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Product Profile

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Product Profile

Bringing Order to Chaos?!

BookQuest/SerialsQuest

by Karen Preslock (V.P. ABACIS, Inc. a Faxon Co.)

*From your Editor: Here is an example of a really inspired librarian! And how about a **Product Profile** — Here is a chance to impact the development of a product in our world.*

Read on . . .

Bringing order to chaos . . . that was the goal of a frustrated librarian, who after years of having difficulty in obtaining out-of-print books and missing serial issues, and seeing the problem get increasingly worse, screamed in her library one day: "Somebody needs to automate this!! I know this stuff is out there, but where?!" And like most librarians, I preferred instantaneous gratification when it came to my requests for my patrons, who at times, could be screamers themselves. I also preferred "one stop shopping", like most librarians I had little time to spend on 99 different duties. The only time a "shot-gun" approach had worked for me was during a document delivery study that our library conducted to test the performance of about a dozen services. . . after all, it was only fair to give each of them an equal shot of fulfilling an equally difficult request. I couldn't feasibly "shot-gun" my o.p. requests, because some dealers had pointed out that they preferred exclusive want lists, or they just didn't take the lists too seriously. "Shot-gunned" want lists also create an imbalance in the true picture of what is in demand and in what quantities. BUT, I also wanted the materials sometime this century. You know how it is, your want list is out there with one dealer for a year and you get a couple of things, then you send the rest of the want list to another dealer and so on, and one day you get a call from a dealer that says: "You know that book you wanted 9 years ago, do you still need it?!" More often than not, you're glad to take it.

My goal: BRING ORDER TO

CHAOS... START SOMEWHERE. . . AND JUST DO IT. BUT HOW?! I sought the advice and support of a colleague and part-time rare and o.p. equestrian book dealer, Ed Johnson. Together, we devised a plan of automation and presented it to an acquaintance of Ed's, Clark Easter, who had raised funding for other start-up ventures. Clark saw the beauty of this idea, and with this vision, the three of us worked on a business plan and spread sheets that went out to 200 venture capital firms the Friday before Black Monday. I often wonder if we had something to do with eventful day?!. As it turned out, we were too small a niche market for them, and besides, genetic engineering was the trend at the time. After well over a year, we were just about ready to give up when a Mr. Sullivan, who had received our plan called to tell us that there would be a meeting of the Information Industry Association in Washington, D.C. area with a venture capital session. I registered, wrote my minute and a half speech, (the time allotted each of the hundred plus participants to get their point across), and then presented it to 200 men in very expensive suits looking to buy Information Companies. As one of two women in the whole place, it was a very interesting experience. After the session, there was a reception for all to meet less formally, where 8 of the attendees came up to Ed and myself to talk more about the idea. I was pleased to be congratulated by them as being "gutsy" for what I had done, a librarian with an unusual idea trying to carry it forward. From there, we kept getting leads that would take us to the publishers and database industry in N.Y.C., and ultimately the idea reached the Faxon Co.

We knew that we would have a better chance of getting funding if we had the database up and running, so

during these many months we worked on the design, and with the help of 2 programming friends, (one of which is now with ABACIS, Mark Mercer) got it functional. We also decided that we needed a critical mass of records to get people interested, so we chose the figure 150,000. It seemed to me that when I searched Dialog, depending on the subject, I would not bother to search any files with less records. We understood, in part, that it would still be like searching for a "needle in a haystack", but you have to start somewhere. Somehow, we were able to convince three dealers to commit 50,000 records each, of their inventory to our database. With the vision of the President of Faxon, Richard Rowe, who had a fondness in his heart for matching the inventories of antiquarian dealers with the needs of librarians, collectors and other dealers AND the desire to create an electronic mall providing one-stop-shopping for libraries, ABACIS was funded in October, 1989, about two years after its original conception.

ABACIS has come a long way since that time, many revisions have been made to our software and our database. We have over 350,000 records on the BookQuest database, have implemented SerialsQuest which includes 95,000 serial wants, sales and trades uploaded in just the first 6 months. We have implemented a bi-weekly journal called the MatchMaker to reach those clients that cannot automate at this time, yet still allow them to quote to improve our matching success rate, which from reports from users runs between 5 and 30%. To make the system even more cost-efficient and time-saving, we implemented nightly automatic matching of wants against sales and trades. Our pilot to study the feasibility of automating the Medical Library As-

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sociation's Serials Exchange was received quite favorably, and we now have 300 medical libraries, many of which responded to a survey about our services with great enthusiasm. From their feedback, we implemented some new features, such as downloading of their match messages to their fax machines to save them even more time and money. We are working on similar projects with the Special Libraries Association and the American Library Association, and look forward to their suggestions as well.

We know that we still have a long way to go, but our team of dedicated employees sees the great strides that we have made, and are proud to serve in this capacity - as members of a small company that can get things done! We constantly strive to improve our services and continue to listen to the needs of our client base, which is now at 1100+.

In that vein, we would greatly appreciate it if you would respond to

one or all of the questions below that **Corrie Marsh** has developed. I look forward to seeing all of you at the Charleston Conference to discuss your ideas in person.

—Do you like the idea of Book/SerialsQuest?

—Would it be useful to load Ulrich's into the Serials Quest database as a title authority file? Many customers agree that this would enhance access and consolidate title entries online, as well as provide online access to Ulrich's-PLUS.

—Would it be useful to load Books Out of Print in the database for online confirmation of titles confirmed out of print?

—Would it be useful to design an E-Mail list in BookQuest/Serials Quest for publishers to submit titles they are considering canceling or reporting out of print? Although this would duplicate publisher reporting of books out of print in *PW* and

BOP, it would provide an additional up to date list for library customer access and solicit "reactions" to publishers.

—Would it be useful to library jobbers of in-print publications to participate in BookQuest? Library jobbers are wondering if their customers would be interested in supplying of out of print orders through BookQuest. In theory, rather than returning cancelled out of print orders to library customers, the library jobber would re-order through Book Quest and supply out of print books as a value-added service. Some customers without PC access to BookQuest are willing to pay the added charge for the jobber to fill these orders rather than have to re-order in-house.

Please send your reactions to these ideas and any other suggestions to Karen Preslock, BookQuest/Serials Quest, 135 Villiage Queen Drive, Owings Mills, MD 21117.