



3-1-2002

Information Today Stands Alone

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Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "Information Today Stands Alone" (2002). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs/434

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Information Today Stands Alone

MORE THAN A DECADE ago I wrote about three family-owned publishers that served online information professionals (see "The Database Press," *LJ* 3/1/89, p. 56-57). Online Inc., MecklerMedia, and Learned Information Inc. each focused on the online community through conferences, journals, books, and other publications.

Now, just a decade later, only Information Today Inc. (the name of Learned Information Inc. since 1995) has stuck totally with the online information professional. In fact, Information Today (see www.infotoday.com) has purchased many of the information professional products from its former competitors, while Online Inc. and MecklerMedia have gone in other directions.

Founders Thomas Hogan Sr. and Roger Bilboul have stayed at the helm as president/chief executive officer and chair, respectively, throughout the acquisitions and changes. Hogan tells me "rightly or wrongly, we have always had faith in the future of librarians and other information professionals, and we have staked our future largely on the belief that this profession will survive and prosper. Obviously, there are many changes taking place in the profession, but that's really a good thing for publishers and conference organizers. For one reason or another, most of our competitors abandoned this market or they relegated it to a much lower priority."

Growing journals

When Information Today purchased *Online* from Online Inc. in October 2001, that made Information Today the only publisher of journals for

online searchers. In its 20 years, *Online* has become the most important magazine of its kind. *Online* publishes both in-depth articles and newsy updates and commentary. Information Today retained the current editor, Mary Dee Ojala, and the magazine retains the mix of articles about Internet, commercial online, and technical topics. Several years earlier, Information Today had

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bought *MultiMedia Schools* magazine from Online Inc. when Online decided to stop targeting school librarians.

In 1995, even before the purchases from Online Inc., Information Today picked up MecklerMedia's *Database Searcher* magazine and transformed it into the new *Searcher*. The most interesting thing about the magazine was editor Barbara Quint, who still serves as a watchdog of the online industry and an articulate spokesperson for online professionals. Likewise, *Computers in Libraries* was bought from MecklerMedia in 1995, and *KMWorld* magazine for knowledge management professionals was purchased from Bill Communications in 1999.

These magazines join Information Today's own periodicals—notably the industry newspapers *Information Today* and *Link-Up*—to make Information Today the voice for online searchers in all types of libraries. According to Hogan, "One of our objectives as a company has been to have products that serve virtually every sort of librarian—corporate, public, academic, government, schools, etc."

Coordinating conferences

Many Information Today magazines have a tie-in to an annual conference. *KMWorld* magazine came with the *KMWorld* conference. The *Computers in Libraries* Conference & Exhibition, which is held every spring in Washington, DC, was part of the Meckler purchase. Hogan says the revenue for this conference doubled in the first year Information Today took it over, due to a deliberate strategy: "First, we kept the price of a registration low enough that budget-conscious information professionals could afford to come, and we offered significant group discounts. Second, we focused most of our programming on the Internet and how it was affecting libraries and librarians."

This strategy was so successful Information Today launched a similar conference on the West Coast every autumn. From the beginning in 1997, the Internet Librarian Conference and Exhibition was an instant success. The name at first was to be "Computers in Libraries West." Ironically, Alan Meckler suggested Information Today use the name Internet in the conference title—the right decision at the right time. Now the conference is branching overseas with the Internet Librarian International meeting held in London in the spring.

New York, New York

Information Today's longest running conference is the New York Online Meeting, brainchild of online guru Martha E. Williams of the University of Illinois and held every May for more than 20 years. Last year even that conference was reorganized to combine three meetings into one—the renamed InfoToday meeting now includes National Online, KnowledgeNets, and E-Libraries. Attendees can go to sessions from just one or all three of the meetings. InfoToday 2002 will be held in New York from May 14-16. (Online Inc. no longer runs a general online meeting, but it does serve online searchers with its "Web Search University" series of smaller training workshops.)



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I asked Hogan if he thinks face-to-face conferences still have a future now that many people are reluctant to travel or face reduced travel budgets. Even though the sessions in late 2001 "were significantly impacted by the recession and by the tragedy of September 11," Hogan says he still believes in live conferences and exhibitions. "People still need to have interaction with others in their profession, and people still need to get out and hear from vendors and other experts."

Information Today has no plans to cut any of its conferences and is, in fact, looking at opportunities for additional meetings. At the same time, Hogan tells me that Information Today is looking at expanding into online conferences to extend its in-person events. Look for the first one later this year.

Dick Kaser, the former executive director of the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services (NFAIS), joined Information Today in 2001 as vice president of content. He will be responsible for the content of all periodicals and pro-

gramming of all Information Today conferences.

Newly added directories

Conferences and magazines have been the most visible Information Today products, but that may be changing. Late in 2001 Information Today made a deal with Cambridge Information to purchase eight directories formerly published by R.R. Bowker. These include such high-profile titles as *Literary Market Place*, *American Book Trade Directory*, *Library Resource Guide*, and *American Library Directory*. This purchase is not Information Today's first entry into the directory business, but it is by far the biggest one. (Hogan says Information Today "increased [its] revenue base by 60 percent in one fell swoop.") To ensure continuity, Information Today kept the entire editorial staff and appointed a longtime Bowker staff member to be editorial director of the directories unit.

Before the Bowker purchase, Information Today's highest profile directory was *FullText Sources Online (FSO)*, pur-

chased in 1998 from BiblioData. Donald Hawkins, who worked many years at AT&T, is *FSO*'s editor-in-chief and product manager. I've always been a fan of *FSO* in print—it is a great source to find all the places where any periodical title is available online—and now a web version of *FSO* is also available. At this time the production and content of the new directories will be kept separate from *FSO*, and since the former Bowker directories and other Information Today directories are on a different production system, synergistic products will have to wait.

Information Science Abstracts

Don Hawkins also manages *Information Science Abstracts (ISA)*. (In fact, Hawkins came to Information Today with *ISA* in 1998.) He says that the editorial side of *ISA* is a three-person, telecommuting operation—something that likely couldn't happen in a bigger company and is certainly a product of the Internet age.

From Pennsylvania he logs in the journals to be indexed; a contractor in North Carolina does the indexing and abstracting; and Lynn Murray from her home in Virginia edits indexing records. She then sends them back to Hawkins for the final production of the online versions for Dialog and SilverPlatter. (Murray prepares the PDF file for the print version.) All of this editorial work is supported by staffers (marketing, graphics, fulfillment, etc.) at Information Today's New Jersey offices.

Expanding book publishing

Almost from the beginning Information Today had a small book publishing operation, which specialized in library and information science books. For over a decade Information Today has been the official publisher of all books and conference proceedings for the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) and has done the same for the American Society of Indexers since 1997.

In 1998 the book publishing division greatly expanded when Information Today acquired Online Inc.'s book publishing operation, CyberAge Books. Information Today has kept the key staffers—an important part of a successful strategy. Online Inc.'s book editor, John Bryans, ultimately became editor-in-chief of Information Today's entire book division. When Bryans took on these responsibilities, Information Today was publishing

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fewer than ten books per year. Last year was the biggest period ever, with 23 new books and eight titles reprinted.

For such a relatively small operation, it is surprising that CyberAge Books took the top spot in *LJ*'s recent Computer Book Best Sellers (see *LJ* 12/01, p. 96). Chris Sherman and Gary Price's *The Invisible Web: Uncovering Information Sources Search Engines Can't See* was the top-selling computer

title in 2001, and another CyberAge title (Ran Hock's *The Extreme Searcher's Guide to Web Search Engines*, 2d ed.) came in at number 18.

Some titles scheduled for 2002 that are destined to be big sellers include *Naked in Cyberspace: How To Find Personal Information Online* (2d ed.) and *Net Crimes & Misdemeanors: Outmaneuvering the Spammers, Swindlers, and Stalkers Who Are Targeting You Online*.

CyberAge also publishes the "Super Searcher" series that helps online searchers with tips and techniques from experienced online searchers in all types of companies and libraries. The series is up to about a dozen titles now, with recent additions to help information professionals improve their techniques in searching for information on global business, primary sources, mergers and acquisitions, health and medicine, and journalism and news. This series is one of the few products that assumes a knowledge of the basics of searching—it is where experienced searchers can go to get advanced tips from the subject experts.

All in the family

All of the new product development and acquisitions have been financed internally "by plowing profits back into the company or by loaning money to the company ourselves," says Hogan. The R.R. Bowker directory acquisition was the first time Information Today had to turn to a loan from a commercial lender, according to Hogan, "a new and somewhat frightening experience."

Information Today is still a family business. Hogan's wife, Sue, serves as the human resources director. Son Tom Jr. is marketing director, and daughter Kathy directs the meeting planning department. The company remains privately held, although with plans to double in size within the next four to six years. Hogan admits, "Eventually, we might entertain the idea of going public—but not right now!"

Hogan, at 57, says he has no plans to retire any time soon. From a small and slow-growing company for 20 years, he has led through a tremendous period of growth in the last few years, buying up most of its competitors' products. Hogan says he has mixed feelings about "the competition issue." "As business people we are taught that competition is a good thing, that it makes us all better and more efficient in the long run."

"On the other hand," he continues, "especially when a market is of a finite size, you kind of relish not having to worry too much about what the competition is doing and whether or not there is room for two magazines, or two conferences, or two web sites—all delivering similar content to the same audience." From a time of three equal competitors in the late 1980s, Information Today now stands alone in its niche market.

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