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Keith Howard-Owner & Managing Director-MCB University Press

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ATG Interviews Keith Howard

Owner & Managing Director, MCB University Press <KHoward@mcbup.co.uk>

by Judy Luther <jluther@earthlink.net>

ATG: Tell us about MCB. Why is "university press" in the title? Isn't this misleading?

KH: MCB was started as a consulting company in 1967 by a group of academics at the **Bradford Management Center** in England. We called ourselves the **Management Consultants of Bradford (MCB)**. During the 1970s the consulting work of the academic shareholders in the business led to the launch of a number of titles relevant to their subject expertise. Additionally, a few titles were acquired which were related to management topics. Over the years, publishing activity grew to dominate the consulting activity. By the end of the 1980s, MCB was established as a small publisher of management titles designed for both the researcher and the practitioner. The word "university" was included in the name as the owners worked in universities and were authors/editors of journals intended to serve the academic market. I don't believe we are unique in that regard. There are a number of other university presses in the UK operating as commercial ventures.

ATG: MCB has been aggressive about buying new journals in the marketplace. Can you tell us how many journals you publish and what percent were begun by you or purchased? What subject areas do you publish in? Do you have any books?

KH: MCB publishes 130 journals, half of which were begun by the press. We are stronger in marketing and human resources, although we do have engineering and science titles as a result of acquisitions. Some acquisitions have brought good managing editors and we have expanded our expertise into secondary publishing as well. We don't publish any books.

ATG: MCB doesn't have a good reputation in the US because of high pricing. You have bought some significant US library journals, for example, and raised the prices significantly. Why have you done this especially knowing what an uproar is going on with Elsevier et al?

KH: MCB has to look at a realistic commercial return on our investment. Generally we've had to pay a lot for these titles and even with MCB pricing policies, it takes six to eight years to pay off a title, and there is a high amount of risk involved. We are moving from journal publishing to publishing information resources—seeking to provide a one-stop shop in the subject area. This is predicated on the Internet and

users having access to the benefits that can be offered with electronic publishing. Although the enhancements we offer, such as research registers, reference linking and current awareness, are of limited value to librarians who acquire the service in their work, we believe they are valued by the researcher. With the conversion of journals to a database format, the user is getting a resource of tremendous value. The business model we have used in the print world enabled us to fund the very costly conversion of these titles to electronic form and create a database. Now we are able to offer more titles for less cost through consortia arrangements, reversing the spiral. We are seeking other models that will allow us to reinvent our approach to pricing single titles. Recently we've reorganized our staff from a product/title structure to one focused on the markets. **Bev Bruce** was recently appointed to head the academic division worldwide and has had a leadership role in developing our liberal license and consortia agreements. On the publisher side, we continue to develop ways to invest in the author community to insure high quality content.

ATG: What are your long term plans for MCB? Are you just trying to build an empire so you can sell it and retire?

KH: Over the years numerous attempts have been made to acquire MCB and there have been many opportunities to sell. As one of two main shareholders, I want to see MCB continue. I could retire now if I wanted to, but I enjoy managing MCB and generating jobs in Bradford which is an economically depressed area. A significant part of our value comes from creating a continuing supply of top class management content and investing in the supply chain by encouraging authors to publish through MCB. This activity gives me (as a one-time academic) more satisfaction than increasing the nominal worth of the company.

ATG: What's behind MCB University Press—were there any high ideals or was it just a business venture? What is your background?

KH: Our goal is to become a world class publisher in the field of management. Running a press was an exciting challenge for a group of business school academics in order to practice what they preached in terms of business principals. For many years there has been a collegial atmosphere within MCB. My first degree was in engineering. This was followed by research de-

grees at master's and doctoral level (obtained when I worked in industry and academe respectively). Several owners have over the years edited MCB journals. In my case it was the *International Journal of Operations and Production Management* which is highly regarded in the US and which I edited from volume two to volume fourteen. I enjoyed the intellectual satisfaction of this endeavor. The second edition of my book *Management of a Student Research Project*, co-authored by **John A. Sharp**, and published in 1996 by **Gower**, provides solid guidelines on how to manage research projects. It draws upon my experience as chairman of the largest and most successful doctoral program in management in Europe during the early eighties.

ATG: Is the US your biggest market? Do your other markets have similar reactions to the US?

KH: The US market is very important to MCB and comprises 20% of our business. We have been successful in introducing US titles to other markets by expanding the base of contributors. The question raised on the reactions from other geographical markets is an interesting one. There are quite significant differences in responses—some are like the US, others not. I have difficulty in comprehending why this should be the case. I am much encouraged by the extent to which we are now signing consortia agreements outside the US.

ATG: What do you think about what's happening in the library marketplace? Please tell us what you think the future holds?

KH: I believe there is a move to single article retrieval on the part of the consumer. Journals and editors will nevertheless, in my view, survive into the foreseeable future as authors continue to seek the accolade of being published in highly regarded journals. There is a growing market of consumers who are willing to pay for fulltext online so they can get just what they need when they need it, but publishers will continue to promote individual journal titles to librarians as the reputation of their databases will depend on the standing of the journals they contain. We are conducting library and author workshops around the world with the aim of informing customers and consumers, at the same time seeking to understand more about the academic market in which we look to sell our products and services.

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negotiation for electronic resources. You will see that a large part of our strategic plan will deal with the rapid development of a total package for the management and delivery of e-journals. We firmly believe that this is an area in which we can be extremely useful to you and offer value-added services which will be indispensable.

I also want to add a word here about other types of online resources that we will enable you to provide to your end users. We are actively pursuing the expansion of our content offerings to include conferences, distance learning materials, courses, etc. It's a very exciting time for us and our clients.

ATG: Let's talk about publishers. What sort of experience do you have dealing with them in this type of situation?

AK: My own experience with publishers is limited. I know that publishers have been and continue to be under incredible pressure to change their historical model for the future. Look at the **Los Alamos model**. Publishers are scrambling. It is a time to potentially partner, a time of opportunity. Publishers are being turned upside down. We are in a perfect position as the middleman between libraries, users and content providers to mold the future of electronic publishing and build the pricing and delivery models which will make the best sense for all links in the information chain. Again, I am fortunate to have a wonderful staff in publisher relations and services with many years of experience dealing with publishers and working in the publishing industry. I certainly don't have all the answers. But I do have the attitude and temperament to deal with all this.

ATG: Tell us about RoweCom's current client base.

AK: As of October 2, we had about 50/50 academic and corporate institutions. It's not widely known, but **RoweCom** has had a significant client base of academic libraries even before the acquisition.

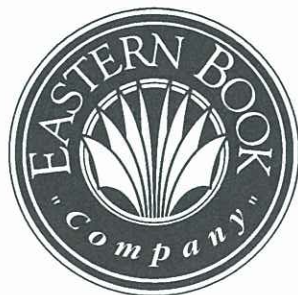
ATG: You have just hired Charles Germain as director of your European operations. Charles used to run Faxon Europe. Tell us more.

AK: France, the UK, and Spain, they are all part of our strategy. Charles is responsible for all of our European business. He certainly has the experience and knowledge to provide the best possible management for these important areas.

ATG: How many people are employed at RoweCom and what's the corporate structure like? Is the U.S. your largest market?

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ATG: Do you consider your users faculty or libraries? How much are you focusing on the individual market?

KH: Recognizing that librarians are both subject matter specialists and information brokers they obviously feature greatly in MCB's thinking. For many years a significant part of our portfolio has been dedicated to the librarian in the

former role. We see the consortial agreements as being primarily for the research and current awareness benefits of the management academic. For this category we are developing access and delivery mechanisms to satisfy their specific needs. The ideal we are attempting to achieve is "information on demand" to the individual, whether the librarian, the researcher or the practitioner. 