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Still the Big Three in Special Libraries

JUDGING FROM THE size of their booths, the number of activities sponsored, and the glitz of their parties at the Special Libraries Association (SLA) 2001 annual meeting in San Antonio, LexisNexis, Factiva (Dow Jones/Reuters), and Dialog are still the big three for special librarians. In fact, all three lead in online system revenues. These mainstays in special libraries fiercely compete with each other, but none can afford to take its position for granted—witness Dialog's recent slip from market leader to number three.

With a new CEO and a renewed commitment to the information professional, Dialog relaunched itself at this year's SLA meeting, also offering a concert featuring 1970s rock icons Three Dog Night. The others didn't let the librarians forget their presence either. Factiva hosted the opening San Antonio-style carnival and LexisNexis offered a rodeo and Texas-style barbeque.

The frills are not the real measure of the companies, of course. Each presented a series of workshops and informational programs, using SLA as a platform to stress enhancements made this year and, perhaps more importantly, to stress a focus on the information professional rather than marketing directly to end users.

Dialog relaunches

Before Gale Group purchased Dialog last year, some of us were making morbid bets on how long the veteran system would survive under its then-current management. Unlike the previous owner, Gale understands the information business and what librarians need and want. Starting with the National Online and SLA meetings in May and June, re-

spectively, the new and improved Dialog reflected what seems to be a sincere commitment to fix past problems.

Dialog started its reinvention at the top last year. Libby Trudell, with nearly 20 years at Dialog and a good reputation with librarians, is now senior VP for information professional market development. Roy Martin, the new CEO, comes from positions at Thomson Legal & Regulatory and West Online Strategic Marketing. Both emphasize talking to customers and fully considering the impact of changes before making announcements.

Dialog's relationship with its customers is different than with most other companies, as Martin quickly learned. He says he was surprised at how many requests for interviews he received and how customers feel about Dialog. He discovered that to its customers "Dialog transcends a product." Users of the three main Dialog Company products (Dialog, DataStar, and Profound) are loyal but have strong opinions about how the services should be run. The new CEO spent the first six months on the job listening and meeting with customers and employees. Martin promises a return to Dialog's core customers—information professionals.

One of the first decisions announced at SLA was to bring back "Quantum," first launched in 1993. Quantum2 provides services to help information professionals do their jobs better and convey their value to their companies. Services include seminars, white papers, marketing tools, training materials, and a newsletter and a web page devoted to users. Quantum2 is managed by Trudell and Betty Jo Hibberd, Dialog's academic program coordinator, and will include Quantum coaches across the United States.

Dialog also will emphasize and improve training classes and its instructional program. On May 1, 2001, Dialog training classes became free for Dialog customers. For students, according to CEO Martin, Dialog "will be adding more people, looking at curriculum materials for a broad array of search tech-

niques," and focusing on LIS schools in the educational program in the next year.

Defining pricing

Martin has gotten an earful about pricing from unhappy customers, so he began exploring what he calls "relatively limited" pricing alternatives almost immediately. He notes that different markets "define pricing value differently." Expert searchers want information quickly and efficiently; less-skilled searchers need more time to browse. Current pricing policies haven't provided value for academic libraries, he says, and Dialog has lost much of its academic library use, though Martin sees future opportunities in that market.

Shortly after SLA, Dialog announced the first in what is promised to be a series of pricing changes, beginning in the third quarter of this year. The first changes are aimed at correcting some of the most egregious mistakes of recent policies, including making DialUnit pricing more consistent, simplifying contracts, and bringing back a connect-time option.

The now infamous DialUnit charges replaced connect-time charges in 1998 with a fee based on processing time, or how much work the Dialog computer had to do to process a search request. (DataStar never eliminated connect-time pricing.) The change was instantly unpopular because the cost of a search is difficult to anticipate in advance, and the same search on Dialog's different platforms (DialogClassic, DialogWeb, and DialogClassic Web) may result in a different charge. Dialog is not eliminating DialUnits but is making their computation consistent across platforms. Customers may alternatively opt for connect-time pricing. Exact prices per hour for each Dialog file must be determined, so this option won't be available until October 2001.

Many users will welcome the return of connect-time pricing to Dialog. Such pricing makes sense for users who bill back the price of searches to clients or to departments, when the searches are conducted by expert searchers who



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know how to get on and get information quickly, and for organizations that don't want to commit to a subscription contract. DialUnits may remain a better option for infrequent searchers who want more time to think online.

More changes coming

High-volume searchers or organizations that offer end user access to Dialog are better off with a negotiated contract. Martin acknowledges that Dialog's contracts should be simplified. In addition, more pricing alternatives will be announced next year. According to a press release, "under review presently are new discount programs that vary prices based on customer usage patterns, changes to the Dialog minimum fee program, and evaluation of different fixed-price options for Dialog customers, including subscription pricing."

As part of a company like Thomson, Dialog can offer much additional content. Martin pledges that Dialog will be working more closely with other Thomson companies, especially in the areas of pharmaceutical, legal, and investment content. Watch also for more linking between databases when the DataStar linking feature is replicated in Dialog and Profound later this year. Both additional content and system features are being planned.

All three services (Dialog, DataStar, and Profound) will still be supported. Although all services are used worldwide, Dialog is most popular in North America and Japan, DataStar is popular in Europe, and Profound has most of its customers in the UK. New products, interfaces, and marketing that focus on specific industry segments are under development, but the general products will remain. Martin even promises that the Dialog Classic command language will continue, since it is popular with many information professionals.

Factiva's new system

The year 2001 is important for Factiva. Although the company name changed last year following the merger of Dow Jones Interactive (DJI) and Reuters Business Briefing (RBB), the online systems remained separate. After more than a year of intensive development, a new combined system called Factiva.com was introduced at SLA. Factiva.com actually won't be ready for customers until later this year, but it promises features and content from both

old systems and will offer cross-file searching across the entire system. In addition to content from both old services, Factiva.com will include links to 7500 web sites that will be indexed with its indexing system.

Factiva is also emphasizing its intranet products and presence. The company provides subsets of content for in-

All three companies have strengthened that commitment to information professionals

tegration into a company's intranet and even offers consulting services to customize these desktop services. With both its internal/intranet and external/destination products, Factiva aims at company information professionals.

Factiva maintains a web site and publishes a newsletter for information professionals. These publications offer links to interesting information, a chance to provide feedback or ask questions, and white papers on topics such as indexing and the cost-effectiveness of searching the web vs. commercial online systems. Factiva's "Boot Camp" provides onsite training for information professionals or LIS students.

Expect future reviews of the new system and comparisons with both DJI and RBB. The old systems won't go away immediately. Factiva promises two years' notice before pulling the plug on DJI or RBB but hopes that by mid-2003 all customers will have switched over to Factiva.com.

LexisNexis

It isn't exactly earth-shattering news, but LexisNexis has dropped the hyphen between its two parts and used the occasion to launch a new marketing campaign with a new logo and a new color scheme. Of more substance, at SLA the company debuted the LexisNexis Intranet Publisher product to help corporate librarians bring LexisNexis content in-house, complementing the LexisNexis Web Publisher product, which provides tools, applications, and customized filters to add selected Lexis-

Nexis content to a company's extranet or web site. All these products illustrate how the roles of corporate librarians have expanded in the last few years, as they coordinate and design the information content of company intranet and web sites.

Lisa Mitnick, senior VP of strategic marketing and business development, told me that "indexing is a real priority" now at LexisNexis. Not only is the company indexing the content of its service, it is "working on taking the indexing and making it portable," so librarians can offer consistent indexing for their internal company information intranets, mixing access to internal and external information sources. A white paper on indexing is available on the company's InfoPro web site.

Perhaps the most important news from LexisNexis this June was the announcement that seven Elsevier Science databases will be loaded into the LexisNexis Science-Technology Library. Though LexisNexis has been a part of Reed Elsevier for years, there hasn't been much sharing of content, leaving LexisNexis noncompetitive in sci-tech content. Subscribers will now be able to add-on access to Elsevier scientific indexing and abstracting databases, including Ei (Engineering Index) Compendex, Geobase, Elsevier BIOBASE, FLUIDEX, World Textiles, and Oceanbase. (The biomedical database EM-BASE was already available.)

Good sense for librarians

This is important to librarians and competitors, because it is the first real integration of the Reed Elsevier science materials, and it makes LexisNexis more of a factor in the sci-tech field. The Elsevier abstracts join several other science databases already on LexisNexis, including CSA's Biological Sciences and Environmental Sciences.

Dialog started with information professionals, got sidetracked, and now has a renewed focus. Dow Jones and LexisNexis started with strong end user support but long ago realized that information professionals, as enterprise champions, should be the focus of their efforts. All three companies have strengthened that commitment to information professionals this year. Now, it's up to us to give them continued feedback about what we want and don't want. It just makes good business sense for all of us.