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ONLINE DATABASES

Dialog Finds a New Home

By Carol Tenopir

THE BIGGEST INDUSTRY NEWS this summer was the announcement that ProQuest had acquired Dialog from Thomson Reuters. Dialog was beginning to look like an unwelcome stepchild as new strategies by Thomson Reuters were moving the firm away from traditional databases and library markets. ProQuest, by contrast, has a solid foundation in both areas and has been aggressively building with new acquisitions and products.

Still, the news came as a surprise to most of us, as the change happened remarkably fast—rarely is a major acquisition rumored, announced, and completed all within a month.

Dialog, the grandfather of online database systems that included all subject areas, was once the main online service in all types of libraries. From its pre-Internet beginnings 40 ago at NASA and the then Lockheed Missiles and Space Company to its recent increasingly uncomfortable home at Thomson Reuters, Dialog has retained a singular focus on aggregating multidisciplinary databases for power searchers.

Shared core values

Suzanne BeDell, who heads the Dialog division at ProQuest, told me that “Dialog is a great fit with the core values of ProQuest. Both organizations are focused on partnering with librarians and information professionals and on increasing global presence.” Perhaps even more important, both ProQuest and Dialog “understand the value of aggregating authoritative content from many sources.”

The core functions of scholarly article aggregators that traditionally serve the library market include the selection of articles from myriad journal titles, indexing, abstracting, and power searching.

Throw in special value-added features such as identification and searching of tables and figures on ProQuest’s Illustrata

and linking to full text, and you will get a sense of the full and unique power of the aggregation services that librarians, ProQuest, and Dialog value.

Both companies were built on a belief in the importance of indexing and in the strength of precision searching. They bring a common conviction that structured information and high-quality indexing help users find the information they need—information of greater quality than the free information on the web—more efficiently.

This goes beyond indexing and searching, as, according to BeDell, “for many of our files, the selection of an article or paper to be included in a database such as Sociological Abstracts is as important as the indexing applied to the article.”

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She feels that “as information explodes, this element of editorial selection by experts becomes even more important for high-end research, especially research in large corporations driven to become even more profitable and efficient.”

Bridging markets

ProQuest is strongest in the academic and public library markets, while Dialog’s strength is in the corporate and government research arenas. Although the key focus for Dialog “will continue to be in the corporate R&D market,” said Libby Trudell, senior VP and longtime Dialog leader, “we will want to assess the potential for drawing on Dialog to expand the content sources available to ProQuest’s academic customers.”

On the other hand, BeDell sees as “no-brainers” some opportunities “like offering Illustrata Natural Sciences and Illustrata Technology for patent prior art search” to Dialog’s corporate and government customers. The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office already of-

fers Illustrata to its patent examiners. Some of ProQuest’s unique full-text content also will be of interest to Dialog’s customers, said Trudell. Dialog plans to renew its focus on traditional areas of expertise, such as intellectual property and competitive intelligence applications, and in the pharmaceutical and biomedical markets.

Investment welcome

Although some core business functions such as legal, human resources, financial services, and technology infrastructure will be shared, Dialog will operate as a separate business unit within ProQuest, with offices remaining in both Cary, NC, and Ann Arbor, MI.

BeDell thinks it is “too early to tell

whether the systems will remain separate or merge.” Although “there may be opportunities for addressing content duplication in the future,” BeDell continued, “my first goal is to stabilize Dialog before we start looking for synergies.”

Trudell already finds the culture of ProQuest “remarkably akin to Dialog.” “I feel very much at home with the ProQuest organization and know all my Dialog colleagues feel the same,” she said.

After several years of neglect in a company that was growing away from the library and scholarly market, BeDell promises that “the biggest change, which impacts everything from the sales organization to product development, is that there will be a focus on investment in Dialog as a strategic business unit, with access to the functional areas and resources available from ProQuest.”

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