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ATG Interviews Gary Shirk

Katina Strauch
Against the Grain, kstrauch@comcast.net

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of whatever sources suit their particular situations and Internet booksellers are certainly among those sources. They have opened up new and useful possibilities. They are particularly useful for locating used and out-of-print books. Some may provide useful reviews, access to out of the way titles, specialized subjects, or other desirable features. Nevertheless, some things remain the same — buyer beware. As this study shows, for this sample of new books in print in North America, the traditional library book vendor was able to provide better prices on all but sixteen items. The greater library-oriented services available from the traditional library book vendor certainly further tips the scales in its favor.

In their excellent, broad analysis of Internet booksellers, Kruse and Holtzman discuss both the increased options and added administrative costs libraries encounter and offer wise counsel to libraries purchasing books of many types over the Internet. They note price competition as one advantage to Internet purchasing. Our particular focus on prices for new books reveals that Internet booksellers are not even price competitive for such materials.

It also worth remembering that relationships matter. Having developed a relationship with a vendor over a period of time creates an atmosphere of trust beneficial to both parties. A book vendor acquainted with the acquisitions librarian at a particular institution will know much about that library’s track record — how quickly payments are made, whether the library is likely to be affected by a state budget crisis, whether there are many returns and why items are returned, will know that the librarian is reliable and fair, etc. If a problem arises, it can be talked through. Slow payment may be tolerated. Special requests may receive a more serious hearing. An out-of-print dealer with whom the library has a long-standing relationship will know that the library actually purchases most items for which it requests searches and will likely pursue new requests with more enthusiasm than for a library that seldom follows through after an item is found. This kind of knowledge base and relationship is nearly impossible to build while clicking through cyberspace. In both cases the Internet booksellers offered no contact person like the customer service representative one tends to get from the traditional library book vendors. In fact, one bookseller doesn’t even offer a telephone number; instead one is offered several FAQ screens and a path leading to an email option, but even then the email address remains hidden.

Bottom line: Although the hype of three years ago has cooled and the Internet has become a routine vehicle for commerce, our basic conclusions of 2000 still stand. Librarians must do their homework, make their own studies and comparisons and place orders based on rational examination of service and price from various sources. And just as one needs to remain wary of hidden costs, it is also necessary to remain alert to genuine value. Again, the basic tenets of the profession demand that librarians make the best use of the resources entrusted to them. It takes some effort to do this, but that is the nature of the job and certainly part of what makes it interesting and of some consequence.

Citations
4. Windwalker, 54.

ATG Interviews Gary Shirk
President and Chief Operating Officer, YBP Library Services
A Baker and Taylor Company <GShirk@YBP.com>

by Katina Strauch (Head, Collection Development, College of Charleston Libraries) <kstrauch@cofc.edu>

ATG: Gary, what does this acquisition of YBP’s parent company, B&T by Willis Stein & Partners mean in practical terms for those of us doing business with YBP?

GS: While the process of selling B&T took many months to proceed, the time between the announcement an the close of the sale took just a matter of days. We announced the sale on July 3rd and it was completed on July 18th. The new CEO, Richard Willis, immediately took the reins and announced the appointment of a new CFO, Bob Agres whose experience in publicly traded companies confirms Willis Stein’s intention to aggressive grow the corporation and, when conditions permit, take it public. I hesitate to speculate what this might mean for our customers. I suppose that in the short term the answer is simply, “business as usual.” In practical terms, our customers will continue to see the same faces, talk to the same people, and most important — enjoy the benefits of our first-class service and continued investments to benefit our customers. In the long term, who knows, maybe we’ll all be able to shop stock in a terrific company. I’m lining up for the opportunity already!

ATG: What are some of the businesses that Willis Stein & Partners own? Are they compatible with B&T, or are they very different?

GS: We’ve learned that Willis Stein & Partners is a leading private equity investment firm specializing in negotiated investments in profitable, well-managed and growing companies. They support excellent management teams in acquiring and building middle-market companies focused generally in the media, business services, information technology, telecommunications, manufacturing and health care industries. They have extraordinary experience in information services and media related companies. Baker & Taylor is their 11th investment in media-related companies. It’s now part of their business services portfolio which also includes Aurum Technology, Protocol Communications, USApubs, WAN Technologies, Inc., and Zeborg. Willis Stein & Partners portfolios include about 40 companies in total and while none are specifically in book distribution they are all active, well-managed companies with substantial growth potential.

ATG: Are there any plans for operating changes in either company? Will management remain the same?

GS: As I’ve said, Willis Stein came to B&T with their own CEO and CFO. Changes at that level are normal business procedures in acquisitions like this and was fully expected. We should expect and welcome the fresh perspective and urgency that these new executives will bring to the organization. It’s probably too soon to tell if organizational changes to management will be necessary. At YBP, we’ve got a terrific team and it remains intact. We expect no changes as a result of the acquisition. Willis Stein appreciates what we’ve achieved and has assured me of their support. I’m excited about being part of company’s growth, and I’m already charting a path for the years ahead. Regarding other changes in operations and business relationships, I’m sure that we’ll see some. But we expect them to originate from within YBP. We are always looking for changes that will lower costs, improve services, and gain market place advantages.

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A TG: Is Willis Stein committed to the
diverse marketplace and locations of B&T?
GS: My interaction with Willis Stein &
Partners has been very limited. However, ev-
everything so far points to a solid commitment
to all of B&T’s distribution facilities and markets.
We are looking to grow in retail and institutional markets and are fully committed to providing
value added services to both. The growth we
have in mind will assure our customers of a con-
tinued development and investment.

A TG: Is Willis Stein publicly traded? How
would this affect either company?
GS: Willis Stein is not publicly traded; nor
is it actively involved in the daily operations of
its portfolio companies. Willis Stein provides
help to company management in areas where
they have valuable contacts or expertise such as
strategic direction, executive recruitment to aug-
ment management teams, capital raising and
structuring, reviewing potential acquisitions and
exit strategies. They also provide incremen-
tal capital to allow for synergistic add-on ac-
quisions that will ultimately improve operating
results and enhance equity value. While there
are no immediate plans to take B&T public,
it is one of the alternatives for the company as
it grows and develops over the next 3-5 years.
It’s too early to speculate on the affects that this
would have on either YBP or B&T at this time.

A TG: Does Willis Stein plan to keep YBP
as a wholly owned subsidiary of B&T or spin
it off?
GS: YBP will remain a wholly owned sub-
sidiary of B&T. It will NOT be closed or merged;
 nor will it’s name be changed by the new owner.
In fact, we’re delighted by the support that
B&T continues to give us and the assurances
that we’ve received from Richard Willis,
B&T’s CEO. We are firmly in B&T’s stable of
companies and look forward to enjoying a pe-
riod of rapid growth and expansion. Naturally
such growth will be difficult with library bud-
gets strained as they are, so we are looking
for strategic acquisitions or mergers with other
companies in the information industry
who will complement and strengthen YBP.

A TG: You have a long history with YBP.
Can you refresh our memory as to when
you joined YBP?
GS: I joined YBP (then known as Yankee
Book Peddler, Inc.) in June 1984 but didn’t actu-
ally arrive in New Hampshire until July 4th of
that year. As you well know, John Seecor,
our founder and CEO, had quite a flair for the
dramatic gesture. He insisted that I take time
out from my moving preparations to join YBP
during the ALA conference in Dallas that year.
I was surprised to discover on arrival that he
planned to announce my appointment at a cus-
tomer reception. It was a wonderful way to for-
malize my transition from the academic to the
world of book supply. I returned home to
Minnesota, packed up the family, and drove to
New Hampshire where we arrived to witness a real
New England Independence Day. My son Dan,
who was just four years old at the time was very

contact information
Gary M. Shirk
President and Chief Operating Officer
YBP Library Services
A Baker and Taylor Company
999 Maple Street
Contoocook, NH 03301 USA
Telephone: 603-746-3102

YBP’s senior management team, keeps its fin-
gers on the pulse of change at B&T, enabling us
to take advantage of any synergies that develop.

A TG: Since Willis Stein & Partners is an
investment firm, how soon will they bail out if
and when the investment does not produce the
anticipated results?
GS: While venture capitalists generally en-
ter new investments with exit plans in hand, I
think it would be wrong to interpret Willis
Stein’s approach in this simplistic way. They
have a proven record of working with the
company’s management to achieve the results
they expect and have shown that they provide
solid support even under difficult circumstances.
A perfunctory bail out is not a planned option.
They are neither harsh task masters nor simply
benign observers. They are part of the process
wherever they can bring their special expertise,
contacts, influence, and access to capital.
From what I’m able to observe so far, they
form a partnership with management to achieve
extraordinary results. I’m excited about working
with them to build YBP/B&T into the undisputed
world leader in book distribution.

A TG: As an old acquisitions librarian,
what is your opinion of where libraries
will be in 30 years or two domestic ap-
proval plan vendors?
GS: I suppose that after nearly 30 years in
the profession I deserve the tag “old acqui-
sitions librarian,” but I’m hoping that you mean
“former acquisitions librarian” rather pointing
to the obvious toll of years. This aside, I’ve been
thinking a lot recently about the issue you raise.
Budget issues in the public sector have taken
quite a toll on academic libraries in the past year
and will take more this year. We who serve these
libraries have been affected as well. While YBP
has felt the pinch, we’ve been fortunate. Our
working relationship with B&T and the breadth
of its market reach, has helped us to
do fairly well. Elsewhere in the industry I
fear that this may not be so and that further
consolidation is likely. Your question is very
timely and important.

In 1984, my last year as an acquisition li-
brarian, competition among vendors wasn’t very
strong. There seemed to be room for a stable of
healthy vendors, each capable of providing for
most of our needs. But, now, nearly 20 years
later, the picture has changed dramatically. For
some libraries whose requirements are very so-
phisticated, competition has already been lim-
ited in practical terms to just two or three ven-
dors. The vendors competing for the market
whose needs are less demanding have been pres-
sured by new entrants like Amazon.com and
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ATG Interviews Rolf A. Janke
Vice President and Publisher, Sage Reference, www.sagereference.com

by Tom Gilson (Head, Reference Services, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424; Phone: 843-953-8014; Fax: 843-953-8019) <gilson@cofc.edu>

ATG: A couple of years ago, Sage Publications made, what some might consider, a bold move. You started a new imprint, Sage Reference. How did a publisher known for quality journals and books decide to get into reference publishing?

RJ: In the 1990's, the Sage book program had experienced a decline in revenue generated from the declining markets for monographs so we needed to identify new products that would fit our strategy and would preserve the Sage brand. We had already started to publish textbooks but the only reference products of significance were our handbooks. And, at that time, our journals program was as strong as ever which meant we were not strangers to the academic library market. The final piece of the puzzle was my experience from Blackwell Publishers and ABC-CLIO where encyclopedia publishing was prosperous. So, we decided that the book-publishing program should include encyclopedias.

But the "bold move" came when we created Sage Reference, which would be a dedicated imprint for publishing encyclopedias in the Social Sciences for academic and public libraries. The Sage brand is very strong in the library market and as long as we adhered to the same quality that Sage has always delivered, we knew that our chances were good — yes, even in a time when library budgets are declining. However, we had so many reference librarians tell us that even with shrinking budgets, they always try to keep their collections current so we knew that if we put the right plan in motion, Sage Reference could make an impact.

ATG: It's been a while since you took the plunge, how is it working out?

RJ: Great! We launched four titles last year, three of which were in the criminal justice discipline. This was by design since Sage is very well known and respected for the books and journals we publish in this area. Two of the four titles, the Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment and the Encyclopedia of Terrorism, have won several awards. This year, we will launch eight titles and we have twelve scheduled for next year. Many ask us, starting so late in the game, are there any more topics that would be unique, or different enough, to capture the librarians' attention? I look at this as the ultimate challenge, selecting topics, and then watching the titles go on to be successful (or hopefully so!). We are still experiencing some growing pains, but so far the plunge has been a refreshing one.

ATG: Growing pains? What type of growing pains are you referring to?

RJ: Encyclopedias are more complex than a traditional monograph or even textbook when you take into consideration the number of people involved. Instead of a single authored book, we were introducing multi-volume encyclopedias that would consist of editors, editorial board members and hundreds of contributors — just on one title! Then you throw in an aggressive writing schedule, so keeping track of everybody presented some real challenges, or growing pains. We have since set up in-house developmental, while adding Web based, project management tools, so even with a small staff, we are now able to manage over forty major works.

ATG: Being new in reference publishing, how have you separated yourselves from the pack? What is unique about Sage Reference?

RJ: There are many established reference publishers but in order to sustain growth from a new imprint, we felt that instead of trying to differentiate ourselves from the pack, we would build upon the same strengths that have made Sage so successful. An independent, higher education publisher of books, journals and electronic media in the Social Sciences that now offers encyclopedias is a great story. We are not trying to knock the big guys off. That would be a tall task, considering all the mergers and acquisitions in the industry. But, we feel that our story will entice librarians to look at what we are doing.

ATG: And the unique part…?

RJ: I believe the unique component of Sage Reference is that every title we publish has a strong interdisciplinary focus to it. The Social Sciences are made up of many disciplines and no matter what the topic, we feel that we can give the end user of our product a wider view of that particular topic. For example, in the Encyclopedia of Community, there are articles that fall under topics such as politics, economics, gender, race, psychology, criminal justice, health and so on. It is not possible to pull this interdisciplinary approach off on every project, but we try. So far, the response from our customers has been wonderful. They expect more usage from such a product. It also makes it easier to select topics, knowing that you can take a niche topic, health psychology, for example, and add more disciplinary perspectives and turn it into a health and behavior approach making it more resourceful to a wider audience.

ATG: Has this interdisciplinary approach made it easier, or harder, to market and sell these reference works? Do they appeal as much to public libraries as they do to academic libraries?

RJ: I believe it has made it easier since you can identify more of a reason one should purchase a particular work. Librarians have told us that since an interdisciplinary work would appeal to a wider audience, they would feel more compelled to purchase it. I look at it as a good "cost-benefit" for our customers. As far as appealing to public libraries? Yes, as long as the topic itself fits their needs.

ATG: We know that Sage is known for its scholarly, academic content, but with reference works, value added features are important. How do you insure the necessary glossaries, chronologies, appendices and indexes are included in each of your works?

RJ: We have built these components into the plan from the start. We have an excellent development staff at Sage Reference who works directly with the editors, making sure they realize the importance of these added value features. I study reviews of encyclopedias and notice that reviewers are very appreciative of these components so it is not that we are adding fluff, we are adding valuable additions that hopefully will be utilized by the end user. I remember when we launched the Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment, Sage Reference's first continued on page 70