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I User-First Encounter with the RCA eBook

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I, User — First Encounters with the RCA eBook

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (R2 Consulting Services, 63 Woodwell's Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Ph: (603) 746-5991; Fax: (603) 746-6052)
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In this issue, *ATG* inaugurates a new column, edited by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** of **R2 Consulting**. *I, User* gives voice to a central, if often overlooked, experience of the information age—namely, what happens when we first encounter a new product, service, interface, search engine, Web site, database, or concept? Specifically, what is the user's experience? Not the developer's; not the marketer's; not the venture capitalist's — the *user's*! Think of these articles as small documentaries, with room for humor, outrage, criticism, and enthusiasm.

We begin by describing our experience with the **RCA REB 1100 eBook** reader. In coming months, we'll look closely at alerting services, other eBook readers, audio book software, "bots" of various stripes, and anything else that piques our interest. However, the focus remains the user experience, minutely observed, which of course extends beyond encounters with technology. For instance, we know several kids starting college this fall. We'll ask one or more of them to recount his or her first experience at their academic library—the catalog, the reference desk, their first taste of bibliographic instruction. Maybe we'll get a new faculty member to do the same. Librarians might describe their first experience of a vendor. We invite contributions.

We'll also offer opportunities for response from the subjects of our scrutiny — correcting misperceptions, updating documentation, promising improvements — because the premise here is

simple: we place the user at the center of the experience; why else do these products and services matter? Any dialogue that can improve that experience is worth having.

"Please Wait": First Encounters with the RCA eBook

eBooks are on everyone's mind these days, if not in their hands. As budding consultants, we at **R2 Consulting** have license to pay attention to, well, pretty much whatever we want to as long as we don't expect to get paid. Because so much ink and so many bytes have been sacrificed to extol the virtues of eBooks, we've spent a good deal of the last six months transforming ourselves from eBook neophytes to eBook phytes. In fact, we even decided to become consumers, as well as mere experts. Here's what happened:

Summer 2000: R2 spends its summer vacation studying the eBook market. We become, in retrospect, irrationally exuberant.

October 2000: Gemstar announces new eBook readers, made by RCA, to go on sale the day after Thanksgiving. Publicity kit includes groovy photos, and names **Best Buy**, **Circuit City**, and **Office Max** as purveyors. We are *there*!!

11/24/00: Drive to **Best Buy**. Look near Palm devices. Negative. Look in PC section. No dice. Near the **GameBoys**? Nope. When all else fails, ask. Ask again. And again. In fact, ask 7 people, including a manager. Weird looks, no reader.

11/24/00: No **Office Max** or **Circuit City** within 30 miles. Let's
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A Tale of the Two Richards from page 30

pany in the late 1960's was meteoric: "We finally had 900 or 1000 people in the company with offices in 16 cities scattered around the world"¹¹ and his offer of an **ELAP** program (**English Language Approval Plan**) providing worldwide coverage of English language publications caught the attention of **Richard Blackwell**. As a direct result of the Abel threat, **Richard Blackwell** expanded his sales efforts into the United States. With the establishment of Blackwell's blanket order service in the late 1960's, **Richard Blackwell** could write in 1971: "At the moment we operate 22 of these plans for North American libraries, and they vary in size from comprehensive coverage of all the main areas (as for example for the **University of Wisconsin**—Milwaukee, amounting to some \$30,000 a year) to **Fordham University Library** (which requires only the publications of the Clarendon Press, amounting to some \$1,200 a year)..."¹² Oh, for the days when a comprehensive U.K. approval plan cost \$30,000!

Meanwhile, the reign of **Richard Abel**, which was to last some fifteen years (1960-1974) was about to come to an end. What exactly caused the final closure of **Abel** is open to much debate. **Richard Abel** himself says that the firm "was always undercapitalized. In 1974 inflation was starting up, the economy has just fallen apart, the stock market lost about half its value in a matter of days. And suddenly, the libraries we were dealing with had cash flow problems. So they slowed their payments to vendors."¹³

A slightly different slant was given by **Don Chvatal** in his 1999 interview where he said: "...one of the causes for the demise of the Abel company: failure to maintain good inventory management. Excess inventory was being carried on the books at an ever-escalating value."¹⁴ In the same interview **Chvatal** also discusses the leveling off of sales growth in the early 1970's, saying: "We introduced cost-plus, and that was a marketing mistake; it quickly turned into a financial mistake because we lost sales and sales revenue...."¹⁵

References

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5. Martin Warzala, "The Evolution of Approval Services," *Library Trends* 42, no. 3 (1994): 515.
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10. Ibid., 25.
11. Boule, 9.
12. Samore, *Acquisition of Foreign Materials for U.S. Libraries*, 61.
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14. Dora Biblarz, "ATG Interviews Don Chvatal," *Against the Grain*, 11, no 3 (1999): 34
15. Ibid, 36-37.

I User
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try **Staples**. Over to the Palm display case. Nyet. Ask the dude. Nada. Question overheard by section manager. A-ha! **Staples** expects shipments of the **Franklin eBook** reader, but release has been delayed. Don't want a Franklin this time, but are so grateful to find someone who knows what an eBook reader is that we buy an entire skid of Post-Its.

11/25/00: Hey, let's try the Web! Go to **RCA** Web site. Honkin' big TVs. Tons of audio equipment. Satellite dishes...hmmm...no, mustn't lose focus. Try Quick search—eBook readers! Well hidden, but eventually we discover a description. Strange buying experience compared to usual e-commerce, but eventually we get the sucker ordered. We think.

12/10/00: **RCA** eBook arrives. **FedEx** box looks like leftover from *Cast Away*, but contents are OK. Content, in fact, is king, but eBook doesn't have any.

12/17/00: Reader is gift for Ruth's parents. More a rechargeable doorstop than a book unless we get some...uh, content! That's it. Let's get some books! Let's set it all up so they can just start reading! I bet they'll look as happy as the people in the groovy photos!

4:00PM Open box. Find Quick Start guide. "Registration and passcode required to protect billing info." "Do not use in bathtub." "Do not use in thunderstorms."

Hmmm, What is the "eBook Librarian" CD for? Plug in phone cord. Start unit. Begin registration. "Registration sets up an online account

and bookshelf." "Please Wait: Dialing 1-800-...-... Please Wait: Searching for local phone number. Please Wait: Dialing 1-800-...-..."

4:21 PM "Please Wait: Downloading latest version of eBook software." (How long? Can't tell file size or modem speed. Isn't this the latest? What did we buy?)

4:28 PM "Please Wait: Installing Software Update."

4:30 PM "eBook software update complete."

4:31 PM "Download eBook Central Catalog." (But I don't want to download it! I just want to browse it. Please?)

4:33 PM Order subject catalogs from Central catalog. (Order catalogs? What? Do I get \$5 back like **JC Penney**? No. Catalogs are free, but they must be ordered.)

4:35 PM Ordered Current Fiction; Magazines; Non-Fiction catalogs. And...what is ordered must be downloaded....)

4:45 PM "Please Wait: Preparing Title for You. Please Wait: Loading Title. Please Wait: Installing Title. Please Wait: Preparing Title for You. Please Wait: Loading Title. Please Wait: Installing Title. Please Wait: Preparing Title for You. Please Wait: Loading Title. Please Wait: Installing Title."

5:07 PM Now the catalogs are on the reader. How much memory do they take? Browse catalogs, look for likely titles. Select two—**Stephen Ambrose's** new one on **WWII** and **Rosamund Pilcher's** *Winter Solstice*.

5:09 PM Purchase Report. \$39.06 charged to credit card. Done or Download? Uhhh, both, we thought. Did we miss something?

5:10 PM Download first book. "Please Wait: Preparing Title for You. Please Wait: Loading Title. Please Wait: Installing Title."

5:15 PM Download second book. "Please Wait: Preparing Title for You. Please Wait: Loading Title. Please Wait: Installing Title."

5:22 PM Flipping through books, trying out eBook features. Make letters big. Make letters small. Highlight bon mots and deep thoughts. Rotate text to right. Rotate text to left. "Hey Moe, I'm reading sideways...Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk..." Dog-ear page electronically with spiffy stylus. Look up "solstice" in context-sensitive dictionary. The longest day?

5:32 PM Present ready, it's pretty cool—now shut it off.

5:35 PM Oh wait, let's look at the display in the dark. Hit power switch. Unit does not respond. Nothing. Maybe it's the battery. Plug it in. Nothing. Look in the manual. "Press switch and release." Really. Rising dismay. Look for numbers to call.

5:45 PM Call tech support. "Thank you for calling eBook tech support...Our hours are Monday-Friday 9-9 Central time." Ruth makes fierce strangling sounds, like when she does Tae Bo. Violence in the air.

5:48 PM Walk away. Step away from the eBook device...slowly. Do it now! Wonder... How do we get credit for eBook bought? Is it on the device or on the online bookshelf? Both? Will we have to repeat all this when the replacement arrives? Christmas is only a week away. Well, we can just give them a picture of it....

5:58 PM Uncork bottle of **Shiraz**. Watch TV. Screen blacks out in the middle of *60 Minutes*. Linger image of the gap in **Morley Safer's** teeth. Return eBook for satellite dish?

12/18/00: Ignore problem. Testy domestic behavior. Ignore harder. Drive to **Borders**. Buy print copy of *Winter Solstice*. Publisher wins.

4:45 PM Call tech support. Not a toll-free call, this better be quick.

4:45 PM "eBook tech support; this is Craig." Answers on first ring. Whoa! No automated switchboard. Describe problem to new friend Craig, maintaining an absolutely civil tone. Always be nice to tech support.

4:46 PM "There's a re-set button under the flap for the Smart Media card. Stick a pin or paper clip in there, then power it up. Lock-ups—they happen sometimes; it's a known problem. (If it's a known problem, Craig, is there a known solution?) Nah, it's a known problem, but the cause is unknown. Always get the firmware updates." Ummm, have you considered mentioning that in the User Guide?

4:47 PM Unbend paper clip. Stick in tiny hole. Flick power switch. Eureka. Now it's as good as a book. The same one we have in print.

Next Issue: "Crisis: Grandma Finishes *Winter Solstice* and Wants Another eBook."

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