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Recommended Citation

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2997
ATG Interviews Martha Whittaker

Vice President, Marketing — Academic Book Center <marthaw@acbc.com>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, Against the Grain)

ATG: So, you used to be General Manager of UnCover. What’s it like working for a book vendor after selling articles over the Internet? Is it a case of a high tech person in a low tech environment?

MW: It’s a good change of direction for me. My days at CARL were among the best in my life, but I was ready for a new perspective. I feel a bit like I’ve come back to being a librarian again. There is much more contact with books and libraries in this job than I’ve had for a number of years, and I really like that.

Academic Book Center is a marketer and product developer’s dream. It’s a profitable business with a solid customer base, but it’s the least well known of the major book vendors. Academic has been focusing on excellence in the areas of operations and customer service, and hasn’t spent a lot of time on marketing. We now have the resources to pay serious attention to marketing and product development, without neglecting the other things we do so well.

People do ask me how it feels to work in the low-tech side of the information industry, but that’s not an accurate assessment. Bookselling is not low tech at all. We’re involved in all kinds of things that require sophisticated technological functioning — like EDI, shelf-ready processing, OCLC interfacing — not to mention supporting approval plans and offering a web interface to the bibliographic database.

ATG: You are advertising for a new technology person. Have you found anyone yet? Are you looking to hire a librarian or a techie?

MW: Ideally both. We have had a lot of good applicants. We want to hire someone able to roll up his or her sleeves and work.

Two of the finalists are librarians. We are looking for someone who understands the trends in libraries and is able to empathize with the challenges that acquisitions and collection development librarians are facing today. We want a person who has experience working with strategic partners, and who has a finger on the pulse of the new technologies. A large order. [Paul Buchanan, formerly head of computing at Washington University Library in St. Louis joined Academic as VP of Information Technology on Oct. 1].

ATG: What are your goals for Academic Book Center?

MW: Initially, for the company to revitalize its image and do a more effective job of telling its story. We are starting to be noticed more, but there are still a lot of folks out there in the library world who have no idea what we do. We have a loyal customer base and legendary great service. We’re financially solid, and we have many innovative products such as BookBag.

We have redesigned our Web site, to be released in November, which shows us to a better advantage and will heighten our vis-

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Electronic publishing fills important needs for timeliness and rapid distribution. And software does wonderful things. But so far nothing beats books for synthesizing, democratizing and archiving information. Books are user- and scholar-friendly in a way that computers have not yet become.

My daughter recently wrote an article on cocaine addiction. She goes to school in the Philadelphia area and has access to wonderful resources, many of them electronic. But, when she wanted a broad overview, she went to books because they synthesize and bring together concepts and are easier to use.

**ATG:** Janet Flowers and I just did a survey on ACQNET on the use of credit cards by librarians in the academic and college community and the results are reported in this issue of **ATG** (see p. 19). Was there an overwhelming response from people actually ordering over the Internet and using credit cards. And a lot of them are using online bookstores like Amazon.com. Does this alarm you?

**MW:** People are going where they can get the best deal and I don’t blame them. I understand why people like to use credit cards. Everyone likes the free float you get. We buy on credit cards whenever it’s feasible too.

But I believe that when a place like Amazon.com or Barnesandnoble.com attempts to go beyond supplying mainstream, mass market materials, the savings, the speed, the convenience become considerably less apparent.

Book vendors provide shelf-ready materials, technical processing, and approval plans. The customer service staff at Academic are bibliographic experts, and they perform research services that customers find invaluable.

Opportunities abound for traditional book vendors to form alliances with online bookstores in ways that are not always in competition. We will be discussing this at a Lively Lunch in Charleston in November.

**ATG:** Tell us about yourself. Where did you grow up? Were you trained as a librarian?

**MW:** I grew up in Provo, Utah where Robert Redford was a local celebrity. (In fact, he still is, but now more as an environmentalist than as a heartthrob!) I got my library degree from Denver University. After that, I lived all around the US—from California to Illinois to Georgia, before finally settling back in the west. My father still lives in Utah and I visit often.

I have a husband and two wonderful children, though I am sometimes an empty-nester since my daughter is at Haverford College (a valued AABC customer, I might add) and my son has just graduated from high school. He was a non-traditional student, and is now the dairy buyer for a local Whole Foods Market, a wonderful national chain specializing in natural foods. With my husband, I am involved in the Colorado Music Festival in Boulder.

I don’t have any music training but my husband is a frustrated musician and violinist. He’s a lawyer, has been teaching for 25 years and is active in local politics as another outlet for his creative side. — KS

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fill gaps. Some of the names that come to mind as former employees are—Charles Ellis, President, Wiley, Barbara Colson, President, Cambridge University Press, Pieter Bozman, President, Academic Press, Phylis Hall, Publishing Director, IEEE, and Al Henderson, Consultant, just to name a few.

**ATG:** We can’t end this interview without talking about Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory. I believe that you and Scott Bullard started that journal many years ago. And we are reporting a title change in this issue of **ATG**–LAPT will become Library Collections, Acquisitions and Technical Services with the 1999 volume.

**RM:** This brings back good memories. Over a couple of beers, Scott said it was about time Pergamon did something for the library community and the journal evolved. The concept was to bring out a quarterly journal at a low price similar to other library journals published by ALA, etc. and to service the acquisitions industry. The price had held steady for over five years, which was unheard of out of Pergamon. Boy, did I take heat on the pricing strategy! I recall the review of the first issue was disastrous. If you remember, Scott had great knowledge but was not always a company type of guy. With this poor review, we regrouped and it survives today under Carol Hawks Diedrichs as Editor-in-Chief. Also I would be negligent not to point out that at one time, if you recall Katina, that LAPT and Pergamon were to be involved in the Charleston Conference as a management group. Fortunately, for you, this did not occur, but the compromise was that papers from the conference would first appear in LAPT. This now takes us back to Asti’s. Thanks for the opportunity to appear in **ATG**. I too am sorry to miss this year’s meeting. See you next year!

**NB:** Unfortunately, Bob will not be in Charleston for us to talk personally with him about this interview. But—next year? Plus there’s always email and even—gasp—the telephone! — KS

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