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ATG Interviews Tom Romig

Publisher — U*X*L

by Tom Gilson (College of Charleston)

*We caught up with Tom Romig, publisher of the Gale imprint, U*X*L, during this year's ALA conference. U*X*L specializes in middle and high school reference titles and Tom, as a leading publisher in this area, had a number of fascinating insights into a market which is unfamiliar to many of us here at ATG. We believe that this is an emerging area of interest to education professionals in colleges and universities — TG*

ATG: U*X*L is relatively new on the scene. Can you fill us in on how you got started?

TR: Sure, I'd be glad to. We started U*X*L about six years ago, in the fall of 1992. We got the idea when a number of our customers said to us that we really didn't have much for the middle school market. Although we published *Something about the Author*, a biographical reference set which covers children's and young adult authors, as well as one or two similar sets, overall these customers were right. What really caught our attention was that they also told us that there was an increased need for reference products for this age group. We conducted a feasibility study and confirmed that there was a strong market and that it would be economically viable. So we decided to take the plunge. Knowing that our customers were our best source of ideas, we assembled a group of advisors consisting of media specialists, librarians, and school district people. Our real inspiration and best ideas always come from our users so we really learned a lot from this group. After initiating strong connections with the marketplace, the next smartest thing I did was to hire Carol Nagel, a Gale editor, as U*X*L's managing editor, a position she holds to this day. Together, we developed detailed data maps of biographical, scientific, and other information in high demand in middle schools. Over the years Carol and I gradually hired more people so that today we have a staff of ten. I can honestly say that this is the most outstanding group I've ever worked with. Whatever U*X*L has achieved has been the result of a true team effort.

ATG: Tom, how long have you personally been involved in the publishing business?

TR: More years than I care to admit! But, seriously, I joined Gale Research about thirty years ago. I had finished getting my Masters degree in English and, though I had no experience in publishing, was able to land a job as a promotion writer. Eventually I became the Director of Creative Services, and after that

the Director of Marketing. Then six years ago Dedria Bryfonski, now Gale's CEO, asked me to become the publisher for the new U*X*L imprint. It was an opportunity that I was ready for and in some ways it seemed meant to be. My father had been a publisher and my Mom was a librarian, and to top it off, my wife, Ann, is a K-8 school librarian and my oldest daughter, Margaret, works for Rand McNally. It must be in the genes. In any case, I jumped at the offer and have never regretted it. It's a great job — I'm doing work I love and I get solid support from Gale.

ATG: Speaking of Gale Research, how does U*X*L fit into the Gale publishing family? What is the nature of the relationship?

TR: U*X*L is an imprint of Gale, like Visible Ink Press, St. James Press, and the Taft Group. We are not a separate publishing house, though we have our own staff consisting of myself, eight editorial people, and a senior market analyst who develops new products. By working with a good many talented freelance editors and copy editors, we have been able to create a sizable list in a relatively short period of time. We rely on Gale Research staff for support. Areas like graphic design, marketing and sales, production, permissions, etc., are all handled by Gale. We work closely with these departments to bring our books and other products like CDs to market. Gale is a great resource with strong professional staffs in all of the areas I just mentioned. As you can imagine, being able to draw on such resources makes our job at U*X*L a great deal easier.

ATG: You just mentioned marketing. It strikes us that the middle school/high school market is unique. What are the differences between your market and the public library market? The academic library market?

TR: Actually, for student reference products, the middle school and high school markets are pretty close to the public library market. Given the meager support of schools in some communities, the public library often serves as the middle and high school student's primary library resource. Even in districts where school support is strong, the public library is usually the only library open after school is out, which is when many students work on their research assignments. Considering these factors, it's not surprising that we sell quite a few books and electronic products to public libraries. The academic market is another matter. Our books and CDs are designed to connect to the curriculum and are intended to be used for real assignments given today's middle and high school students. They are not intended for the college market although some college students might find them

useful. The scope, contents, and layout of U*X*L products is considerably different from those in college or adult reference works. We need to keep our writing and graphics lively and inviting in order to draw the students in. Of course, colleges and universities are training a lot of the teachers who will use our materials so they need to be familiar with them.

ATG: Are there issues specific to this market — i.e. age appropriateness? Censorship concerns? How do you deal with them?

TR: When you publish reference works that follow the curriculum it is extremely important to have the full facts and not shrink from including the controversial. We are not confrontational, but we do not avoid unpleasant facts. For example, in our forthcoming *Technology in Action*, we point out that, while Henry Ford was a great innovator and had a profound impact on the automobile industry, he was also a notorious anti-Semite. Our staff feels that kids need the whole picture, warts and all, if they are going to be discerning about issues. To maintain objectivity, we've established a series of checks and balances that involves not only the U*X*L editorial staff but also independent fact checkers. We get a few complaints, but those tend to be from friends and relatives of some of the people we have written about, not from parents or media specialists. We select our sources carefully so if challenged, we can back up our work with the facts. So far our approach has been successful.

ATG: U*X*L has an increasingly varied title list. How do you decide which subjects to concentrate on? What is the role of librarians and teachers in the process?

TR: As I noted our work is closely tied to the curriculum so we emphasize subject areas directly related to it. Even titles like our *Sports Stars* series and our three-volume set *Parents Aren't Supposed to Like It*, which covers rock and popular musicians, fit this criteria. Students want to write about these people and any subject that a student might do an assignment on is a subject we'll consider. When we first started, the staff jokingly referred to me as "Mr. Derivative," and in a sense, I guess it is true. Our reference works derive their content from the curriculum and from the interests of middle and high school students.

Input from librarians, teachers and students has been crucial. As I mentioned earlier, every year we convene in Detroit a national advisory board of librarians and media specialists who make suggestions about trends in education and needed reference products. They also critique the print and electronic products we've produced and tell us what they like and don't like about what other publish-

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ers are developing for students. In addition, we have advisors for each product — specialists who give us feedback on the plan for a work, the arrangement, and the writing style and level. And I'm fortunate to be able to call on my wife for advice on student needs and to use some of her students as guinea pigs. We have let them, as well as students from other schools, use our books and later answer questions about whether they were inviting and easy to use. From time to time, we have teachers and librarians use our reference works in class and in the library, observe how students use them, and then get back to us with their impressions.

Besides getting feedback like this, we are also guided by the middle school movement, which stresses developing higher thinking skills and conceptualizing. Our work reflects the belief that the middle school years set the cognitive development patterns that last a person's lifetime. From that standpoint, it is very important for U*X*L to publish quality reference works. We like to think that our concern about quality shows in our final product.

ATG: *On the other hand, what suggestions do you have for librarians, teachers, and parents using your reference works?*

TR: I'm so used to asking our audience what their needs are that it gives me pause to be asked what suggestions I might have for them! Basically, I think that everyone who educates children, whether librarians, teachers, or parents, should continue helping kids to get beneath the surface of things, to go beyond mere recall. Students need to learn to ask first why things are so and then whether they must be so. U*X*L's role in this is to provide the whole honest range of information on a topic, and then to help students to grasp the implications of actions and events so that they'll see how ideas are connected. U*X*L is just a part of a process that, when it works, helps students come up with their own original insights and helps them shape their own lives. And even when we can't be all that noble, we hope at least to be able to help kids get their homework done right and in on time!

ATG: *U*X*L seems to organize its reference works in a variety of ways, i.e., alphabetically, chronologically and topically. How do you decide which is the most appropriate method for each work? Are students ever confused by the way your works are organized?*

TR: Early in the conceptualization stage for each new product, we send a full proposal — including an outline of contents, proposed arrangement and indexing, and sample entries — to ten or so librarians and media specialists for their suggestions. We always ask questions about arrangement. We specifically want to know what's the most useful way to present the particular type of information to students working on assignments. An example helps show what the thinking might be behind a given arrangement.

Our *Explorers and Discoverers* could have been arranged alphabetically, chronologically, or

geographically. Our advisors told us students were most apt to access this information by the name of the explorer, so the primary arrangement is alphabetical. However they also told us that other approaches are useful, so we include a table that, for each region of the world, lists in chronological order the people who have explored the area. And, again at the suggestion of advisors, we even included a listing of explorers by country of birth. In this way we try to eliminate or at least minimize any confusion on the part of students. Our goal is to do what's necessary to help them achieve a successful research effort.

ATG: *Tom, you have mentioned CDs a few times. Don't kids really prefer electronic resources over print?*

TR: Of course CDs and other electronic formats have great appeal to kids and we offer a number of CD products. The multimedia capabilities of the electronic formats are a big plus. But to be honest, the kids seem to like our books just as well. The print product has the strength of organizing knowledge in a more visually obvious way than electronic formats. Using chapters, subheadings, sidebars, etc., print resources can be more sequential and reflective of the hierarchy and inter-relatedness of information. But truthfully, the bottom line is that neither is "better" than the other. Print and electronic formats have their unique strengths and students should have access to both.

ATG: *What are U*X*L's future publication plans? Are you going to expand any of*

your existing series? Add any new ones?

TG: As you'd guess by now, whatever we do will be dictated by the curriculum, by students' needs for reference material to do whatever research projects they're assigned. We'll certainly continue developing print and CD resources in all the subjects students are interested in, but the big news for 1999 is that we're taking U*X*L online. Our comprehensive databases in science, biography, multiculturalism, and other areas will be made available to school and public libraries via GaleNet, which is Gale's online service. This is something we've been planning to do from the very start, so it's exciting for us take this major step towards making U*X*L information even more available to students.

ATG: *We have one last question and then we will let you go. Tom, what does U*X*L stand for?*

TR: I get that question all the time, so I guess it is not as obvious as we originally thought. Although many people think it is an acronym, it is not. It means exactly what it says — You Excel. And that is the real message we want to get across to kids, and it looks like it is getting through. Just the other day I had a librarian tell me that one of her students came in asking if she had gotten in any new "you excel" books. Comments from students like that are really gratifying and are one of the reasons I love this work and feel proud of what the U*X*L staff has accomplished.

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