Against the Grain

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ATG Interviews Mitchell Davis, Chief Business Officer, Bibliolabs

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Chief Business Officer, BiblioLabs

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ATG: Can you tell us about how you got started in publishing and e-publishing? What made you realize that there were entrepreneurial opportunities in the industry?

MD: I started a small desktop publishing company out of college and threw myself into it. After a couple of years the first Web browser came along (c. 1995), and I remember being totally overwhelmed by the sheer change the Internet was going to bring to civilization. Ultimately, that business failed, but it started a fire that is still burning in me. In 2000 I was very fortunate to meet some partners with more experience who have been fantastic mentors to me. We started a digital publishing and manufacturing company — **BookSurge**.

ATG: You sold your first company Book-Surge, a print-on-demand vendor, to Amazon. How did that deal come about? What was it like negotiating with an industry powerhouse like Amazon?

MD: It was actually really easy. They needed what we had built and we were smart enough to know if we did not sell to them we would be competing with them soon (not a fun prospect). They gave us the price we wanted and we gave them a technology that they have used to disrupt the book publishing industry globally, which was the fulfillment of our entrepreneurial vision.

I got to work in Seattle for two years, which I call getting my **Amazon** MBA. There are absolutely brilliant people killing themselves to make **Amazon** the powerhouse that it is. No one has handed them anything. It gives me a great deal of pride to see how they have scaled our idea and integrated our company so successfully. They also grew the employees from 60 to 600 people in Charleston, which is great.

ATG: What gave you the idea to start your current company BiblioLabs? For those of us who may not be familiar with BiblioLabs, can you fill us in on what BiblioLabs is all about? What services do you provide? Who are your primary customers? Do you provide any print services, or is everything digital?

MD: We originally started this business with a focus on driving the cost out of putting historical books into print-on-demand. I worked on this lightly at **Amazon**, but **Amazon** is not focused on one particular niche like this, and we thought by focusing on it we could turn it into a real business. And we were right. Most of the books we sell have not been available for over a hundred years. We built a massive platform to process and package these books. We work with public domain content and also with licensed content from leading aggregators and cultural institutions. We got that part of the business profitable in 2009 and have funded the build of our digital business over the past 18-24

months from those profits. We have basically been our own VCs.

BiblioLabs offers two connected products to libraries: **BiblioBoard Creator** and **BiblioBoard Library**. All libraries have free access to **BiblioBoard Creator**, a tool that enables libraries to create sophisticated, multimedia digital anthologies using their own collections or historical content from our catalog. **BiblioBoard Creator** enables libraries, without teams of developers and designers, to meet the high expectations of today's tech-savvy patrons on the Web and on mobile devices. **BiblioBoard Library** is where these anthologies are published and promoted.

ATG: We understand that your newest product release is called BiblioBoard. As part of the BiblioBoard service you have created and are selling digital anthologies from your large archive of public domain content, correct? How does that work? What are some of your more popular collections?

MD: Before we started recruiting other people to put Anthologies together, we needed to improve our software platform — be our own guinea pigs, so to speak. We also were inventing a whole new type of media product, and we needed to show people what it was we were building. So we hired a few local historians who have put together some incredible compilations of historical books, photos, letters, manuscripts, and other historical documents (from the public domain). Some of the more popular collections are sports (*History of Golf, Chess, Baseball*), religion (**Charles Spurgeon**, **Dalia Lama**, and Buddhism) and more quirky and hobbyist ones (*History of*

Poison, *History of Trains*, *History of Castles*). There are almost 200 Anthologies incorporating over 40,000 historical curated historical objects now and we are seeing new Anthologies get traction all the time.

ATG: We also see that as part of this service, almost anyone, including a library, can use your free self-service authoring tool and the BiblioBoard app to publish their own anthologies and maybe even make some revenue. How can an interested library get started?

MD: BiblioBoard Creator is the platform we built that makes it simple to discover, organize, enhance, and publish Anthologies across multiple platforms including the Web, iPad, Android, and other tablets. Essentially, it removes all technical cost and project management from any cultural institutions wanting to create elegant digital products that work everywhere. Institutions can make anthologies free or free to specific audiences, while choosing to charge a small fee to other people (for example people outside their tax paying constituency, consortia, or campus). When we are able to find customers for their Anthologies we share revenue with the creating organization. Most institutions are looking at this as a way to re-capture money spent on digitization or to help them digitize new materials.

To get started we set them up a free account, and then they attend a free Webinar (about 45 minutes). Typically they are off and running. It is a super intuitive interface, but if they have any questions we offer one-on-one support to help them through the process.

ATG: The British Library was one of the first to use the service. Can you tell us how that developed? What other institutions are working with you to create anthologies using BiblioBoard?

MD: We had done some really innovative and successful things with the **British Library** in print-on-demand and so when we decided to do our first digital project, we approached them. We launched the **British Library Historical Books iPad App** in June 2011. We launched it in conjunction with the **Apple WWDC** conference and had 250,000 downloads in the first two weeks. The project was a huge success with nearly 500,000 downloads to date and tens of thousands of active users even two years later. The project showed us that there was mainstream interest in materials previously sequestered and hidden in the research world. We just had to be creative in the packaging and simple and elegant in the product delivery. That App ended up winning a 2012 Publishing Innovation Award. It was very cool to have the **British Library** on stage with

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Random House, **Simon & Schuster**, and even **Jay-Z** winning a traditional industry award. When we made the move to **BiblioBoard**, they were the first to sign-up.

We are also working with other national libraries such as the **National Library of Chile**, and **National Library of Columbia**, as well as smaller museums and historical organizations like **San Diego Air & Space Museum**, **Louisiana State Museum**, and the **Southern Food and Beverage Museum**. The list of third parties using **BiblioBoard** to create digital products is growing so quickly it is hard for me to keep up with it honestly. We solve a huge problem for these organizations.

ATG: Other parts of the BiblioLabs family include BiblioBazaar and BiblioLife. How do they fit into what you are trying to accomplish?

MD: Geez, clearly we have too many Biblios. No, really these are all part of the same process. **BiblioBazaar** was the original company name in 2007, and we have essentially erased that name from our branding. No one could spell it. **BiblioLabs** is the parent company (corporate name), and **BiblioLife** is the brand we give to our in-house created Anthologies to differentiate them from third-party organizations. Hope that makes sense, but all that to say that the whole company (30 of us) are all razor-sharp focused on **BiblioBoard**, which is a product that we think is going to radically disrupt the current publishing and media landscape.

ATG: We know that building your own business takes a lot of energy but you've got to take a break once in a while. What do you do for fun? Is there an activity or hobby that really puts you into relaxation mode?

MD: I was lucky to find yoga in my early 20s. In many ways it, along with music and nature, saved my life. I still use it as a way to re-integrate experiences (business and otherwise) and stay focused. I am also lucky to be married to a phenomenal person who is a yoga teacher and nutritionist, and she keeps me healthy. She is also my creative partner, and we have a small production company called **Organic Process**. We produce really inspiring documentary projects, several of them award-winning. I also play in a **Widespread Panic** cover band called **54 Bicycles** and try to go bodysurfing or SUP boarding whenever I can.

ATG: As someone who lives in Charleston, what would be on your "must see" and "must do" lists for the first time visitor to the Charleston Conference?

MD: I love this city. I still love riding bikes and exploring the backstreets of Charleston even though I have been doing it for 20 years. I think just hitting the city on a bike with no plan is the best way to experience it. Also, seeing some Jazz music. Charleston has a jazz history that pre-dates New Orleans by 40 years, but no one has really told the story well (at **Organic Process** we worked on a documentary that contributes to fixing that in the future). The music scene is incredible. 🐾

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BORN AND LIVED: Charleston, SC.

EARLY LIFE: I grew up in Summerville, a suburb of Charleston, where I played some sports but mostly tried to be popular. I then went to the **College of Charleston**, majored in English and put in the minimal effort required to make Bs and get out in four years. Then I spent some time out West after college washing dishes, climbing rocks, and trying to "find myself" (it mostly worked!). I then returned to Charleston and became an entrepreneur at 24 when I was too stupid and young to know any better. I find I need the challenge of entrepreneurship and building new things to drive my work ethic, which has become stronger and stronger over the years.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I started a small desktop publishing and Web development company in my 20s that was a huge learning experience. This was just as the Web as we know it today was being invented (Netscape 1.0), and the overwhelming potential of the Internet hit me like a ton of bricks. Ultimately, I proved too immature and inexperienced to run my own business,but I met some partners, and we started **BookSurge** in 2000.

BookSurge was the world's first integrated, global print-on-demand and publishing platform. We sold that company to **Amazon** in 2005. I went to Seattle and got what I like to call an *Amazon* MBA (hard-earned!) and then re-grouped with my former co-founders, and we launched **BiblioLabs** in 2007.

We got **BiblioLabs** profitable in 2009 and have built our digital business (**BiblioBoard**) as our own VCs, funding it from cash flow. We unveiled **BiblioBoard** at **ALA Mid-Winter** in January 2013 and will have our official launch in March. We think we have created an entirely new media ecosystem and the platform to deliver it.

FAMILY: Incredible wife and creative partner **Farrah Hoffmire**, two beagles (Freddy and Lucy) and two cats (Nina Simone and Natalie). We also have three great nieces to whom we serve as crazy aunt and uncle.

IN MY SPARE TIME: I spend a lot of time re-charging my batteries, mostly through being with my wife, doing yoga, breathing, sweating, and exercising. I also love to body surf and ride the Stand-Up Paddleboard. I play in a **Widespread Panic** cover band called **54 Bicycles**, which is a lot of fun. I am not spending much time on this now, but over the past eight years my wife and I have produced some award-winning documentaries through our "active philanthropic" organization — **Organic Process Productions**. That has been a fantastic opportunity to travel the world and tell stories we find important and interesting.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Hard, but to pick a few: nearly every book by **Tom Robbins**, **Krishnamurti** writings, *Archaic Revival* by **Terrence McKenna**, *The Book* by **Alan Watts**, *Understanding Comics* by **Scott McCloud**, **Richard Brautigan** poetry books, and **Ben Timpson** art books.

PET PEEVES: Laziness, I guess.

PHILOSOPHY: Do what you can, when you can. If you can't, just don't do it. Also the serenity prayer is pretty spot on.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Selling **BookSurge** to **Amazon** and playing a part in the successful integration was fantastic. Also, winning the **Publishers Innovation Award** along with the **British Library** on our first digital product is a big one. But, spending the last 18 months building **BiblioBoard** and launching it with the amazing team we have now trumps both of those.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I want to see **BiblioBoard** flourish and reach its potential over the next five years.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Libraries will be competitive with **Apple** and **Amazon** in terms of user experience. Rapid development of new types of user interfaces and sharing ecosystems will allow them to remain competitive over time. This is a key component of the library remaining relevant in the digital future. Once the user experience is competitive, the library will become a sort of Groupon; pooling the resources of its constituents to do group media buying and better leverage tax dollars, tuition, and membership fees (for private libraries, etc.). 🐾