

Possibilities Abound

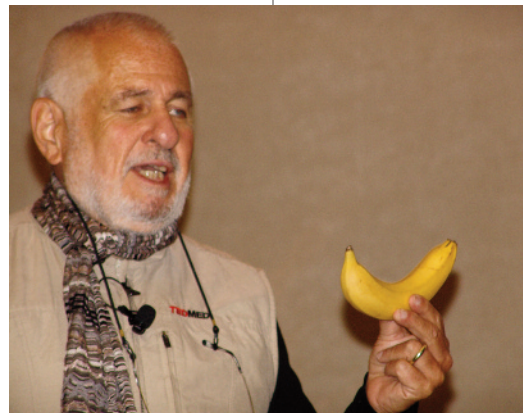
by Thom Haller

Thom Haller, the *Bulletin's* associate editor for information architecture, is a speaker, writer, user advocate and teacher of principles of performance-based information architecture and usability. Since 1998, Thom has taught classes on architecting usable web/Intranet sites. As a teacher, Thom enables students to structure information so people can find it, use it and appreciate the experience. He can be reached at thom@thomhaller.com

Richard Saul Wurman rose from his chair, extended his arm and presented a banana. “How do you get to the fruit?” he asked. The speaker looked out at the roomful of information architects attending the 11th annual IA Summit, where he was presenting the keynote address.

The 75 year-old champion for understanding described the challenges of opening the banana from the top, where it had been attached to a stem. He then presented another option, opening the banana from the bottom – a surprising choice for me, but not for the European at my left. Why would so many of us fight to open the banana from the top? “Because we always do it that way,” suggested Wurman. (Well, many of us do.) We don’t consider other options. “Why not?” Wurman mused aloud.

Wurman holds a special place for those who practice information architecture. He coined the term in 1976, in part as a response to what he identified as limited perceptions of the word *design*. The term *information architect* grew from his desire to know rather than already knowing; and from his ignorance and curiosity rather than his intelligence and assumptions. So it’s not surprising that when Wurman presented keynote remarks at the recent IA Summit, he spoke of information architecture within the framework of a journey from not knowing to knowing. “That’s the magic of this business,” he told us.



How do we capture this magic? Passion makes a good beginning, according to Wurman. “The job is laced with a desire to systematically communicate to another human being.” Curiosity is also essential. “Ask questions,” says Wurman. “If you discover things don’t work, ask.”

Wurman also reminded the audience of the inherent structures in information: location, alpha/numerical structures, time, categories and hierarchies. “If there are more than five, I have yet to find them,” stated Wurman, but he says he’s still interested in looking.

New technologies delight him, and he shared his perceptions of the iPad. “It’s not a book. It’s not a collection of pages.... You don’t have to have the metaphor of a page in your head.” He went on, “We are in the first moments of doing something.”

What does it mean to do something? We can start at that place of *not knowing*. What structures exist in the heads of others? What can we do to slice through complexity? How can we apply user-centered techniques to learn ways to help others understand? Can we find a better way to open a banana?

Wurman’s excitement in structuring information builds from his focus on understanding. When we overcome the fear of *not knowing*, possibilities abound. ■

Richard Saul Wurman presents a metaphor at the 2010 Information Architecture Summit.