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The Research Factor

by Susan Hodara

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If we want to speak to people, we need to know their language. In order to design for understanding, we need to understand design. — **Erik Spiekermann**

As a freelance journalist, I have become a temporary expert on subjects I'd barely considered before accepting assignments to write about them. I've delved into lawn furniture restoration and learned more than I thought existed about environmentally-sound dry cleaning options. I know the difference between a djembe and a djun djun, the price range of a haircut in Westchester County, New York, and as much as I could discover about Ralph Lauren without actually speaking with him or anyone close to him.

The stage of my work that enables me to develop such eclectic expertise—and thereby to write my articles—is research. It is a stage that exists in many disciplines: the process by which one becomes acquainted with a subject intimately enough to make it the focus of one's work. Research for this end involves not only the quest for information—via Google, print media, interviews, travel—but also the digestion of that information, its assimilation into one's consciousness, so that it becomes usable fodder. Research is the input and understanding that necessarily precedes satisfactory output.

My research for this column involved questioning experts in different fields about their own techniques of and attitudes toward researching. Ben Rubin is a sound designer and multimedia artist who directs EAR Studio, a multimedia design and technology firm in Manhattan that he founded in 1993. His most recent piece was "Listening Post," a collaboration with Mark Hansen—a statistician who is a professor at UCLA—that was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2002-2003. Martha Schwartz is a landscape architect and owner of the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Martha Schwartz, Inc. since 1990. Recent projects include Swiss Re's headquarters in Munich, Germany; the Mesa Art and Entertainment Center in Mesa, Arizona; and the award-winning Jacob Javitz Plaza in New York City. She also teaches landscape architecture at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. My husband, Paul Hodara, is the president of NetWave Technologies, a New York City-based communications firm specializing in computer network design and implementation.

I asked them each to describe the ways they research, and with each response, I countered, "How?" How do you find material? How do you look at it? How do you store it? How do you use it? My goal was for them to articulate as precisely as possible the way they garnered information from external sources and transformed it into workable knowledge.

Well before this questioning, however, my awareness of my own approach to research heightened and I began deconstructing my personal methods. Over a period of months, I noticed activities and systems that combine culling, sorting and absorbing. The creation of folders—on my computer for Word files and e-mail, and a manila folder for printouts and other papers—ushers the project into my life. I begin to accumulate material from the Web that I cut and paste into a single, expanding Word document. I create more Word files as I transcribe my handwritten notes from the interviews I conduct. Then I print hardcopy versions of all these that I read and reread with highlighter in hand.

I realized that my process involves reducing what initially seems like an infinite (and intimidating) amount of information to a finite group of typed and stapled pages, and that doing so is an integral part of getting my feet wet and allowing my growing knowledge to permeate my thoughts. As this occurs, I am making connections and drawing conclusions, and eventually I start assembling sentences in my mind. This is my segue from researching to the task of writing.

This narrowing down and making tangible is a process Ben Rubin uses when integrating the material he has gathered in his research. He called it "reorienting information."

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He described his technique when working on "Memory and Hope," his 1997 sound collage that is permanently installed in the central rotunda of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in lower Manhattan. After interviewing 60 Holocaust survivors, he said, "I had hundreds of hours of tape that I transcribed word for word. I ended up with more than 1,000 pages of transcripts.

"Then I attacked it with a highlighter, and when I finished, I passed it around to several other people involved in the project and they highlighted it, too. In this way, we identified the sections that stood out as meaningful or useful. I asked my interns to cut out the highlighted areas, noting the page number and interview on each, and these I sorted into piles in maybe half a dozen topic areas. Then using the kind of glue stick that can be easily peeled, I stuck the pieces on a big board and started rearranging them. These scraps were the physical incarnation of what ended up becoming the piece."

This physicality is particularly important to Rubin because his primary medium is digital audio. "It's inaccessible," he said. "You can't see it, you can't lay it out visually." His paper scraps, he continued, provided the assurance of the tangible: "I'm more comfortable in a world where conservation of matter holds true. You can move the pieces around, you can even put them in the out bin, but they still exist. You don't get that feeling with digital information."

This attitude extends to the online information Rubin acquires using Google—a tool he relies upon and describes as "embedded in the research process," but one he also calls "a diabolical trap for me. I get lost in it; I always want to know what's around the next corner."

To assist in coping with the abundance of potential sources online, Rubin is working with Mark Hansen on software that, he explained, "can cycle through the results of a Google search and filter them. We might end up generating a 5,000-page document that's entirely unformatted, and then we are able to sort it based on a variety of criteria relating to the text—maybe quotation marks, or numbers. It's the linguistic equivalent of a centrifuge: we pulverize the search results, pull them apart, and then analyze them to find their essence."

As landscape architecture is explicitly physical, Martha Schwartz's research begins with the physical elements of her project site. "It is absolutely essential that I spend time on the site," she said. "I have to walk it, read it, experience it, before I have a sense of what is to happen there."

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Susan Hodara

Susan Hodara is a freelance journalist who contributes regularly to the New York Times and whose work has appeared in salon.com, Parents, a Showtime Web site, and numerous other publications. She serves as Consulting Editor for Family Communications, which publishes four New York-area monthly parenting newspapers. As Editor-in-Chief of Manhattan-based Big Apple Parent, she received a Best Editorial award from Parenting Publications of America for her monthly column. Hodara also teaches memoir writing at the Northern Westchester Center for the

Arts, and is currently working on a collection of short memoirs. She lives with her husband and two teenage daughters in Westchester County, New York.

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