time of the interview and only been paid for three

INFORMATION NEEDS

- Finding potential employers
  - Magazines – covers and illustrations for articles
  - Book and e-book covers
- Finding accurate information
  - Up-to-date contact information
  - Appropriate contact (editor vs art director)
- Finding appropriate channels for contacting potential employers
  - E-mail
  - Telephone
  - Postcards

EXAMPLE: *MODERN DOG MAGAZINE*

"I was literally just flipping through magazines at Chapters ... ones that had illustrations on the cover, or when I would just casually look through, if they, if I saw that they used illustrations at all, and then I would kind of judge whether it seemed like something that I could do, or that they would- it was like a stylistic thing, like they would wanna work with someone who does work like me? Um and then I would just copy down the, the information from the, the masthead at the front of the magazine and, um, then I would go to the website when I got home later and try to find uh contact info for the right people..."

MODERN DOG MAGAZINE CONT.

- Merida was familiar with the magazine from previous purchases and she specializes in dog illustrations so it was a good potential match

- Had previously emailed the editor inquiring after jobs and including sample artwork

- Editor contacted her and offered a full page illustration to accompany an article plus her photo and information under Contributors for that issue

Information Encountering

- Merida's methods are highly serendipitous, relying on chance and "encountering" the right information
- Information encountering: the unexpected discovery of useful or interesting information; occurs when someone finds information while going about their daily routine or while looking for other, unrelated information (Erdelez, 1999)
  - In contrast to information seeking which implies an active role in finding information
  - Way of taking advantage of an information-rich environment

Information encountering cont.

- Super-encounterers: those who "encounter" information on a regular basis and consider it an important part of how they find information (Erdelez, 1999)
  - May be embarrassed to admit to relying on such a serendipitous method for finding information, especially for important information
  - Merida laughed when describing her super-encountering, saying it didn't sound very professional
- Super-encounterers may be easily overwhelmed by abundant information and avoid environments or channels with "too much information"

INFORMATION SEEKING STRATEGIES

	Active	**Passive**
Directed (Purposive)	Searching	Monitoring
Undirected (Serendipitous)	Browsing	Encountering

Adapted from Oliphant (2014)

- Merida mainly relies on passive strategies
  - Monitoring social media for updates from peers
  - Encountering magazines with illustrations that would suit her style
  - Occasionally using more active methods like sending repeat emails to potential employers but attaching new work that might catch their attention

FORMAL CHANNELS

- Schooling
  - Business courses in third and fourth years of college
  - Co-op work experience in third year
  - Creative residency with Uppercase Magazine
- Ad agencies
  - Supplies the subscriber with contact information for hundreds or thousands of potential employers
  - Very expensive and potential legal complications with new Canadian corporate mailing list laws
- Agent
  - Someone to find her jobs and represent her in negotiations with employers
  - More commonly used for securing book cover deals

INFORMAL CHANNELS

- Information encountering
- Social media and networking sites
  - Tumblr preferred for ease of use and greater visual appeal
  - Twitter used occasionally, Facebook avoided for complications with ownership of images posted
- Networking with peers
  - Former classmates and other illustrators
  - Mainly occurs on social media
  - Merida's first illustration job obtained after a classmate posted a published illustration on Facebook and gave her the contact info for the publisher

INFORMAL CHANNELS CONT.

- Personal website
  - Merida has a website that functions as an e-portfolio
  - Can direct potential employers there both by email and on social media
- Etsy shop
  - Less to attract employers than potential customers
  - Has made some sales but very sporadic
- Booth at events
  - Craft expos, Artist Alley at conventions
  - Very expensive for very little gain, has mainly discontinued the practice

FORMAL VS INFORMAL CHANNELS

- Formal channels seen as "more professional" but carry greater risk
  - Higher expense of ad agency or agent
  - Greater affective or emotional risk, informal channels "less scary"
  - No guarantee of success with formal channels
- Informal channels less risky but much slower and rely more on chance
  - All of Merida's jobs were obtained through informal channels but only five jobs found in two years
  - Information encountering and researching publishers takes time which is limited by her full-time job

FORMAL VS INFORMAL CHANNELS CONT.

- Harris & Dewdney's (1994) 4th principle of information seeking: People tend to first seek help or information from interpersonal sources, especially from people like themselves
  - Merida's reliance on her friends and peers is unsurprising, particularly for someone new to the field
  - She has considered moving to more formal channels but unsure of the risks involved

BARRIERS TO FINDING INFORMATION

- External uncertainty
    - Possible outcomes are known but not the probabilities for each outcome; aim to find information that will increase probability of predicting the outcome (Kamal & Burkell, 2011)
    - An ad agency would supply Merida with many potential employers but they may not be employers who would be suited to her particular style of illustration
    - The contact info may also not be correct, forcing her to spend extra time double-checking
    - Some of Merida's peers have subscribed to ad agencies but had little success, making her doubt their usefulness

Barriers cont.

- Information overload
  - Formal channels like ad agencies would increase the information she finds, but may be overwhelming
  - Increasing her presence on social media may also lead to overwhelming amounts of information to sort through
  - Bawden & Robinson (2009) suggest carefully managing your information environment to avoid information overload by creating a "personal information management style"
  - Merida has done this by limiting her social media presence and avoiding channels that would present her with more information than she can currently handle

Barriers cont.

- Information scatter
  - The information Merida needs comes from a wide variety of sources and she may need to look in several places to verify what she finds
    - Magazine → Magazine website → Art director's personal website → Social media account
  - "Sometimes... you'll find a magazine that looks really good, but you just can't find the information cuz like they don't really want unsolicited people, so even when you go online, like you can follow their Twitter handle or something but that's not really that effective."
  - Ad agency subscription would likely decrease this problem but may add other problems instead

Conclusion

- Merida is aware that her information seeking strategies may not be sufficient to achieving her goal of supporting herself as a full-time illustrator
  - Still considering an ad agency despite the risks
- However since the interview, she has found several more jobs and the steadier work may lead her to continue her passive and serendipitous practices
- With more experience she may put more faith in formal information channels and be able to expand her business but for now she seems content

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QUESTIONS?