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ATG Interviews John Riley

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National Sales Manager, Eastern Book Company

by Jack G. Montgomery (Western Kentucky University) <jack.montgomery@wku.edu>

ATG: John, how did you come to work with Eastern books?

JR: I had come to know Eastern during my 10 years of covering the Northeast region for Ambassador Book Service. I kept hearing good things about the company and eventually met the owners, Stephen and Richard Coyne. They were interested in expanding their base beyond the Northeast. In 1996 I went to work for Eastern Book Company as National Sales Manager.

ATG: Can you tell us a little bit about the company's history, its founder and it's overall business philosophy?

JR: EBC was founded by Sam Macisso, Dick and Steve's grandfather, in 1957 after many years as a branch manager at American News Company. With his experience in wholesale distribution he could see the opportunities possible in the library market. It didn't take long to discover that Eastern had to be highly adaptable to be effective in serving its customers. The understanding that operational efficiency must be coupled with customized services is at the core of the company's business model.

ATG: What if any specialized training, experience or education did you receive before getting into the book business?

JR: I graduated in the early 70's with a B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of California Santa Barbara and I was on the verge of enrolling in library school. Instead I started a used bookstore. (see below).

I have been in the book business ever since. I have also worked as a publishers' rep and I finally did attend library school at the University of Rhode Island. I really enjoy being able to participate in both sides of the equation: business and libraries.

ATG: I understand that you also own and operate your own bookstore. Can you tell us about that?

JR: I started a bookstore during my senior year in college. I found myself with a collection of over 3,000 books that I had amassed over the years and I decided to open a used bookstore in Isla Vista, California, the town adjoining UCSB. I always had the best time in used bookstores: discovering new authors and lost histories. As I was growing up in Santa Rosa, I frequented a local used bookstore named Cipriano's. I became friends with the owners and I was inspired by their camaraderie and scholarship. Later I was a regular customer of Moe's Bookstore in Berkeley where Moe would sometimes treat me to a cappuccino and talk books. Later I visited Shakespeare and Company in Paris and when George Whitman offered me a glass of Beaujolais Nouveau on entrance I was convinced that this was a profession I was interested in mastering. After meeting my future wife, Patty, who is from Massachusetts, in my Isla Vista store we opened a

branch in Santa Barbara. Two years later, we relocated to Northampton, Mass. and continued in the book business with a shop named The Globe Bookshop. After a detour starting The Iron Horse (a cafe/music hall) I was back in the book business with Gabriel Books, which Patty now runs. The shop sells books both as a retail operation and on the Web. The Web is becoming a growing part of the business. Patty sells books on ABE (Advanced Book Exchange), Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Alibris. We hope to be able to keep both ends of the business supporting each other. My experience in the used book business, also gave Eastern an early advantage in offering a full range of out of print search services. The online o.p. sites were integrated into our fulfillment service very early.

ATG: Who do you see as primary customers of Eastern? Are you organized to respond to a certain patron group?

JR: We supply all types of libraries nationwide. We are especially focused on academic libraries, but we also work with public libraries, special libraries, community colleges, prep schools, museums and research labs. We have exhibited at conferences as diverse as ATLA (American Theological Library Association), IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations), MLR (Military Library Roundtable), and many of the state associations from Texas to North Carolina to Illinois to New York. We also supply many government libraries through the Fedlink program.

ATG: So far, what has been notable in your experience in dealing with Libraries? Have there been any unexpected issues?

JR: I was surprised that in academic libraries there are always departments that don't spend their allotments. It always seemed to me that they would want to be more involved in the selection of the books destined for their collections. We have recently started a slip plan that helps librarians deal with this. We can finely tune our plan to cover very specific areas that need more coverage.

ATG: From a "Jobbers" standpoint, what is one thing you wish most librarians knew but sometimes seem to forget or need to learn?

JR: Librarians need to tell us exactly what they want. Most vendors are very accommodating and are willing to adapt to just about any circumstance, but if we don't know what you want, how are we going to provide it? There is a learning curve as vendors and libraries adapt to each other's practices. It really is a continuous process of input and feedback, hopefully with an attendant sense of understanding.

ATG: Do you find it difficult to compete with large companies/vendors?

JR: Would you rather drive a Mini Cooper or a Buick? It all depends on the performance, doesn't it? Actually, I think of Eastern as a

medium sized company since we deal with libraries of all types on a national basis. All vendors are dealing with a vastly changed marketplace. We now have Amazon, Barnes & Noble and even Walmart as online competitors! Librarians have discovered that traditional vendors are still the best source for scholarly and research materials. Eastern has found a place as a dependable, stable, flexible company. We can easily adapt to our customers needs. For example, Innovative Interfaces had a problem allowing their customers to choose the paperback isbn from the OCLC database for electronic ordering. Eastern allowed our customers to put their preference in the vendor note field, which was then sent as an email to our customer service department where we modified the order. Our larger competitors were unable to adapt to this bump in the road until much later. In addition to our flexibility I also think that with tightening book budgets there will be more emphasis on firm orders and slip plans: areas where we excel. Also, with the sophistication of the newer integrated library systems, using multiple vendors is easier than ever. We support EDI and electronic invoicing with most of them. Technology has leveled the playing field for all vendors large and small.

ATG: I've seen your website and it looks great and navigates smoothly! What do you envision for the future of your online ordering/interactive Website?

JR: We receive lots of compliments on how easy it is to navigate our Website. It was built with staff ease of use foremost. Some librarians even prefer to order on the Website and pick up FTP records for download to their ILS. We are now adding other functionality to the Website and we will be adding more book reviews and publisher links. Our Website will soon function much more closely with our notification slip plan, offering many of the same slip plan options on the Web. We also offer access to multiple selectors. Even though we have fulltime staff working on the Website, one very effective source of new ideas is from our own customers' suggestions.

ATG: How many staff do you currently employ and how is Eastern generally organized?

JR: EBC has grown over the last few years and we have relocated to our new headquarters in Westbrook, Maine. After nearly 50 years in the Old Port District of Portland we are now located in a business park outside of Portland with lots of free parking and a one floor warehouse that looks like an airplane hangar. We are organized much like a library staff with an acquisitions department with separate firm, approval and standing order sections, a customer service department, accounting department, warehouse services, IT and Website staff.

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ATG: What would you say is the most challenging aspect of what you do?

JR: Staying up to date with ILS offerings, publisher mergers, library personnel changes at our customer libraries ... I guess pretty much what librarians have to deal with too.

ATG: Do you see Eastern taking a position in the whole eBooks trade? Do you envision making eBooks a part of your inventory?

JR: We have been approached by a number of publishers that would like us to sell their eBooks on our Website. We are still exploring the possibilities. I believe that there will be a convergence of eBooks and POD (print on demand). Readers will have a choice of buying the e-version or ordering a copy printed on demand. The printer could be lo-

cated at a bookstore or at a vendor's warehouse, or even one day in the library itself. We are increasingly buying POD books that have been printed from digital storage from sources such as **Lightning Press**.

ATG: Where do you see Eastern going within five years? What directions have you considered taking?

JR: As we all know, five years is an eternity in cybertime. We will continue to adapt to libraries' needs as their mandate changes. As we move ahead we will continue doing what we are doing now, supplying research and scholarly materials to libraries in whatever format they need. I also think that the pendulum of electronic databases in libraries has swung very far to one side, and now libraries are realizing the value of a good book collection again: you own it outright, you don't have to license it or renew it, you can loan it out to whomever you want, and it will last for hundreds of years. What a bargain!

ATG: Where do you find your greatest sense of professional accomplishment?

JR: Working with libraries nationwide and meeting with librarians. It is a constant learning process. I also get a lot of satisfaction from working on new projects at **Eastern**. The staff I interact with is very creative and professional. Working with **Katina Strauch** on "**Against the Grain**" articles and **Charleston Conference** projects has been a real high point too.

ATG: Finally, what do you do with your "copious free time"?

JR: This summer I have enjoyed attending "Summer Stock" theater productions in the Berkshires. I also enjoy visiting bookstores and trying out new restaurants. I play a good amount of golf, I like cooking and reading and tending to my book collection. I've written some short stories that I hope to get published soon. I had better stop now. This is beginning to sound like a personals ad in the *NYRB*. 