Marketing to Libraries: Interview with Suzanne Schmidt

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VM: Suzy, I understand that you have been working with NewsBank and their Readex division for 12 years. Can you tell us a little about your background?

SS: I was hired by NewsBank in 1984, having worked for a number of years in the computer industry. Initially in sales, I have spent the last 6 years in a number of management positions, and I am now Vice President, Academic Market, with responsibility for all development and activity in the Academic market.

One of the first concepts I learned was understanding the needs of librarians. I had come from a background in the computer industry, and knew very little about the academic libraries beyond being a patron. I certainly learned a lot about academic libraries in my first years selling the Readex collections! Even today, as librarians' collection development strategies change, we are constantly learning what their new needs are.

VM: Librarians are familiar with NewsBank products, and Readex products. Not everyone knows that you are now the same company. Can you tell us a little about the NewsBank/Readex partnership, and what characterizes the two product lines?

SS: Readex was purchased by NewsBank, Inc. in 1984. NewsBank had experience with academic, high school and public libraries; Readex had a number of very sought-after collections for the academic library community. Each company had collections suited to the needs of school and academic libraries, respectively.

NewsBank is one of the leading providers of current events and issues information in electronic and other formats. NewsBank was started by the author John Naisbitt in 1970 as an outgrowth of his research on trend analysis which led to his bestseller, Megatrends. Naisbitt used newspapers to indicate the occurrence of trends, by noting the number of times a topic appeared in various newspapers. The original NewsBank newspaper collection on microfiche was sold to the present owner, Daniel S. Jones, in 1972.

Readex began in 1950, by reproducing scholarly document and other collections in microprint format. The company produced microprint cards with reduced size reproductions of documents and books on them.

When NewsBank purchased Readex, we began to look at the combined repository of information that we hold and the newly merged company focused on the synergy between the two companies. NewsBank had indexing resources and reformatting capabilities which could enhance the Readex collections, and Readex had a long-standing reputation within the academic library community, as well as unique collections of information.

NewsBank created the Academic and Research Libraries Division which carries the Readex line of academic products, as well as those NewsBank collections which are useful to academic libraries; sort of "the best of both worlds," for academic libraries.

VM: I understand that the format for some of the collections you produce has changed over time. Can you tell us a little about the Readex product line and how it has changed in format?

SS: Albert Boni founded Readex in 1950. His vision was to gather the world's most important library collections and make them widely accessible. The first historical Readex collections came out in the 1950s, making available materials which most libraries did not have.

Some examples of our scholarly collections are the Readex collection of Early American Imprints, based on "The American Bibliography," by Charles Evans. The Readex Landmarks of Science collection is regarded by many scholars as the finest history of science collection in the world. It is important to note that the integrity of the information in our historical collections has withstood the scrutiny of scholars over time.

With the purchase of Readex in 1984, NewsBank saw the value of converting Readex collections which were in the antiquated microprint format. NewsBank used microfiche to enhance access to newspapers, and in 1986 was the first company to produce a monthly-updated CD-ROM product for libraries. Now, selected collections from the Readex product line have been converted to microfiche as well. NewsBank's extensive indexing capabilities have also been put to use enhancing access to various collections in the Readex product line.

The acquisition of Readex by NewsBank provides a combination of unique scholarly collections with an ability to deliver in various formats using NewsBank's expertise in various access methods. This is part of the "synergy" between the two companies I referred to earlier. We now produce CD-ROM which contain full-text and bibliographic information for many of our collections.

VM: As a company with a product to sell, how do you adapt to market changes?

SS: We are always listening to librarians. Their input drives what we do. The best way we hear what librarians are saying, and how library needs are changing, is to have consistent representation in the marketplace. That means that a customer gets to know the same representative over time. One of the advantages of our academic representatives is that most of them have been with us for a long time, so not only do they get to know our customers, but they become real experts on our collections.

Our United Nations Documents Collection is one example of the manner in which librarians drive our product development. Until six or seven years ago, the United Nations Documents collection was not indexed by Readex, and the only available index was in a paper format, with annual cumulations of the index on fiche. This caused frustration for many of the users of the collection.

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their collections, what areas they will not focus on for the near future, and what they like and don't like about collections that are available from various sources.

VM: Are there areas where your company may part ways with the desires of librarians?

SS: Not really. However, when it becomes obvious that a requested information product will not be economically feasible to produce, we cannot afford to publish it.

VM: What changes have you seen over the last few years in specific libraries, or in the library market as a whole? Can you identify some of the forces driving these developments?

SS: Access and technology seem to be two of the biggest issues impacting our company's change. Librarians recognize the value of the information we provide and our "value-added" features, such as the high level of integrity of our indexing. Because of this, we select the appropriate type of technology for delivering our products in a manner that will fit a library's budget. This is why many of our products are still produced in microfiche form, as opposed to expensive digital conversions which may be too costly for many library budgets. The bottom line for us is providing the information libraries need. We are dedicated to our customers; not just individual librarians, but users, and the library as a whole. This philosophy has been central to our relationship with libraries.

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