September 2000

Donald Hagen-Managing Director, Bernan Associates

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (2000) "Donald Hagen-Managing Director, Bernan Associates," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 4, Article 19.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3261>

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ATG Interviews Donald Hagen

Managing Director, Bernan Associates

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <strauchk@earthlink.net>

ATG: *It seemed that Bernan just appeared on the scene recently. Tell us: how old is Bernan? When was it started? Where and why? Who owns Bernan? How is it governed?*

DH: Actually, **Bernan** has been around since 1952. The company was originally founded by **Bernie** and **Nan Lockyer**, hence the name. **Bernan** was initially set up to fulfill libraries' subscriptions to publications. By the mid 1970's the company had transitioned into only filling standing orders of GPO publications. In 1976 **Bernan** was purchased by the **Kraus Organization Limited**, a family owned corporation headquartered in New York City, run by the president, **Mr. Herbert Gstalder**.

ATG: *Bernan just acquired Accents. Tell us why you acquired Accents. There was some consternation recently over a listserv about the loss of Accents and their personalized service. Is Bernan that much bigger than Accents?*

DH: We acquired **Accents** for several reasons. The former owner of **Accents**, **Mr. Nadav Katz**, initially approached us about purchasing his company. When we took a close look at what **Accents** was doing and who their customer base included, we found that there was quite a bit of crossover between the core business of both companies. The majority of **Accents'** business was **CFR** subscription fulfillment, which is also a large portion of **Bernan's** business, allowing for a seamless transition of these accounts. On the other hand, there are approximately ten large academic libraries that were using **Accents** for acquiring highly specialized material. We currently do not have the staff in place to meet these needs, but we recently hired someone who, among other things, is looking at the possibility of us beginning this service again.

ATG: *You publish quite a few federal government publications. Will this continue? Do you publish in electronic format(s)? What else do you publish?*

DH: Absolutely. Government material is the foundation of what we do at **Bernan**. Not only will we continue, we are constantly adding titles the government discontinues in spite of a need driven demand for this material. Two examples of this are *Business Statistics of the United States*, and *Handbook of U.S. Labor Statistics*. This year we will be publishing for the first time *The Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, formerly published by GPO. We have received high praise from many librarians for taking over the publication of these items.

Currently we do not publish anything in a straightforward electronic format, but we are in the process of laying the groundwork to begin doing this in the near future. Some of our products are published on CD-ROM or include additional material on CD-ROM or diskettes.

The material we publish covers a wide range of topics, such as international trade, statistics and demographics, health and medicine, education, ethnicity and culture, environment and natural resources, banking and finance, each branch of the federal government and more.

ATG: *Currently, there is a bill in Congress to cut funding for the Government Printing Office/Office of Depository Libraries. Many fear that government publications will cease to be available or will be available to a select few people or libraries. Could you please comment? If this funding was withdrawn would this be an opportunity for Bernan as a commercial publisher? Is this desirable for the public good?*

DH: We are watching the developments on this bill closely. Personally, I believe that the **Federal Depository Library Program** is a wonderful treasure and it would be a shame if the proposed funding cuts actually take place. It is possible that the members of the House could be saber rattling, trying to drive home the point that in spite of the budget surpluses we have been hearing about, there are still tough choices that are going to have to be made if we are going to ensure the continuation of Social Security. I have a hard time believing that these cuts will be passed, though, by both the House and the Senate and then signed by the President. I think a likely scenario would be that the House passes these cuts and the Senate does not and the funding is reinstated during conference or that both chambers pass these cuts and the White House demands they be reinstated.

However, if both chambers of Congress and the White House take this unimaginable step, I believe there could be a role for **Bernan** to play. Conceivably, this could be an opportunity for **Bernan** to begin republishing additional items, but clearly this is not desirable for the general public. As a business we would have to charge for these items and that would mean libraries would have to make some tough decisions regarding their collection development. Library budgeting is a zero sum game. So, if a library decided to purchase something they previously received for free, then they would have to eliminate something else. This situation is not in the best interest of the end user.

The GPO has a sales program in place and for some titles a far greater number of publications make it into the public's hands through the sales program than through the depository program. If all the material currently in depository program were made available through their sales program, I believe there could be a big role that **Bernan** could play. First, I believe that **Bernan** is easier to deal with than GPO, because we are more customer oriented. Secondly, I think Congress would start to view GPO as a revenue source and prices would steadily rise. **Bernan** is a for-profit business, but, part of running a profitable business is not pricing yourself out of the market. Profitability has never been a constraint the federal government has had to operate under.

The alternative to the government printing and distributing this material is to put the information online, but there are so many problems with this solution currently it is not really viable. Before this becomes even part of the solution, several questions need to be addressed. How will information be archived? Will it always be available for historical reference? What do you do with maps? What about depository items published in Braille? How do you verify the authenticity of something online? To my knowledge, currently there is no way to verify that electronic information has not been altered. This issue looms even larger in light of the archival issues. What about computer viruses? An open system that allowed everyone access would also be more vulnerable to hackers and viruses.

The world of libraries is changing, though. I grew up with books and find pleasure holding a book in my hands. My oldest daughter just finished her freshman year of college and tells me that she rarely set foot in the library. She did almost all of her research online. So while the idea of moving the depository material to an electronic format will be met with apprehension by me and my contemporaries, the generation that are now becoming adults would probably welcome this change.

ATG: *How many people are employed at Bernan? How many books do you publish per year? How about journals? CD-ROMs? Electronic databases? Other?*

DH: Currently there are about 55 people working at our office in Lanham, MD. **Bernan** publishes approximately 40-50 titles including new titles and new editions. We publish five titles on CD-ROM and none in electronic format, but that will be changing in the near future.

continued on page 52

Donald Hagen
from page 50

ATG: Tell us about your international offices. How large are they and where are they located?

DH: Bernan has no international offices. The closest we come to international offices would be the resale agreements we have with our international distributors.

ATG: How has the electronic revolution affected Bernan?

DH: Since we were founded in 1952 and we are not a huge corporation, we, like many other companies, are working to retrofit an established company. This is a difficult process, though, on two levels. First, you have the cost associated with making these changes. We do not have large cash reserves that we can use to throw money at this week's new idea. We must make our choices wisely, so that a year from now we are not suffering from buyer's remorse. Secondly, in a company that is almost 50 years old, you have tradition and a certain ebb and flow to business. When you publish a book it is an event with a tangible item. Electronic publishing does not offer these same things. Material posted online can be updated whenever you like, there is no need for second or third editions. So while you set dates for posting material online, those dates are much more easily changed than a publishing date. Electronic publishing is in our future. How that will manifest itself is still under consideration.

We have an e-publishing group that is laying the groundwork for this transition, looking at hardware options, doing market surveys and evaluating which material is best suited for an online format.

The electronic revolution has had, is having and will continue to have an increasing influence on how and what we do at Bernan. From networking the office, to changing our order entry/accounting system, to deciding what material to publish online and how to package it, the electronic revolution has changed the way we do business. That is just the nature of the world we live in, though. Change is inevitable so we must continue to change and reinvent ourselves or we will be left behind.

ATG: Tell us about yourself. What are your hobbies? What do you like to do? What do you like to read? Family?

DH: I'm a family guy with three girls and a boy. My wife, **Joyce**, is busy constantly keeping the daily business of the family operating. My oldest girl will be in her second year at the **College of William and Mary**. Another girl is a rising senior in high school, and the third girl is moving up to the 8th grade. My son will be in second grade next September. The majority of my free time is occupied with crew, soccer, lacrosse, and Little League events. Reading—mostly newspapers and re-reading high school classics to help the kids with reports. Biking has become my outlet for stress relief and weight control.

Fazio Interview
from page 48

ATG: Given the uncertainty and high cost of electronic publishing, we understand your hesitance. Have you considering partnering with other small (or large) publishers? Is that a viable option? Why or why not?

EF: We are partnering with **netLibrary** on some of our academic works, but have not yet gone this route with an encyclopedia. I am considering options, but I am not ready to make any recommendations. As far as other publishers go, it becomes a question of who owns the copyright to a work, how it's going to be used and where, does it end up in a database that then competes with the original work, and similar issues. These things become a deterrent.

ATG: Where do you see *Sharpe Reference* in 5 years? 10 years?

EF: I would like to see this line continue to grow and expand, and become one of the best in the industry. I believe that if we stick to our mission and continue to grow carefully, and concentrate on high quality, we will continue to be successful. We have increased the number of titles published from 4 a year to 6 or 7. Our print runs are fairly stable—we'd rather reprint than keep excessive inventory, and the sales are growing on an average of about 20 percent a year so far. The backlist continues to sell, and we've reprinted several titles. I expect these trends to continue.

Here's Looking At
from page 45

One of the revelations of this book, as I've mentioned, is that sprawl did not happen by accident. I had thought that the *lack* of zoning was responsible for sprawl, but here the authors demonstrate that sprawl is actually the logical outcome of current zoning laws and planning practices, which specify nonoverlapping single-use areas for shopping and for housing, and which regulate the type of housing that can exist in a certain area, forcing uniform, economically segregated neighborhoods without options for multifamily dwellings, apartments, and single family homes in a single integrated area.

The authors show that the typical suburb with its cul-de-sac kids and soccer moms is not a healthy psychological environment. The kids are safe on their cul-de-sacs for their first few years, but then become virtual prisoners "of a thoroughly safe and unchallenging environment" which they cannot leave except by car, so they are completely dependent on adults. Moms, on the other hand, are stuck in their cars for hours, driving various children to all the places they now need to go since they have nothing available to them in their

own neighborhood: no walkable park, school, library, or shops. Teenagers are bored in these environments, and the elderly are stranded. Commuters are exhausted, pushing the limits of how far they can stand to drive daily. The authors point out that "now, largely be-

cause of suburban land-use patterns, the eight-hour day has once again become the ten-hour day. These two hours, once the most interesting, varied and socially productive hours of the day [when spent at home, or in communal activity as early in the twentieth century] have become some of the most stressful and unpleasant"—spent fighting traffic on overstuffed highways.

The book's most simple and yet stunning conclusion is that we've been designing our towns and cities for cars, not people. To make them work for people, they should look like traditional neighborhoods: mixed use, with shops and houses intermingled, apartments above stores, narrow treed streets, houses set close to the street with garages hidden at the back, and a sense of the presence of other

humans (which the mixed-use tends to encourage, but the single-use to discourage, since people all go off to work at the same time, abandoning one area, to fill an office park somewhere else, which, because of its isolation in a sea of asphalt, off a highway, is impracticable to leave except at the end of the workday.)

One of the authors' strengths is their ability to show how the "devil is in the details"—how small things like street width and the angle at which roads meet are important factors in establishing our psychological as well as physical environment. They point out that the arbitrarily curvy streets of the typical new subdivision "create an environment that is utterly disorienting" and that road engineers design roads with curves at intersections to allow cars to navigate them more quickly, but these same roads discourage walkers. It is difficult, after reading this book, to underestimate the power of such physical details. The authors believe (and do a good job of showing) that "community cannot form in the absence of communal space, without places for people

continued on page 66