December 1999

Martin Manley, President and CEO, Alibris

Katina Strauch

College of Charleston, strauchk@cofc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (1999) "Martin Manley, President and CEO, Alibris," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 11: Iss. 6, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3873>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

ATG Interviews Martin Manley

President and CEO, Alibris <martym@alibris.com>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

ATG: Who are your strategic partners?

MM: We have several important relationships with large distributors and retail customers, some that have been announced and others that we will be announcing during the next 2-6 weeks. We are especially excited about a major strategic alliance that we have just announced with the **Ingram Book Group** that will enable libraries to easily order out-of-print books. Using **iPage**, Ingram's Web-based ordering system, libraries will be able to order out-of-print and hard-to-find books as easily as they order new and in-print books today. By integrating Alibris inventory with iPage, stores and libraries will be able to order both in-print and out-of-print books through a single system. Many stores and libraries turn down customer requests rather than deal with the time and cost issues involved. These new iPage capabilities will be launched to Ingram customers in the first quarter of next year. Second, Ingram and Alibris will jointly market out-of-print and out-of-stock books to increase awareness and demand for our books. Ingram Book Group will use its presence at hundreds of trade shows, sales reps and other marketing tools to promote these books to libraries and retailers. Third, Alibris and Ingram will work together over time to create additional services to libraries, including help with opening day collections and Alibris library order processing. We will also be developing ways for Ingram customers to access Alibris inventory through methods other than iPage. Alibris is uniquely able to provide this type of opportunity to Ingram because of the systems AND operations infrastructure we have created. The investments we have made in automated ordering, large-scale automated shipping operations, EDI systems and payments processing make Alibris uniquely capable of servicing the business-to-business book market.

ATG: This is big news. Didn't Alibris just complete a major acquisition?

MM: Yes, we acquired **Bibliocity** in October and are integrating their dealers and customers into our operation this week. We found that we shared a very strong technology vision with Bibliocity, shared the same values, and had very complementary dealer networks. We are delighted to welcome them and their staff to our operation.

ATG: What role does Stanford University play in your company?

MM: No special role. Some of our people went to school there and **Michael**

Keller, who runs the Stanford Library, serves on our Board.

ATG: Is the library market your primary market? How about individual collectors?

MM: We serve three markets: libraries, retailers, and consumers. Librarians can purchase through a special Website <http://library.alibris.com/>. From this site librarians have access to more than 8 million hard-to-find books around the world. We offer matching services for libraries that computerize their collection development. Librarians can purchase from a single source using either purchase orders or credit cards. We also will consolidate shipment of large orders. And, of course, we guarantee our books: libraries can return any book for full credit within 30 days although almost none ever do.

ATG: We have an article in this issue from John Zubal in which he talks about the impact of the Internet on out of print booksellers (see this issue, p.26). He is almost euphoric about the impact of the Internet. I guess you would agree?

MM: Yes—as tiresome as the Internet is as a news topic, it is a historic and profound development. For three hundred years libraries and specialized booksellers have had a problem: they can't find each other very easily, and when they do find each other, they can't transact business very easily. The Internet enables a company like ours to solve this problem. We can bring together millions of books and the payment and logistics systems to make this market grow. It is terrific for our dealers like **John Zubal**, and it is also terrific for our customers—especially libraries.

ATG: Alibris has a growing presence in the library world and we have even seen your ads in The New Yorker. Recently, though, you haven't been getting good publicity. Can you tell us about this government-imposed \$250,000 fine for mail intercepts on the part of your predecessor Interloc, Inc.?

MM: Glad to. We worked very closely with the government to resolve a complaint that staff at Interloc, our former company, had improperly copied email. Interloc started back in 1993 when email services were hard to get, so they provided email services directly to dealers. When dealers complained that they were not getting email from big customers, Interloc staff wrote a script to check on this by making copies of email. They erased these files when the complaints stopped, but as we now know, you can't do that—it's against the law even if you never open the email.

Alibris, which is a very different company

than Interloc, took a series of steps starting 18 months ago when we first learned of the government's concern. We were very active in helping investigate the problem and the government has acknowledged that on many occasions. We discontinued all email services and sold our ISP—we are not in that business any more. We relocated our data center from rural Massachusetts to Silicon Valley, hired professional managers, and dramatically increased our system security. We took personnel action. We talked with our customers, dealers, and employees very openly about this. And we volunteered to pay the fine rather than litigate.

Alibris takes privacy very seriously. We are obviously relieved that the government concluded that no confidential information was obtained or misused. They concluded, and so did we, that nobody suffered any financial harm. And if you were to spend a day in our offices, you would find that we have become mildly obsessive about privacy—far more than any e-commerce company I am familiar with.

ATG: Was this due to a specific person rather than a corporate decision on the part of the company Interloc?

MM: The actions that broke the law were not malicious and not a part of any corporate policy. We had nothing to gain by reading email, since we already know when a dealer sells books or when a customer buys one: customers and dealers tell us this voluntarily. Our dealers and our customers understand this completely and have been very supportive of us during this matter.

ATG: Were there management resignations because of this? If so, who resigned?

MM: We investigated this very thoroughly and dealt with it appropriately. I respect the privacy of our employees just as I do that of our customers however and would prefer to not discuss individual cases.

ATG: The period of time covered was six months in 1998, I believe. Why this?

MM: The dealer complaints came in late 1997, so the conduct that turned out to be illegal began in early 1998.

ATG: What was/is your relation to Interloc?

MM: Together with the founders of Interloc, I formed Alibris, which purchased Interloc, moved the company to California, raised money and developed an entirely different business. Interloc was a 10 person company operating in Massachusetts, Washington state, Oregon, and New York. Alibris is now an 80 person company concentrated in

continued on page 42

Manley Interview
from page 40

Silicon Valley with a distribution center in Sparks, Nevada. Today, Interloc no longer exists, and we have closed our operations in Oregon, reduced them in Washington, and will move the few remaining activities in Massachusetts to California in January. We would rather maintain fewer, more consistent, higher quality locations than get ourselves too spread out.

ATG: Where are you located?

MM: We are based in Emeryville, California but with a substantial team in Sparks, Nevada where we have our cataloging, warehousing and distribution center.

ATG: Are you a group of techies or out-of-print book types?

MM: We are a mix of old books and new technology. We have many former book dealers on our staff—seven or eight at last count. Some of them ran very sizable operations. We also have very deep technology development capabilities and have invested several million dollars in building a technology infrastructure to serve the library market.

ATG: Who's behind Alibris? Is it a private company or a public company?

MM: We are privately held and backed by institutional investors who share our vision of making every book easy to find, even if it is rare, out-of-print, small press, or foreign.

ATG: How was Alibris born?

Alibris is a product of **Richard Weatherford's** bookselling experience and my business experience. Dick pioneered the online bookselling of out-of-print books long before the World Wide Web. I have an odd combination of business experience and an attraction to causes like bookselling. The combination turned out to be powerful, and we are building a very interesting company as a result.

ATG: Where did the name come from?

MM: We needed a name that we could trademark, and I wanted it to start with an A because the Internet is still pretty alphabetical. We tried Aldus, but it was taken. We tried Alibra, but it turned out to be a Viagra competitor. For a while we were Alibrus. Now it's Alibris and we'll probably leave it alone for a bit. My mother-in-law taught Latin and she tells me it means "to books", which is fine with me, but we did not plan it that way.

ATG: Alibris was at the Charleston Conference in force. Can you tell us about the contacts/input that you made/hoped to make there? Was the Conference good for Alibris?

MM: It was great—kind of a coming out party for us in the library world anyway. **Brian Elliott**, our VP who heads up our library team, gave a talk that was very well received. We were gratified by the interest shown by librarians

who tested our ordering tools and placed their initial orders. We will be visible at many library conferences in the future, either on our own or with our new partners at Ingram.

ATG: We recently called Alibris and wanted to talk to a human being but it was difficult/impossible without email contact. Are you or have you moderated this practice?

MM: I am sorry you had trouble reaching us. We have installed a special toll-free number for librarians and posted it prominently on the library Website. It's easy to remember—1-877-ALIBRIS (1-877-254-2747). Please give us a call.

ATG: Tell us about your business. What's a typical day like for one of your employees?

MM: There is no such thing as a typical day or even a typical employee. Everyone in the company helps customers buy books or supports those who do. We have a customer service group, a dealer relations team, a lot of technology folks, a sizable marketing group, library specialists, fulfillment and cataloging staff, and others. We pay a lot of attention to making Alibris a great place to work, and to date I think that we have done a pretty good job of this.

ATG: How is it to deal with a lot of very individualistic rare and OP book dealers?

MM: It's great so long as you are not afraid of direct criticism. Booksellers are not a bashful bunch—when they like what we do, they tell us and when they don't like what we do, they aren't at all hesitant to tell us that. The first thing that **Richard Weatherford** and I did in starting Alibris was to travel the country listening to booksellers (including **John Zubal**, who you feature elsewhere in this issue). We were trying to figure out how to use the Internet to grow this market, and dealers gave us very good feedback. We still spend a lot of time listening to booksellers and many of our best ideas, including our program to warehouse more than a million titles for rapid delivery, have come from doing this.

Booksellers are actually a lot like librarians in one important respect: bookselling is a cause, perhaps even a calling. Nobody becomes a bookseller or a librarian to get rich—they do it because they believe passionately in books. Personally, I have always worked for causes I believed in and am comfortable balancing the needs of a cause with the need to be economically effective. I love business, I love books and I love just causes—so at the moment at least, I love my work.

ATG: Tell us about your future plans for Alibris. What's on the horizon?

MM: We are very committed to libraries, and many of our future plans will be designed to benefit librarians both in North America and around the world. We will quickly become a much more global business, meaning that we will serve libraries and dealers in Europe, Asia, and South America. We will

increase our marketing effort substantially and will invest more in marketing hard-to-find books than anyone in bookselling history. We will announce more major alliances, some of them very soon. I would expect additional acquisitions as we seek to enrich our content and distribution. The next 12 months will be very exciting for us.

ATG: Tell us about Marty Manley. What's your professional background?

MM: I have had a wonderful, but non-standard career, if you even want to call it that. Early in life, I held a lot of hourly jobs: I was a journeyman machinist, a cannery worker, a waiter for several years. I was a union organizer and a leader of several unions during the seventies and early eighties. I went to **Harvard Business School**, partly because I have a sense of humor, but largely because I find business problems very interesting. I was exposed to a large number of complex business situations while at **McKinsey & Company**, a first-rate global consulting firm. I started two consulting businesses that got me involved in some very large and politically charged business restructurings. **President Clinton** nominated me to form a new federal agency to promote workplace innovation, so I served as **Assistant Secretary of Labor** in the early years of his administration. I returned to California to help restructure a very large nonprofit health care organization. Altogether the perfect background for starting an Internet book company, wouldn't you say?

ATG: You have two boys 3 and 7, right?

MM: Yep. Small kids are a lot like e-commerce startups—they manage to keep you young while aging you faster!

ATG: And your wife is an author?

MM: Yes, she is a professor at Berkeley, working at Stanford this year. She is a well-known scholar of Silicon Valley, which leads to some very amusing arguments over breakfast, I assure you.

ATG: What books are on your nightstand at the moment?

MM: Too many. I just finished the **Stephanopoulos** book on the **Clinton White House**. He had a better seat for that show than I did, so it was a fun read. I am halfway through a terrific art history book that I bought on Alibris. I am stuck in the middle of *Nudist on the Late Shift*, which **Po Bronson** gave me at a big party **Alibris** held at the **San Francisco Public Library**. And I have a book of **Tennyson's** poems which is worth more than all the rest of them put together—except that I've hardly opened it.

ATG: Hobbies?

MM: Bicycling, parenting, and Alibris—that's about all there is right now.

That's all, folks. Alibris will be at ALA MW—booth # 704.—KS