

Gene Smith

Tagging: People-Powered Metadata for the Social Web

Book Review

—Reviewed by

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Index Terms—*Classification systems, information management, metadata, tagging.*

In *Tagging: People-Powered Metadata for the Social Web*, Smith provides an overview of a form of information management called tagging. Smith is a principal of nForm, a user experience consulting firm based in Canada; he specializes in social classification systems, emergent information architecture, and interaction design. The book is a practical guide with a twofold goal: (1) to help the reader understand tagging—what tagging is and how and why it is used and (2) to provide information on the technical design of tagging systems. Smith's primary targets are web designers, developers, information architects, user experience developers, and product managers.

The book consists of seven chapters that sequence the information from the general to the specific, as well as three appendices containing case studies that illustrate tagging applications. Each chapter begins with an outline of “What You’ll Learn in This Chapter” and ends with a set of summary points. These are extremely useful since they provide bookends for the content of the chapter. This organizational device is also found in each of the three cases. Smith also uses a device called “Notes” to provide helpful suggestions, including suggestions for further reading.

Chapter 1, “What is Tagging?” provides the reader with an overview of the concept. Smith explains how tagging works, presents a clear model of tagging systems, and offers perspectives on tagging from information architecture, social software, and personal-information management. Smith also provides a rationale for why tagging is important. Even a reader who does not fall into one of the

book's target groups will find this information interesting. I do not fall into one of the target groups; however, I have used tagging and wondered about it when using social networking systems. Smith communicates effectively both textually and visually. His use of figures, including screen shots from social networking and commercial sites, reinforces the discussion.

In the second chapter, Smith explores tagging's value for both individuals and organizations. Tags can help you organize personal information. The examples provided demonstrate that not only does tagging assist an individual with managing information, it can help someone collaborate and have fun, or engage in play. For example, Smith explains the “Squared Circle” game on Flickr, where individuals take photos of round objects and crop them centered in a square. These photos are then tagged “squared circle” so that one can view all such contributions. In addition to an individual return on investment, Smith outlines seven business benefits of tagging. These benefits include increasing employee participation, making data easier to find, and fostering innovation. Smith points out that in order for tagging to have value, it must be aligned with the goals of users.

Chapter 3 discusses the architecture or framework of the tagging system. Included are concepts that the reader would consider when designing a tagging system. These include rules about users, system membership, privacy, and the control of tagging. The chapter concludes with a set of real-world examples as well as a list of tagging pitfalls, including lack of interest in the system and the possibility of a small number of users taking over the system.

Chapter 4 provides the reader with a more detailed discussion of metadata or “data about data.” It is Smith's position that tags can function as metadata. There are three categories of metadata: (1) descriptive, (2) administrative, and (3) structural. Metadata is a hot topic in a number of business

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fields because it provides information on our purchases and our internet behavior. Smith also introduces the reader to taxonomies, controlled vocabularies, facets, and folksonomies. I was not familiar with these concepts, and the examples and discussion were very clear. This is a densely packed chapter and, as a result, a reader who is initially unfamiliar with the concepts described may wish to revisit it.

Chapter 5 discusses navigation and visualization. Smith explains that tag navigation is different from other navigation with which one might be familiar. For example, a book has a beginning and an end; each page has a top and a bottom. We navigate from beginning to end, top to bottom. When driving, we turn right or left. Tags, however, involve "sifting." Individuals might move very differently in the system. Despite this, the space must be designed in order to be used. This chapter discusses such design issues. New concepts explained in this chapter include tag clouds, pivot browsing, filtering, and geotagging. Once again, these are technical terms; even as a novice, though, I was able to understand the concepts.

In Chapter 6, Smith discusses interfaces. This chapter will likely be challenging for readers who do not design systems. Many additional concepts are introduced; for instance, the reader learns that one has a choice on the pattern of the tag interface. The choice of interface may be based on

the speed and simplicity one wants in the system. In addition, Smith also provides suggestions for tag management.

In Chapter 7, "Technical Design," Smith discusses databases and how one would build the tagging system in a database. I have never used one of the databases he discusses and could not take away much from this chapter given my current skill level. However, for readers who have experience with a database, such as Access or Oracle, this chapter will make sense.

Finally, each of the three appendices presents a case study that focuses on either social bookmarking, media sharing, or personal-information management. I liked that Smith provided three varied cases since I suspect that individuals designing tagging systems will find at least one of the cases particularly relevant to the type of work they do.

I believe the book succeeds in accomplishing its goal. In a concise presentation, Smith provides the reader with a practical overview of tagging and system design. Any difficulties I had with the concepts are totally related to my lack of experience in system design. Yet, even though my background does not place me in one of the target groups that Smith was trying to reach with this book, I learned a lot about tagging, and I enjoyed the trip.