

Input! Input!



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By Ken Garner

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In the classic 1986 Film "Short Circuit" the main character is a cute Robot with an acute thirst for knowledge known only as 'Number 5'.

http://www.dvdreview.com/fullreviews/short_circuit.shtml

One of Robot number 5s most engaging traits is that whenever he stumbles across anything interesting he rushes off enthusiastically to collect and index the data with cries of "Input! Input!".

Robots designed to collect and index data actually exist but they are not made of exotic metals, they are software programs and are used by Search Engines to gather information about the relevance of your web site to a particular search term. These Robots (sometimes called spiders or crawlers) are smart but not very selective. Unless you provide unambiguous ground rules for visiting Search Engine robots, excluding them from areas you don't want them to enter, then every file on your web site will be perceived as "Input!" and is likely to get indexed.

"But", I hear you ask, "I want to get indexed by Search Engines, why is this a problem"?

Indexing everything sounds superficially smart, however as part of a coherent web site promotion and Search Engine optimization strategy it has a number of important disadvantages.

* Search Engine spiders should be actively discouraged from visiting areas

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where sensitive information might be stored.

* Indiscriminately indexing everything can seriously dilute the relevancy of your web sites overall theme and can produce a sub-optimal rank in Search Engine listings.

* Allowing a Search Engine spider to index everything can even inadvertently lead to the perception by some of the Search Engine that your web site contains spam, this can lead to your site being blacklisted.

* For multilingual web sites it's imperative to focus English language robots onto the relevant English language pages and to direct robots from international Search Engines, who might be looking for Spanish, German or French language resources, to the appropriately localized content areas of your site.

* Search Engine robots can only "read" text. Dynamic content or graphical components cannot be read or indexed, rendering your site effectively invisible to Search Engines.

* Some robots "rapid fire" requests causing severe, server loading problems which can detract from your visitors browsing experience and ultimately cause loss of business.

The answer to this problem lies in having a Robot exclusion file on your web server.

Robot exclusion files, normally in the form of "robots.txt" are ASCII text files which reside in the document root directory of web servers and are used to set access permissions and control the actions of robots or spiders. Most of the major US and international Search Engines deploy spiders which look for a robots.txt file during their visit to a web site. There is an agreed industry standard for robots.txt files and, in order to work as anticipated, robots.txt has to be correctly formatted and placed in the proper location on the web server. Once uploaded to your server robots.txt is utilized to notify individual spiders about which elements of a web site cannot be visited and should not be made available on the public Internet. Used in conjunction with Search Engine optimization tools and/or services robots.txt can significantly enhance your sites chances of that all-important first page listing on the major US and international Search Engines by focusing individual spiders on specific content.

Although only a small ASCII text file, robots.txt enables a significant degree of fine tuning to be applied to your Search Engine optimization program. Used intelligently robots.txt can do a big job, significantly improving your knowledge about, and control of, visiting Search Engine robots. This is particularly the case where a web site owner either wishes to deliver specific content optimized for a particular Search Engine, or has paid for an accelerated Search Engine listing service where it would be useful to track the activity of the robot associated with that specific paid-for service.

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Just as Robot Number 5 gathered more and more input and transformed this data into useful information, so web site owners can use the data generated by the interaction between robots.txt, visiting spiders and their web logs to gain significant competitive advantage.

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Take It or Leave It ... But Get It

By Nan S. Russell

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The expense was substantial. An immersion workshop with twelve participants sharing a common goal to hone their skills. With nervous eagerness like kindergarteners embracing school, we received input, critique, and suggestions about our work. Some of the feedback I used. Some of it I didn't. But all of it was helpful.

I haven't always viewed feedback that way. At times in my career, I've taken it more like a personal indictment than a helpful gauge; an intruder I needed to defend against, rather than input I needed to evaluate. I've even found myself akin to a workshop colleague who said he wanted input, but when he got responses different from what he expected, he argued and debated and explained. What he wanted was praise or input he agreed with, not honest reactions.

You see it's not enough to ask for feedback. You have to be open to receive it. After three days of our colleague's defensiveness, any willingness to offer anything but cursory input was stomped out. His argumentative actions lost him an opportunity for connection with fresh voices and new input. And we lost an opportunity to practice giving helpful feedback with authentic insights and thoughtful reflection.

I learned a painful lesson about seeking feedback in my first management position. Given a large assignment, I was proud of what I produced, certain it would be received as an outstanding product. Instead I discovered my work was mediocre at best and significantly flawed because I failed to seek feedback and assessment from the end users along the way. Relying only on my own thoughts and perceptions was a big mistake.

Over the years in the corporate world, I learned to view feedback as data. The more data I got, the more information I had to improve what I was working on. Realizing I was in charge of how I used that feedback data, I learned to seek it. Feedback is opinion; not fact. It's something to evaluate; not blindly accept.

But, I find when several people have the same perception, it's good to listen. When I get insights I hadn't thought about, it's good to consider them. When input is mixed, it's good to follow my instincts. But when people provide feedback with a hatchet, finding only fault rather than offering ideas for

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improvement, it's good to look at it with distant curiosity.

Bottom line: if you want to be winning at working you must learn to seek and offer well-intentioned feedback. I think of it like the Sicilian proverb: "Only your real friends will tell you your face is dirty." Let input, suggestions, and feedback be real friends at work.

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Russell has spent over twenty years in management, most recently with QVC as a Vice President. Currently working on her first book, Nan is a writer, columnist, small business owner, and instructor

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