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Vendor Interview / Lenny Schrift

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Vendor Interview — Lenny Schrift

President and Founder, Ballen Booksellers, International

Way back in the year of printed books and journals — B.T., Before Technology — I met Lenny Schrift. He was a friend of a lot of friends. He is a down-to-earth person with a pragmatic view of life. This attitude also extends to libraries and to bookselling. Read on . . .

ATG: *Where were you born and educated? How did you get your start in the library bookselling business?*

LS: I was born in Brooklyn and educated at Brooklyn College. My book career began in 1959 when I was enrolled as an undergraduate at Brooklyn College. I was a sophomore and in dire need of a part time job, so I applied to Taylor Carlisle. **Ed Taylor**, the owner, was my uncle (my father's sister's husband), which was probably more of a liability than an asset. When my father became seriously ill, I was forced to work full time and ultimately concluded my education as a part time student over the next several years.

I remember delivering book packages to local libraries, packing up books in the shipping department, putting away inventory and picking orders, answering telephones, working at the front cashier's counter in the retail store, and finally sweeping the floor. I virtually learned to do everything, which only helped me in later years.

Since Taylor Carlisle had been recently awarded a sizable contract to supply books to the Air Force libraries, I was asked to assist **Stanley Anson**, one of the firm's managers who was overseeing and supervising the performance of the project. It was Stanley, along with **Mike Sedecca** and **Paul Friedman**, who were the real foundation and strength of Taylor Carlisle. I would say that in the three to five years that I worked with these folks, I got a real education in bookselling. Eventually we moved the Air Force contract operation to a small store front on New York's west side across the street from Madison Square Garden (needless to say I spent many evenings climbing the old Garden stairs to sit in the cheap seats on the rafters). This Air Force contract was strictly firm

orders and they came printed on this terrible paper. We had to make triplicate copies of the original order, create labels for over 350 ship to locations, and break down each by publisher. It was a rather sizable contract, even by today's standards. And, with the average price of a book being in the range of \$12.00 — \$14.00, there was a lot of material to handle, and a slew of people working on the project. I truly learned a lot about the essence of the book business. Well after a year and a half, the contract came up for renewal and you guessed it. We were out bid and lost the project.

ATG: *Then what happened to you?*

LS: In 1962 I temporarily moved to Orlando, Florida where Taylor Carlisle had a retail store and library wholesaling business. While managing the operation, I developed this sort of makeshift approval plan. We had a contract with the

"I could probably come up with a list of 100 [vendors] that don't exist anymore."

Martin Company (later Martin Marietta) in Orlando and with NASA at Cape Canaveral where they were building a large research library. Using rather broad-based subject parameters, much like an automatic shipping program with scholarly publishers, I built a "crude and un-

sophisticated" science/technology approval program. Yes, there was a weekly book shipment, but in addition we loaded up this van with the new books received that week and drove around to each installation, whereby scientists and librarians would come examine and order books for their facilities. We even sold books directly from the van. It turned out to be a really successful operation and ultimately moved to the Winter Park Mall.

Eventually, I returned to New York as I was needed on the home front. Mike Sedecca left the firm to go into business with Bill Herald (Gary's father) and Paul Friedman's tenure as general manager was short-lived. He ultimately left in 1965 to work for Richard Abel & Co.

So, there I was 24 years old and Ed Taylor approached me (1966) and asked if I were interested in running the business. Ed was an absentee owner with only limited involvement in the day-to-day operation of the business. The company wasn't doing well, and I thought here was a great opportunity for me to succeed. I was promised all sorts of rewards and compensation, but I really wanted the challenge of turning the business around.

ATG: *There you were suddenly in charge of a company. How did you know where to begin?*

LS: From 1966-69, I was Vice President and General Manager. In that period, I worked to turn the firm into a profitable and substantive organization. I broadened the client base to include academic and medical libraries, as well as the many special libraries it already serviced. I introduced automation to the firm where everything was done manually. My philosophy, then as it is today, is to automate on a modular basis. I developed all sorts of automated programs beginning in finance and accounting. The applications were cumbersome and archaic by today's standards, but you know it worked. As a matter of fact, I never developed a system or program that did not work from day one. It was as a result of not trying to complete the whole task simultaneously.

I was really pleased with the progress of the firm by 1969. Instead of receiving the equity position I was promised by Ed in 1966, my thank you was that he was going to sell the firm. He did assure me that I would have a job, but the truth in fact was that no one was buying this firm without me. I was only married a few

"An organization needs chemistry; it needs camaraderie; if people are emotionally involved in the company, they work more as a team."

years, had a newborn son, and was scared to death as to what the future had in store. I had to think about myself and my family. I did know that I was inpatient and wanted my own company. So, I left Taylor Carlisle. And, on October 1, 1969, I founded Ballen. I always considered myself as an entrepreneur and here was my chance.

ATG: Wow! Just like that? Let us in on more of the background.

LS: It was 1969. The library market was blooming. There were many competitors out there such as Abel, Baker & Taylor, Brodart, Midwest, Stacys. In addition there were a large group of small and medium-sized regional vendors. It seems that there were many more regional vendors than exist today. I could probably come up with a list of 100 of them that don't exist anymore.

I wanted to focus on the domestic academic, research and medical library communities. In fact, there were three of us that founded Ballen. **Barry Bernstein** (he had worked at Taylor Carlisle with me in operations, and was also my oldest and closest friend), **Al Jaeger** (who was in the back issue periodical and serials business), and myself. Ballen is a combination of our three first names — B for Barry Bernstein, A for Al Jaeger, and L for myself. **Howard Clark**, an old friend of mine, of Holt Rinehart and Winston strongly suggested that we add on *International*. Howard felt that down the road it would be an asset. I think it was good advice.

We started with a meager \$10,000 which we scraped together. We needed to be able to order and pay for some books and office materials. It wasn't

enough but it just had to do. Al was occupying two floors in the building and made some office space available for Ballen. Eventually both firms moved to Commack, Long Island, as it is really hard to find first class warehouse space in New York City.

The first year in business, Ballen's only employees were Barry and myself. We did \$500,000 worth of business in 1969. We each worked seventy-five hour weeks, but it was worth it. We had money in the bank to pay ourselves, to pay for supplies, and publisher invoices so we could stay in business. We were very undercapitalized for this type of a business, but we kept all the money in the business and we didn't have a lot of expenses that first year.

ATG: So, it was a good time to start up. Did you have trouble competing with the existing vendors?

LS: We were lucky. We couldn't have picked a better time to start a business. Libraries were exploding. The output of new books and reprints of retrospective titles dramatically increased. Perhaps in retrospect it was the best of times. I traveled a lot during the first ten years. I purposely didn't initially go to the hot beds of business. I went to places where other vendors didn't travel or were seen infrequently. Very few vendors had representatives on the road and those that did tended to visit only the larger institutions. I visited larger institutions but quickly saw that smaller and medium-sized institutions were hardly ever visited. I remember the days and weeks on the road through New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida and Georgia and on and on. Initially, we were only offering firm order service. And, my sales presentation mainly consisted of looking to become the secondary vendor of an institution with a sizable book budget. I figured that our becoming a library's secondary supplier would enable us to do business, establish some credibility, and ultimately grow from there. We had a lot of success. Many of these clients are still with us today, and many have become real good friends.

ATG: In another life, I worked at Duke University Medical Center Library. You do a lot of medical library business as well. How did that come about? How did your approval plan fit in with what other vendors were doing, like Richard

Abel & Co., for example?

LS: We were very fortunate that we became a vendor under the New York State Contract in the very first year in business, and quickly became a secondary vendor and/or primary vendor to the SUNY libraries in the early seventies. It was also in the early seventies that medical libraries were well funded and began receiving strong federal support. It was apparent that no competitors were aggressively marketing approval programs in medical libraries. **Emil Frey**, from SUNY-Stony Brook immediately became our first approval program, quickly followed by the SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. About the same time, **Don Osborne**, the Head of Acquisitions at SUNY-Stony Brook, suggested that Ballen adopt an LC-based profile, ignore Dewey and ignore what other vendors were doing. His rationale was that both the library and the vendor needed a common denominator system of communication. Use LC and don't reinvent the wheel.

ATG: What kind of people did you have working for you? What kind of person do you like to hire? What kind of a President are you?

LS: Well, we have had some brilliant people and at times some strange individuals. I guess I could go on for hours discussing the many, many people I have worked with. But, I would like to at least cite three names who have contributed much to Ballen's success. **Carl Teresa**, Vice President and General Manager has been with the firm for fifteen years. **David Ungar**, Vice President for our International Division, has been with Ballen 13 years. And **Linda Moran**, Vice President and National Sales Manager

"We can't be all things to all people. We are looking for a niche."

for eleven years. We tend to keep the people we hire, and even have had a number of people leave the firm only to return at a later date. I am committed to promoting from within. Of the 120 people who work at Ballen, at least half have worked for the firm for more than ten years.

As President, I think my biggest asset is teaching people each aspect of the book business. I have a particular philosophy to get across, and having worked literally from the bottom up, maintain a strong work ethic. I believe in setting goals and outlining a clear mission for the company and myself. One of my most difficult tasks is to delegate authority and responsibilities to others. My role, as President, is to be a mentor, and to nurture my people so they can take responsibility for their positions within the company. An organization needs chemistry; it needs camaraderie; if people are emotionally involved in the company, they work more as a team. I guess it is sort of like the baseball line, of "Bleeding Dodger Blue."

ATG: What do you think about bookselling today?

LS: Today's bookseller must be much more cognizant of what is going on in the industry, particularly with new technologies. With many technologies

becoming quickly obsolete, resources can be wrongly spent on inappropriate hardware and software development. Today's generation of booksellers recognize the benefit in enhancing services while not overextending the basic business of the firm. We have to be pragmatic. My belief is that we cannot be all things to all

"Through it all, people have continued to be infatuated with the printed word."

people. My firm looks for a niche in the marketplace. For example, some booksellers offer approval programs and some do not. That's OK. This generation of booksellers is certainly more businesslike and prudent than those of the late sixties. The evolution of the contemporary bookseller has developed a better crop, of more educated, more focused on direction and mission, more sophisticated as to the subtleties of business, and

finally more technologically advanced than their predecessors.

ATG: What about the current library today? Is there a place for the printed book or will all of us become obsolete?

LS: I don't think so. One thing I can say by having been in bookselling a long, long time is that I have seen a lot of fads (technologies) come and go. Through it all, people have continued to be infatuated with the printed word. Libraries are in the information business. They need to provide access to that information immediately. Technology has certainly made this more and more possible. But regardless of the access to information, the mere reading of that document is usually done and will continue to be done, in most disciplines, in the printed format.

The End. ☛

Lenny will be at the 1993 Charleston Conference. Let's continue this dialog there. - Yr. Ed.

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