

# Against the Grain

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## Troy Williams, President & CEO, Questia

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# ATG Interviews Troy Williams

## President & CEO, Questia

by **Judy Luther** (President, Informed Strategies) <jluther@earthlink.net>

*I had an opportunity to meet Troy Williams during the NISO/NIST ebook conference in Washington DC and to discuss his approach to providing this innovative service. Questia's mission is inspiring curious exploration. — JL*

**ATG:** Is it true that Questia does not plan to work with libraries? I understand that you will market directly to the end user and the university as a whole, NOT the library? Why? Isn't this closing out a potential customer base?

**TW:** We have worked closely with libraries in building this service which is designed to help libraries with their own goals in meeting the needs of students to find material quicker and easier and to do better research.

Publishers are not willing to allow us to license content to libraries so we can't offer that option today. Considerable market research indicates that students across all demographics have a high willingness and ability to pay.

We are willing to discuss arrangements and to think creatively about the service. Libraries are an integral part of building Questia into a first rate service. Most librarians we've spoken with are enthusiastic about the service and we see a developing partnership with librarians.

**ATG:** What is different about Questia to distinguish it from ebrary and netlibrary and its other competitors?

**TW:** Questia is focused on providing access to the research environment for liberal arts. We will introduce our service with a whole library of books, 50,000 in January and will grow to 250,000 in three years. All titles are simultaneously available to all users all the time.

The significant difference with netLibrary is that they sell individual copies of books and make them available then to li-

brary users to check out which is maintaining the traditional model and relates to the sales of books.

EBrary is relatively newer and their model is less clear. Their business is to allow students to browse for free and then pay when they cut and paste text.

**ATG:** Why would students pay for access through Questia when they can get access for free through netlibrary with their library paying the bill?

**TW:** Questia offers the search function for free so users have access to the contents of the books. What they will pay for is unlimited access to the collection from anywhere at any time without the limitations of reserve status or concern that the book is checked out. They also find value in the hyperlinked footnotes that enable them to research both books and journals that they can annotate and have a bibliography produced for them. This functionality can be compared to the value of a word processor applied to the content.

**ATG:** Is Questia going to have the same books that are available from netlibrary, ebrary, etc.? How about books that are available free on the Web currently, like Project Gutenberg books?

**TW:** Questia has the world's largest digitization project. We are including historically valuable books back to 1920 and before, that have been identified by librarians. More than 105 publishers have signed up including Pearson and Greenwood which have committed to 5,000 titles in the next few years. This is a holistic approach we are taking to launch with 50,000 titles.

Although we are including some of the titles that have been made freely available on the Web, we've had to invest as much in digitizing them as in new books since they often lack edition statements and the pagination and line breaks have been stripped from them.

**ATG:** How about printing? Will students be able to print a chapter at once or will they have to print page by page? Will publishers allow this? And if publishers are letting you do this, why didn't they let netLibrary do it? What has changed?

**TW:** Printing is done one page at a time. We have negotiated with our publishing partners to maintain fair use and still replicate the difficulty of using a photocopier. Publishers get revenue on each page that is viewed.

**ATG:** Who owns Questia? Do you have a governing board? Who is on it? You were started by what Forbes has called an "infapreneur," (very young adult) yes? Tell us more. Is Questia a publicly traded company?

**TW:** Questia is owned by the employees and two major investors: TA Associates and Oppenheimer. Our Board of Directors includes Rod Canion who was CEO and President of Compaq, Ken Lay who was Chairman and CEO of Enron, Andrew McLane who is Senior Managing Director at TA Associates and myself. It is not publicly traded and there are no plans for an IPO at the moment.

**ATG:** Are any librarians involved with Questia? If so, who are they? Do you employ any librarians?

**TW:** There are seven librarians working for Questia, including Dr. Carol Ann Hughes who is the Director of Collection Development. Conversations with librarians including Chuck Henry at Rice were instrumental in the initial conversations about the concept. There will be an Advisory Council of Librarians and we will be releasing their names in the near future.

**ATG:** How about end users on your board? Who are they? How are end users involved in the company or are they?

**TW:** The company was developed on extensive market research including focus groups with users. To have raised \$135 million requires a strong foundation. Many users were involved in the design and development of the product concept.

**ATG:** Tell us about your future plans? What types of materials do you plan to have online and what do you plan to have online in the future? Textbooks? Bestsellers? University press materials? Academic imprints? Trade? Etc.?

**TW:** We include trade, university press and academic imprints today and will include bestsellers and other titles if they are relevant to the undergraduate market. Our growth plans are mammoth, going from 50,000 to 250,000 titles which would support graduate level research and lifelong learners.

**ATG:** Are you going to offer any sort of portals to specific groups or communities of specific users?

**TW:** There are broad based community plans in development to provide services. We have so many opportunities that in some cases we must depend on users to come to us.

**ATG:** How much is your service going to cost? Can you give us some sort of price list?

**TW:** We've not finalized the pricing but the goal is to be affordable to students. I came from a blue collar family and want this to be affordable. It will be comparable to other monthly services that students subscribe to now.

### Papa Lyman Remembers from page 48

I am delighted to report that 3 quarters of the first year of XXI have passed without my having seen ad writers struggling to add up their parts.

If our Editor grants permission, I'll try to finish the 1990 - 1999 decade in the Spring 2001 issue. For the midyear issue I'll try to recall some non-bookish but noteworthy happenings during the XXth Century. 🐼