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ATG Interviews Philip Blackwell

CEO, Blackwell Limited

by Katina Strauch (Editor, Against the Grain) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

We're here today with Philip Blackwell, talking about Blackwell's Book Services, a company near and dear to many academic libraries for its focus on shelf-ready services, publisher relations, and loyalty to customers. Philip has been CEO of Blackwell Limited, Blackwell Book Service's parent company, since January 2000. He began his career with B. Dalton Booksellers in USA before returning to the UK to work in a number of roles in bookselling and publishing with Harper Collins, Hodder Headline and Blackwell. Prior to rejoining Blackwell, Philip was Director of the eBusiness & CRM team at Cap Gemini Ernst & Young. He has an MSc from London University and is a Sloan Fellow of the London Business School.

ATG: Let's plunge right in with the question that everyone wants answered first — what is the current status on the news we heard in late November that Blackwell Limited is considering selling some of its UK bookshops? And how will that affect Blackwell's Book Services here in the US?

PB: Right. A little background is in order first, I think. The Blackwell Family owns two independent and separate companies: Blackwell Publishing, the world's leading publisher for societies; and Blackwell Limited, the retail and library supply business. Blackwell Limited has asked BDO Stoy Hayward, a financial firm with a specialty in family businesses, to review the strategic options for its UK retail division which includes a merged portfolio of bookshops — some flagships, like the Broad Street shops, and many smaller campus and specialist stores, as well as an online bookshop. Blackwell Publishing is not included in this at all, nor is Blackwell's Book Services. We expect there to be no affect on either of these. Blackwell's retail portfolio is only under review and this does not necessarily predicate a sale of all or part of the business.

ATG: Tell us a little about Blackwell Publishing, the other company that is part of the Blackwell Family holdings.

PB: Blackwell Publishing is the world's leading society publisher with over 750 journals in partnership with more than 550 academic and professional societies. A sampling of new titles introduced in 2004 includes Headache Currents ("fills an essential niche in the headache and migraine literature") to New Blackfriars ("open to the Continental hermeneutic tradition as to the analytic approach") to the International Journal of Nautical Archaeology. I'm pleased to report that the average impact factor of Blackwell journals increased by 12% between 2002 and 2003, according to the ISI Citation Index. Another thing we're extremely proud of is that Blackwell Publishing makes their journals available for free or at low-cost to institutions in the developing world through partnerships with WHO Hinari, EAO Agora, INASP and other initiatives.

ATG: Blackwell's has been celebrating its 125 year anniversary. You are a noted name in bookselling. But much has changed. Is bookselling still a viable business? Comments?

PB: As viable and exciting as ever, I think. The bookselling market has become increasingly competitive and aggressive following an extended period of consolidation, which in part was what prompted Blackwell Limited to re-examine the marketplace. And Blackwell's remains committed to the book-selling industry, and in particular the library side of the industry in the Americas via Blackwell's Book Services. Our ability to create and maintain good working relationships with our publisher partners is of great importance to the libraries we serve and to our faculty and staff. I think you'll continue to see the name Blackwell's affiliated with bookselling for another 125 years or so!

ATG: Blackwell's Book Services has recently reworked its invoicing and billing. Would you comment on why you did this and what the status of the process is at this time?

PB: In Fall 2004, Blackwell's Book Services implemented a new order management and distribution system to provide to its customers with the long-term benefits of speedier delivery times, higher quality invoices, enhanced reporting capabilities, and increased functionality in Collection Manager. It was absolutely necessary to do this for several reasons. First of all, we needed to have a more robust platform to be able to take advantage of the latest efficiencies in technology. Without that, our services to customers would stagnate, and that is not what Blackwell's is about. And our customers' needs were changing, and we wanted to be able to respond to that by offering enhanced invoicing and billing capabilities and services. We're working side by side with our customers through this transition, and feel that our goals are being achieved.

ATG: I just saw an announcement about Blackwell's implementation of the OpenURL standard in Collection Manager — how does that really work for the busy bibliographer or selector?

PB: It is really very simple. With the OpenURL protocol in place, libraries can connect seamlessly to a variety of online resources, including bibliographic holdings and order information of designated library and vendor partners. We think that making a better informed buy benefits everyone, allowing tight budgets to be spent more effectively. The process is easily incorporated into the library's current acquisitions and order processing workflow, eliminating extra steps. And every institution's financial information is secure in terms of what is shared in a collaborative environment.

ATG: I understand that Blackwell's has been providing funding for an Excellence in Academic Libraries Award in conjunction with ACRL for the past five years. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

PB: Blackwell's Book Services was looking for a way to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of community college, college and university libraries. We partnered with ACRL to make three awards for $3000 each, done each Spring. We'll be announcing our winners for 2005 shortly after ALA Midwinter, and will present these awards at the ACRL Conference in Minneapolis in April. Past winners have included Austin Community College, Cornell University and Baruch College, and the pool of applicants for this year's awards is impressive. There is more information on this award and others at www.acrl.org/ACRL. We're very pleased to be able to support the missions of these institutions, including ACRL.

ATG: Can you comment on e-books and the sale of eBooks? Is this increasing or are sales flat?

PB: eBooks have moved out of the experimental stage for many libraries, publishers and distributors. I hope you all saw the article in the NY Times (1/25/04 "An Idea Whose Time Has Come Back") this past weekend on the "arrival" of eBooks to the mainstream. The article specifically mentions that public libraries are embracing eBooks for a variety of reasons, such as cost, availability and functionality, and their patrons are too. Demand and usage is building in academic libraries, though the trends are harder to see since many eBooks are being packaged in collections, such as Oxford University Press' Oxford Reference Online. Blackwell's Book Services began offering digital reference management assistance as part of Collection Manager about 12 months ago, and we're seeing steadily increasing use of this functionality by our customers.

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people profile

Julie A. Carter

BORN & LIVED: My hometown is Marshall, VA (50 miles west of Washington, DC) and I lived there for most of my formative years. I moved to Weaverville, NC after college and currently call Greenville, SC home.

FAMILY: My folks, Wallace and Shirley; A fiancéé, Chris; and a hamster, Mina.

EDUCATION: I graduated from Mars Hill College with a Bachelor of Science in Zoology. I am currently enrolled in the MLIS program at the University of South Carolina.


IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Play games (video, board, card), ice skate, be silly.

FAVORITE BOOKS: The Color Purple by Alice Walker.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Socks with sandals.

PHILOSOPHY: Always laugh.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: To be gainfully employed as a reference librarian (in less than five years from now!)

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: From a library school perspective — the classes will continue to include core competencies but will focus on technology and its applications; there will also be an emphasis on collaboration and information fluency.

I'm not sure we'll ever see that one-publisher model fully develop. All the searching enhancements and latest technology will not change consumer behavior and attitude, which at this point seems to be rejecting the conglomerization of the publishing industry. We are seeing more academic institutions taking publication of professional papers back into their own hands and making the decisions on where, when and how their content is accessed, which is proving to be a challenge for everyone involved — university presses, libraries, faculty and students!

Adventures in Librarianship — Our Mystifying Patrons

by Ned Kraft (Ralph J. Bunche Library, U.S. Department of State) <kraftno@state.gov>

ATG staff would like to thank its public library colleagues for responding to our call for unusual community bulletin board announcements. It's been an amazing adventure for us, reading through the mountains of submissions. Taken in such a large dose, these announcements reminded us of the essential beauty, sincerity, and bewilderment of the family of man; especially that branch of the family which has few qualms about baring its soul on bulletin boards and reality shows.

To share-the-joy with our readers, here are some of our favorites. Names, phone numbers and email addresses have been obscured or creatively changed to... well, you know why.

Lost Pet: gorgeous white Pomeranian lost in the Hill's Grove neighborhood. Sweet tempered and trusting. Answers to the name of “Muggles.” Please call 555-1234. Momma wants her baby back!

Meeting of the Admiral Overton Society, Tuesday, March 3rd, 7pm. Will discuss Admiral's role in the Marimack, and his strained relationship with his father. Full regalia please! Meet at Barney's. Park in back to avoid scaring neighbors.

For Sale: Mountain bike, 26-inch frame, front shocks. This one's seen a lotta trails, dude! Busted my collar bone. Mom says she ain't afraid to toss her injured thirty-five year old son out on his xxx. So I gotta get my life straight, get a job. $100, OBO. Rims are slightly bent but could be kicked back into place. Leave a note for "Crazy Dave." Phone's been turned off.

Scruffy, matted, off-white Pomeranian found in the Hill's Grove neighborhood. Snappish and ill-tempered. Tag just says “Muggles.” Please call 123-4567 ASAP. Our children are being traumatized.

Sign up now for evening Gang-Zhou classes. Improve your luck through the ancient art of pebble holding. Good for the liver. Makes you more attractive to the opposite sex. Guaranteed to boost your income by ten percent. Recent paroles are welcome. Call Raul at 987-6543.

Under 35? Unhitched? St. Paul's United Presbyterian Church is forming a single's softball league. Come on! Meet new people, say a few prayers, have some good clean fun! Be at the VFW Memorial Hall at 10am on Saturday. No spikes. No fast pitch. And No feeling sorry for yourself! Divorcees should bring court documents.

I buy wax of all colors. Instead of throwing those candle butts away, call me, Crazy Dave, on my new cell phone! 456-7891.