2014

ATG Interviews Rolf Janke, CEO, Founder, Mission Bell Media

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina and Gilson, Tom (2014) "ATG Interviews Rolf Janke, CEO, Founder, Mission Bell Media," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6657>

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CURRENT REVIEWS FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

ATG Interviews Rolf Janke

CEO and Founder, Mission Bell Media

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: Rolf, you have over 30 years' experience in various aspects of academic publishing. But for those readers not familiar with your accomplishments, could you give us a rundown of the highlights?

RJ: Over those 30+ years, I have been involved with textbook, trade, professional and reference publishing with such companies as **International Thomson**, **Blackwell**, **ABC-CLIO** and **SAGE Publications**. At **Blackwell**, an Oxford, UK-based company, I was one of the first editorial executives to be based in their first major office in the U.S.. That was a real learning experience navigating a well-known UK publisher through the complexities of the U.S. higher education markets. It also allowed me to travel outside the U.S. where I learned that publishing on a global level was great fun! My most memorable publishing highlight was at **SAGE** where I founded **SAGE Reference**. What a great opportunity to start an imprint under a great company like **SAGE**. I will never forget the early days travelling around to academic libraries and listening to what was most important and needed on the reference side then applying that through award-winning publications.

ATG: We understand that you recently founded a new company called **Mission Bell Media** which is a publisher of digital and print content focused on leadership and leadership studies. Can you tell us about it? Where did the idea come from? Why the name **Mission Bell Media**? What market is your content aimed at? What digital and print formats are you publishing in?

RJ: I have always been passionate about leadership as a topic. In my early days as a publishing executive, I remember reading **John Kotter's** "*Force for Change*" which at the time was the book on leadership, and I would argue still is. That is when I started to watch, listen and learn from leaders around me — from my father to the CEO of the company I was working for at the time. But it really wasn't until the early days of **SAGE Reference** where I was able to publish in leadership and the *Encyclopedia of Leadership* became one of the most successful titles we ever did. It was not only a commercial success but I was reading every article as it came in and learned so much from it!

So fast forward to **Mission Bell Media**. Late last year, I decided to start my own publishing company and sought the advice from entrepreneurs on just about anything. Their advice was simple; you better be passionate and enjoy what you do and not be afraid to fail. I am passionate about publishing and leadership so it was game on. **Mission Bell Media** will produce digital and print media in leadership and leadership studies for librarians, faculty, students and professionals.

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The products will be e-reference works, eBooks, software and video. Well, that is what is up on the white board for the moment, and I am sure it will change over time to include other forms of media as well. We will produce print when needed.

The name **Mission Bell Media** has a local connection for me. I live in Santa Barbara, CA which has one of the larger missions in the state. It is a beautiful building with so much history, and I have always been drawn to the bell towers, especially at night when they are all lit up. It also has a historical-meets-contemporary feel to it which sort of summarizes my publishing career, an old print publisher now focusing on digital.

ATG: *With such a deep connection to the area would you ever consider publishing local history or local interest books?*

RJ: Santa Barbara County has a very strong and growing wine region, and I have enjoyed learning about our local industry for many years now. I have actually thought about publishing a few boutique titles on how some of the local winemakers became leaders in their industry. That would be great fun to do!

ATG: *In addition to your digital focus it sounds like you will be offering print-on-demand. How will that work? Is your print-on-demand model one that is being used most frequently by smaller publishers? By even bigger publishers? Will you doing any warehousing of some titles? Is there a threshold?*

RJ: I am looking at two avenues for print distribution. The first would be licensing our digital content to another publisher that has a strong and established print sales, marketing and distribution process established. I have already been approached by some and feel this could be a logical approach for our reference titles. The second would be print-on-demand. There are many sources to use and who we use will depend on many factors such as our target customers, product specs and the value they provide to the customer. By focusing on digital and allowing others to handle our print and inventory, we can keep our costs down and make our products very affordable.

ATG: *Do you expect the bulk of your market to consist of individuals or institutions?*

RJ: This is a very good question. I think the safe answer for now is both. If we publish reference works on leadership as well as resources specifically for librarians, you can see that the individual vs. institution market can be one and the same. There are other institutional markets we will target, but they are not our immediate focus.

ATG: *What is your strategy for generating the kind of quality e-reference works, eBooks, software and videos expected in today's academic and professional markets? How will you recruit authors and contributors? What quality controls will Mission Bell Media provide in terms of peer review, copy editing, etc.?*

RJ: There are a couple of aspects of the quality issue here. First and foremost, our mission is to produce content that provides a real value, thus having a high quality attached to it. Secondly, with such a high value that we will place on our content; we will translate

that passion to our business partners who will develop and produce our content. Ideally, the end product, no matter what format, will meet and maybe exceed the markets expectations.

Recruiting authors and contributors will be a challenge because we are a startup, but I have had the wonderful opportunity to work many talented authors over the years and I have already warned them that they should expect a knock on their door from me. I am pleased to say that no one has told me to go away and come back later....

We will peer review our products as well as put our content through the traditional production process which will include strong development, copyediting, etc..

I should mention that I will be establishing an advisory board who will help assist me in markets, technologies and processes that I am not familiar with. The members will consist of librarians, academics, professionals and digital media experts.

ATG: *Why do you think that now is the time for a publisher like Mission Bell Media? What unmet needs do you hope to fill? What specific opportunities led you to start your own company now?*

RJ: Because of our specific focus on one topic and it's a topic people care about. It's not about self publishing and it's not a list of titles that will get lost in a large publishers catalog. As far as what needs we hope to fill, we don't necessarily want to publish more "how to" books on leadership, as there are many, but focus more on defining the many interdisciplinary aspects as well as a focus on the experiential nature of leadership.

Regarding the specific opportunities, I look at it more as to what was and still is available to me that led me to starting my own company. I have met so many brilliant, creative, hard working and entrepreneurial people over the decades, and prior to officially announcing **MBM**, I reached out and asked many of them their thoughts on me starting my own company. The standard response was "of course you should!" There were also some pretty humorous responses which I probably shouldn't mention here....

ATG: *Do you have any partners in your new venture?*

RJ: Yes, I am currently working with some key business partners who will be very involved with various aspects of the business. I worked with these folks when building **SAGE Reference**, so I am very aware of their capacity and how they can fit into my business.

ATG: *Founding your own company is quite a challenge. What are the biggest hurdles that you've had to face so far? On the other hand, what have been the most pleasant surprises?*

RJ: The biggest hurdle for me is learning to get out of my own way! We have all heard "lead, follow or get out of the way." Well, as an entrepreneur, I need to practice what I am publishing in. The most pleasant surprise is how much fun it is to learn a whole new way of building a business. You become the CEO, the COO, the director of marketing, editorial director all at once and your typical day is never typical. I could write a whole article on this alone. Oh, the dress code at **MBM** is a nice change from the corporate sector.

ATG: *If you could give one bit of advice to an aspiring entrepreneur thinking of starting his or her own business, what would it be?*

RJ: Well, I am still a newbie entrepreneur but I would say, surround yourself with creative, smart and *fun* people and, of course, the advice given to me, make sure you are passionate about what you are doing. And the most sobering advice, don't be afraid to fail.

ATG: *We understand that you were spreading the word about Mission Bell Media at ALA Midwinter in Philadelphia. What was the response?*

RJ: I was really pleased with the initial reactions at **ALA**, from librarians, publishers and old colleagues. I also received a great deal of advice from CEOs of established companies, but they themselves were once in startup mode. There was also a genuine sense of enthusiasm behind the focus on leadership and I only got an "are you crazy!" from one person.

I should also mention that this **ALA** was a very unique experience attending now on my own — I really sensed a new-found appreciation for this industry and that libraries have never been more important!

ATG: *Given your past expertise as founder of SAGE Reference, we would be remiss if we did not ask you about your views on reference publishing. What do you see as its future? Does it have one? If so, what does it look like?*

RJ: Reference publishing has a future. However, there are far more obstacles for sustainable growth than there have ever been. I have been working on this philosophy that reference publishers have to believe that value plus relevancy equals sustainable growth. Your content has to be of value, and it must be relevant. Haven't we always believed in that? Maybe more so but in better economic times and when technology was emerging, not dominating. Now, it seems more of a game of survival, and perhaps reference publishers are too busy trying to figure out the next big thing, ignoring what got them there in the first place.

ATG: *Speaking of SAGE Reference, what have you taken with you as lessons from the SAGE Reference experience?*

RJ: Probably the most important lesson was how to build something, grow it, brand it, grow it some more, make it digital, make it global, make sure people have fun working for it, grow it some more and finally realize that the process never ends. And that is a very good thing.

ATG: *Starting your own company must take a tremendous amount of time and energy. Do you ever get a chance to relax and recharge your batteries? If so, what are your favorite activities and pastimes?*

RJ: It is time consuming, especially when I have never done this before. But I have learned you also need to walk away from it occasionally and recharge, so I take advantage of Santa Barbara and ride my bike, play golf, enjoy our local wine and head down to my satellite office...the beach.

ATG: *Rolf, thank you for taking time from what must be a very hectic schedule to talk to us. It was fun, and we learned a lot.*

RJ: Thanks **Katina** and **Tom**, I really appreciate the opportunity to discuss **Mission Bell Media!** 🌲