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Lindsay and Howes

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Interview with Miriam Lindsay and Bernard Howes

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On Friday, June 27, 1997, I spoke with **Bernard Howes** and **Miriam Lindsay** at the Crowne Parke Plaza in San Francisco. The conversation was so absorbing I forgot to take many notes. Katina probably takes a tape recorder to her sessions. I understand why Katina does so many of these sessions. I learned a bit about the other side of the library book business and had a good time. Lindsay & Howes Booksellers had just celebrated their tenth year of supplying British books to American libraries. — PC



grounds, but we have experienced the same problem with finding new, larger premises over the last couple of years as we did in those first months.

ML: I remember that first we had to go to the bank to open an account. In order to do this we had to have a business plan. Since we were somewhat naive about what a bank would look for, this step took several attempts.

ATG: What were they looking for?

BH: What they really wanted to know was can you make a go of it? Will it be profitable?

ATG: How did you convince them?

ML/BH: Our assets were our knowledge of the publishing industry and our working relationships with libraries. But what seemed most persuasive to the bankers was that libraries always pay the bills. How many businesses can say that about customers. Libraries don't go bankrupt or run up bad debts.

ATG: So you never have to hire a collection agent?

BH: That's right. The transactions may take time but libraries always pay.

ATG: In our state, agencies must pay penalties if they take over 30 days to pay an invoice. Do you see fewer delayed payments now from libraries than when you first started the business?

BH: Yes, libraries are faster about paying and EDI offers further possibilities for improvements.

ATG: Do you have British customers or are you strictly an export company?

ML: The British customers we serve — some local schools and such — we have because they are located close to us. Ninety-five percent of our business is with American libraries.

ATG: For several of the last ten years American libraries have seen budgets hit

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joint operation where we learnt to “fall out” with each other. Who wouldn't when dealing with continuation orders!?

ATG: Was starting your own business as you expected it to be?? Or were there surprises?

ML: I don't know what Bernard's expectations were and can't remember now what I thought it would be like, but I do know that if I'm having a good day, I'd say I wouldn't trade the past ten years for anything else. We have done absolutely every part of the process ourselves so we know it inside out.

ATG: Tell us what you remember about how you began the company.

BH: When we left S & B, we spent four months setting up L & H and actually worked from my parents' house during

ATG: How did you decide to start your own company?

BH: Both of us had worked for Stevens & Brown before it was acquired by Dawson and were happy there. We wanted to continue in the book business and felt that the time was as right if it ever would be.

ATG: You said you both worked for Stevens & Brown? What were your responsibilities there?

BH: I worked for Stevens & Brown for 14 years in periodicals and was previously involved in the publishing and newspaper industry, hence I suppose my keen interest in this side of our business. Miriam was with the company for 23 years and

“... libraries always pay the bills. How many businesses can say that about customers? Libraries don't go bankrupt or run up bad debts.”

worked on “the other side.” Her initial responsibility was for the “new phenomena” of Approval Plans, but in the later part of her time with the company she became responsible for the overall Book operation. Where did our paths meet ... well, in the Continuations Department, a

that time. Our major problem was finding premises, and we eventually managed to secure a building south of Godalming which we took over in May, 1988. We started off in one room and now we more than fill the whole building. Fortunately, it does have other storage space on the

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hard by periodical price increases and electronic resources. Have these trends hurt your business?

BH: We have heard librarians discuss these trends, but our business has increased during this time.

ATG: Are you planning to continue to grow?

BH: As long as we can maintain quality service, I see no reason why we should not see continued growth. Having interviewed us, you can see that you are not dealing with aggressive sales people, but I hope our record and reputation stand us in good stead.

ATG: It does seem that as companies get larger they get further removed from customers.

ML: Since we don't have stockholders to please, we can set our plans to please ourselves. We have a responsibility to our customers and our employees.

ATG: What services do you currently offer?

BH: Approval plans, firm orders, standing orders, out of print orders.

ATG: Are there any publishers you will not deal with?

ML: We will try to get anything a library wants; that's why we're in business.

ATG: Will you get government publications or dissertations from British universities?

ML: This is a difficult area but we do our best and usually come up with the goods.

ATG: How about audio or video tapes?

ML: We have gotten them for our customers when they are published with printed materials but these formats are not our primary specialty.

ATG: How do you stay current with the British publishing scene? How do you select the books for your approval customers?

BH: We use numerous sources of new title information from British publishers, mostly now in electronic format, but the printed blurbs and catalogs still come in useful.

ATG: How do you avoid duplication of titles published in America and England at the same time?

BH: This is an issue we have coped with over the years and our experience has shown that it is not a major problem. We supply known first UK titles and our knowledge in the trade helps us through the minefield of international publishing.

ATG: The first acquisitions librarian I worked for told me that it was always better to buy from an agent in the country where the work was published. Do you agree?

BH: It's hard for us to say what's best for any one library, but we certainly be-

"Some customers have been introduced to the company from the Website, but mail has made a bigger impact at this point. We can communicate so much faster with customers on the Internet... Email makes time zones irrelevant in many ways."

lieve that buying from country of origin is preferable. Purchasing a book is not always as straightforward as people outside the trade think. Being on the spot is invaluable.

ATG: Some other British booksellers have retail stores in university towns. Do you see that possibility in the future for Lindsay & Howes?

BH: At present, we have no connection with a bookshop, although this is something we have wanted to do since starting up on our own. Our reasons for this would probably be more out of personal ambition to have a retail outlet rather than good business sense. In reality, the current climate is not exactly conducive to small individual shops. Having a shop in many ways would not really be a great advantage to our existing business, except that hopefully it would increase turnover and maybe give a little more buying power. It would also help as an outlet for unwanted library titles, bearing in mind, however, that the highest percentage of our export titles are of little appeal in the high street.

ATG: So, you have no plans to diversify or to expand to the British market?

BH: We have never really tried to get into the British market, mainly because our background was in export and that was where we had the contacts initially.

The UK library scene is also in a fairly depressed state at the present with very little funding. Consequently, library suppliers are feeling the pinch and it would not be a good time to make any effort to get into the market. All that aside, you will find we are "very conservative" and feel that we have ample to do in complying with our present market requirements. Whilst diversification has its advantages, it can also distract from actual quality of service provided overall.

ATG: It does seem that libraries try to be all things to our patrons and our primary services don't improve as a result. Do you provide physical processing for books?


ML: Yes, that is a relatively new area for us, but we are anxious to meet customers' varying requirements as they arise.

ATG: Do you have a sales force?

BH: No. Miriam and I come over for Midwinter ALA and for the summer show. We began doing this in Dallas, 1989.

ATG: Do you see the Internet changing your business greatly?

BH: At this point we have a Web site — www.lindsay-howes.co.uk. Some customers have been introduced to the company from the Website, but mail has made a bigger impact at this point. We can communicate so much faster with customers on the Internet, for Rush orders or other specialized services. Email makes time zones irrelevant in many ways.

Our Webpage — which is really in its infancy — is the work of my younger son, Ben. He worked full time with us for a year between university courses, and during his last year at Imperial doing his Masters in computer science, he has continued to make updates. 

NB: When I first encountered Lindsay & Howes, I was working for Tia Gozzi at Stanford University. Now I am at the U. of Florida in the Marsten Science Library, but I still make use of their services and hope that you will visit their booth at ALA!
— PC