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Tim Collins-V.P. Division General Manager, EBSCO Publishing

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Consultant

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ATG Interview with Tim Collins

VP, Division General Manager, EBSCO Publishing

by **Judy Luther** (102 West Montgomery Ave. #B, Ardmore, PA 19003;
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The innovative, fabulous and energetic Judy Luther tells me that her interview with Tim Collins (see below!) took nearly the whole morning one day recently, and that she found him to be customer-oriented as well as humble with a great sense of humor. Read more to learn about this gentleman! — KS

ATG: How did you connect with EBSCO and what do you do today?

TC: In 1987 EBSCO purchased a small abstracting company which I co-founded with my stepfather, **Jerry Seaman**, in 1983. Today I am the VP, Division General Manager of EBSCO Publishing, which along with EBSCO Subscription Services and EBSCODoc, comprise **EBSCO Information Services**.

ATG: How did you get started in the business? What gave you the idea?

TC: Our first idea was to create "Magazine Guide", similar to "TV Guide," to be sold in the checkout stands in stores. Publishers were willing to give us advance copy, so we could create abstracts and we knew we could sell ads to cover the cost, however, the retail chains which needed to display the issues were reluctant to provide the counter space. So the concept of presenting summaries of the news seemed to be a good one, but the market needed to be rethought.

I was attending college at the **University of New Hampshire**, studying marketing and with \$5,000 I had earned doing odd jobs, we did a mailing to survey libraries on their interest which confirmed that we had a market. Our publication, called *Popular Magazine Review*, covered 250 general magazines and sold to 33 libraries which liked both the abstracts and the timely nature of the information covered. We then raised the necessary capital, using a business plan I wrote in my entrepreneurship class, to begin producing the product.

In addition to doing the business plan, I wrote the initial computer programs in dbase. Three years later, when we were ready to convert to CD-ROMs, we connected with **Jim Stephens** (President of EBSCO Information Services) who had just bought a CD-ROM publishing company, **Horizon Information Systems**. In 1989 Horizon was merged with our company, **Database Communications Cor-**

poration to form **EBSCO Publishing**. **Oliver Pesch**, who was a principal of **Horizon** became our Director of Technology. He still is a critical part of our team and deserves a lot of credit for what we have accomplished.

ATG: To what do you attribute the success of your company?

TC: There are several factors that should be recognized: 1) our ability to listen; 2) a bias for action and 3) people who work hard.

We have signs around the company that say "think like the customer." I have been known to say, "I don't care what we think — what does the customer think?" and we'll go call the customer. By listening to the market, we can produce better products.

At EBSCO Publishing, we have a bias for action. I would rather do 10 things and have 8 of them be successful than do 3 things and have all of them be successful. We don't overstudy a problem. We evaluate the options, get as much information as possible in a reasonable time, and then implement the decision.

There is a lot of hard work being done by a lot of talented people who thrive in an entrepreneurial environment. We are willing to hire people who are specialists in their field and support them rather than control them. Folks have the freedom to come up with good ideas and we're fortunate to have a talented staff. We also like to have fun.

ATG: What is the mission of EP and how would you describe the corporate culture?

TC: Our mission is — "To provide practical solutions to libraries, using current technology, at reasonable prices." We devised this in the early 1990's and it took months to get consensus on the correct phrasing.

We think of ourselves as being on the leading edge rather than the bleeding edge. We've not pursued ideas that we could have produced when we thought they were not practical or the market wasn't there. We did develop a new online service with a sophisticated Web interface for those who have Web access and a character cell interface for the many institutions which are using dumb terminals. The culture is loose with humor used particularly to counter the intensity focused on operation of the business and a very competitive element focused outward on our competitors.

ATG: What are the challenges facing fulltext publishers and indexing services?

TC: The primary publishers need to keep pace with changes in their customer's environment. They are challenged to provide data quickly and less expensively (with different pricing options) and still add value. There is more information available today competing for increasingly tight budgets and one option is to offer information on a transactional basis.

We are looking for the defining moment in the industry, which will offer the capability to provide dramatically better results to users. Nothing will stop the move forward which will require that everyone adapt. Like the dawn of the automotive industry, "a company would be in better shape to make a bad automobile than a better buggy."

ATG: How do you present your fulltext files?

TC: We offer multiple formats to meet diverse needs of the market for different types of publications. Some titles such as poetry titles which are text only work well in an ASCII format. Other titles, such as *Time* magazine requires a compound document comprised of ASCII and imbedded images. This enables users of dumb terminals to access the text, whereas a Win-

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dows interface or Web access is necessary to view the images.

The highest quality image is produced by PDF files which are keyword searchable or TIFF files which provide an original reproduction of the page but cannot be keyword searched. Both of these formats are space intensive and would be suitable for titles such as *JAMA* [Journal of the Medical Medical Association] which require a high quality image.

ATG: Two of your biggest competitors are *IAC* and *UMI*. How would you describe your share of the market with these two competitors?

TC: We find that we compete head to head with *IAC* in virtually every sales situation and *UMI* in a large number of these situations. While no one knows for sure what the relative market share is between us, my gut feel is that *IAC* and *EBSCO* are the leaders and relative leadership between the two differs by market segment.

ATG: What are your comments about the slowness of searching fulltext on the Web? What would you say are the minimum requirements for library patrons to be able to perform this type of access?

TC: We have found that searching the fulltext does not have to be slow on the Web. The actual search of text is not a big resource drain — in other words, if your Web access is slow, fulltext searching will be slow — If your access is fast, fulltext searching will be fast. The real resource drain is the delivery of large fulltext documents over the Web. The ASCII format is relatively fast compared to bit-mapped images or PDF files — but a 50-page document is going to take a long time to get over the wire, even if it is ASCII format. In order to manipulate non-ASCII fulltext (and handle large ASCII files), the user should have a decent-sized machine, perhaps a 486/33 with 8 MB ram or more and the library should upgrade their existing Internet connection as the utilization per existing user will increase when they start retrieving these documents.

ATG: Can you give us some idea of the number of publishers who are willing to allow fulltext access to their publications?

TC: Of the 50,000 periodicals that are purchased in a reasonable volume by the library community, I would estimate that around 10% have their data available as part of a packaged product. We have asked to include fulltext for the 4,500 titles that we abstract and have received agreements for over half of these journals.

The relation between number of titles abstracted and available in fulltext differs per product but generally hovers between 40-50% fulltext coverage for our higher end products. However our software allows the user to limit searches to only journals for which we have fulltext, providing the utility of a 100% fulltext database.

ATG: Can you comment on the publications which are loaded in your database and then must be pulled due to contractual agreements with the publisher?

TC: We have only had a handful of titles cancel their agreements for fulltext access with us. Generally speaking, when a publisher agrees to allow their content to be offered electronically as part of one of our products, they are making a commitment for the long run.

ATG: Where do you see *EBSCO Publishing* going? What does the future look like?

TC: Our intention is to be the leader in the provision of practical solutions to library needs in the area of research journals, magazines and journal articles. We have built a reputation in the public and school market and devoted time in the last two years to developing products for the academic and corporate markets so we can become a leader in those areas as well.

EBSCO Publishing provides magazine and journal articles with abstracts and online access to fulltext. We find that we are competing with fulltext search engines on the Web for document retrieval and so have expanded the database beyond the magazine and journal realm to include book chapters, encyclopedias, company directories and transcripts. *EBSCO* adds value by linking different types of data together and providing a context through those links.

This is only one component of retrieving information. We realize that the patron, who is searching abstracts electronically, prefers to view the text online if there is a paid subscription to it. If not, they want to know if their institution owns the paper version. If it is not held locally, then interlibrary loan and document delivery are the next logical sources. We can actually do some of this now, but our objective is to provide a comprehensive solution which is seamless, so that it is easier for the customer to choose between their different options for acquiring articles. This is a real challenge and we're working on making it available.

ATG: Where are you located? Tell us about your physical surroundings.

TC: You've asked me a question that I really like to expand on as there is a lot

of history here. In 1995 we bought the Ipswich Mills Complex which has been completely restored. These buildings have evolved, making the transition from textiles during the Industrial Revolution to military applications and light bulbs in the Manufacturing Era and now house database production during the Information Age.

Built at the turn of the century, these housed the largest manufacturing facility for hosiery in WWI. After the War the company was not able to convert to fashionable hosiery and went bankrupt during the depression so the buildings were auctioned.

During WWII *Sylvania* owned the buildings and was contracted by the government to produce the proximity fuse which was the second most important advancement in weaponry during the War. The fuse was credited with the U.S. winning the war in the Pacific as it enabled our pilots to be nine times more effective since bombs would detonate close to targets instead of requiring a direct hit. When proximity fuses were made and shipped overseas, most of the workers did not understand the significance of what they were making as only a select group of managers had access to the complete government planning documents. Post War, the factory was converted for manufacturing light bulbs.

Now the whole facility has been redesigned for an information company. *EP* has 350 employees and is growing. The site is located on the Ipswich River about a mile from the ocean and the state just installed a fish ladder to aid Atlantic salmon in their swim upstream around the dam. A new footbridge and riverside park are in the planning stages.

ATG: What do you like to do for fun?

TC: I actually consider work fun and like the challenge of growing the business. While I live in Ipswich, I'm from a neighboring town, *Topsfield* and enjoy spending time with my family. I have a cabin in the *White Mountains* with no electricity and an outhouse. It's a great place for hiking and mountain biking.

ATG: Will we see you at the upcoming library conferences?

TC: I've attended every *ALA* since 1984 and usually go to *SLA*, *MLA*, *AASL* and *National Online* as I'm frequently a speaker. At *National Online* in NYC, we plan to have an Indy race car with the theme — "Come take a test drive in the race to the Web."

This summer we'll be showing *Academic Search FullText* which includes access to over 1000 titles as well as author-supplied abstracts from publishers such as *Elsevier*.