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## ATG Interviews Pinar Erzin, Founder and President, Accucoms

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## Founder and President, Accucoms

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

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

**ATG:** Pinar, your parent company Swets was declared bankrupt in September 2014 and along with it Accucoms. Did you have any indication that Swets, and hence Accucoms, were in such serious trouble?

**PE:** Absolutely not! We were working hard to finalize the sale of former Swets Information Services (SIS), including all its subsidiaries. As the deal we thought was almost signed fell apart, we heard the news. Accucoms had actually no financial trouble, however since SIS acquired 100% of Accucoms' shares in August 2011, we were automatically pushed towards bankruptcy. When your parent company dies, it pulls you along, unfortunately. Or maybe I should say fortunately...

**ATG:** There was a period for about two months after the bankruptcy where things were fairly uncertain for Accucoms. What was that time like for you and your staff? What were your biggest fears and challenges? How did you overcome them?

**PE:** From the moment that I received the internal email on 22 September 2014 until the rebirth of Accucoms on 6 November 2014, I found myself in the biggest fight of my business life. We were in boot camp. Multiple things happened during those weeks: Accucoms was also declared bankrupt, our employment agreements were terminated, obviously and rightfully my team was very concerned about their future. I have always tried communicating progress with staff as openly as possible. We had regular calls so they knew what was going on. I told them to seek and find jobs, that I would personally contact their future employers and help find good spots for each of them. They are all very well trained and skilled professionals with excellent multilingual capacity as well as fantastic personalities/attitude. This was my number one priority: Help team move further in life with minimum damage. At the same time, I was in talks with the Trustee, as well as many respected companies, competitors, and investors about a potential acquisition of Accucoms. What really happened is this: We didn't sleep, didn't go out or socialize... We calculated, talked, forecasted, thought "yes" and then thought "no," negotiated, made a decision, and acted on it.

**ATG:** How did your customers react? How did you allay their fears and concerns?

**PE:** Just like with my team, I remained very transparent about the situation and what we were trying to achieve with our customers. I received nothing but support! I can fully confirm that honesty and transparency always pays back, often in multitudes. What we went through is the proof of this. Since we no longer had any company money to spend, we had



to cancel our annual customer day ACCUfest 2014, but decided to go to Frankfurt Book Fair and bring the beer for the traditional BEERfest with our own resources. It was the smartest decision ever! The moment I stepped on the fairground, I knew we were going to make it! We met publishers, librarians, consortia leaders, competitors, and several companies. All conversations were positive. I knew that one way or the other my company would survive this crisis. If not, it would be my failure with so much support we received from everyone. You see, most of our customers saw me setup this business from scratch. They were part of our history and they wouldn't want us to disappear. The message I received was clear: "We don't care about the name of the company or the color of the brand. We are with you as long as you have your team and the quality you provided us with until now." See, the keyword here is "the team!" Without them there is nothing: no customers, no business, nothing.

**ATG:** Fortunately, you and the other stakeholders were able to buy back and restart Accucoms. Can you tell us about that? How did you make that deal happen? Who are the major stakeholders of the newly formed company?

**PE:** At the very beginning of the crisis, I involved my Management Team (MT) in the conversations and the "making of" the acquisition. During the three years when we were under the SIS flag, if I did one thing really well, it was investing in a strong MT which consists of three highly successful professionals in our industry: Egon Menardi, Simon Boisseau, and Rakesh Malik. The MT, along with the rest of our team, is the core of our business. <http://www.accucoms.com/staff/>

How we made the deal happen? That's a difficult question. Let me see. I explained the situation and possibilities to staff and customers. We evaluated all external acquisition approaches. We made millions of calculations. We did a lot of soul searching about full, shared or non-ownership. Additional to this, we knew everything about the company, so it was very clear that we could make the best offer to buy the company. We decided that independence would be the best choice for customers, team, and ourselves and went for it. I should add "luck" as an element too. I felt very lucky with everyone's trust, dedication, and support during this highly challenging and educational process.

**ATG:** What specific representation, tele-marketing, and business intelligence services do you provide to publishers? Has anything changed now that you are a stand-alone company?

**PE:** After the crisis and rebirth, we decided to focus on continuation of core services to build a stronger base for our renewed existence. All our services help publishers maintain, grow their current business and discover new revenue lines, while building an understanding of different markets. These are: global telesales/telemarketing services, full representation in multiple territories including sales, marketing, and customer services. We have always been a hands-on organization with ability to take decisions quickly. So if anything changed, it is the speed by which we grow, now that we are independent.

**ATG:** Are there new market realities that have required adjustment? If so, what strategies are you using to make those adjustments?

**PE:** There are new market realities which we are working on currently. We are looking into partnerships in some territories, while we look to build a bigger telesales organization to run a specific territory. We also look into developing new business lines. I am not able to go into much detail, as this is part of our growth strategy for 2016 and beyond.

**ATG:** Why should prospective clients have confidence in the new Accucoms? What do you tell them about the future of Accucoms?

**PE:** I guess we can now say we are a mature company, after 11 years, since its incorporation. We have been a proud trendsetter in establishing a new way to service and represent publishers. The three years under SIS flagship were highly beneficial. It allowed me to delegate all of the administrative management side of the business and focus on growth. The bankruptcy was a crisis with a great opportunity. We were able to become independent again to grow faster, to focus

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on the areas we believe we can be useful for our customers, and move away from what we think is no longer important for them. We are a debt-free company, which makes profit and reinvests even after such a crisis, thanks to our team and customers. We are careful in promising something to a publisher and dedicated to fulfill it once we made a promise. This is what I tell prospective clients. Actually, I mostly, don't tell much anymore. I let my team talk to prospects. This is how we win new customers and keep our current relationships. My team does it. They are the experts in their fields.

**ATG:** *Who are your main competitors? What is different about Accucoms? What advantages do you bring to the table?*

**PE:** Interestingly, we create, develop, and grow the list and the type of competitors, as we grow our business. Our typical competitors are companies/sales agents which represent publishers in different territories. I think PCG is our only one-on-one global competitor; a very successful company with a great reputation. There are different local companies we compete with in different countries and territories. Sometimes we compete with large subscription agents, consultancy firms, and even aggregators. I personally don't like the word competitor. In my own filing system there is a folder I call "partners." This is also where I file all info about my competitors. I believe that all competitors are potential partners. There are countries or business areas in which we could do better if we worked together. There are times we are best at competing for the goodwill of our companies, as well as our customers. It is a balance and that's my vision.

**ATG** *We noticed that you have announced several new agreements over the last couple of months. Can you tell us about them and what they say about your future direction?*

**PE:** On 6 November 2014 we acquired **Accucoms**, and on the same day we entered a new "positive" storm as we were re-establishing ourselves. We stayed focused and were able to shift very quickly to business as usual. We were 38 people in November 2014, and we are 60 people now. We have several new contracts and we entered new territories. We have grown some of our relationships with large publishers in managing part of their business. We have gained several new agreements with large university presses and our global telesales activities are growing. I think the fact that we were able to protect most of our current agreements, as well as gaining new types of publisher agreements, is a proof that Publishing Industry is pleased with the way we run the company now. It also shows their trust in our future strategy.

**ATG:** *All of these fast breaking changes must take a lot of time and energy. How do you recharge your batteries? What fun things do you do to unwind?*

## against the grain people profile

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### Pinar Erzin

**BORN AND LIVED:** Born and lived in Ankara, Turkey until after graduation from university, lived in Amsterdam, the Netherlands after university until recently. Currently residing in Turkey, traveling globally mainly for business.

**EARLY LIFE:** 1981-1987 — French high school. 1987-1992 — BA degree in American Culture and Literature.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER:** 1992-1999 — Several international jobs in Amsterdam  
1999-2000 — Sales Representative for Turkey at Swets Subscription Services  
2000-2001 — Publisher Relations Manager at Swets Blackwell  
2001-2004 — General Manager Extenza Marketing Solutions  
2004-2014 — Co-founder and Managing Director Accucoms BV  
2014-Present — Founder and President, Accucoms International BV (rebirth)

**FAMILY:** Parents, sister, one niece, and one nephew who all live in Ankara Turkey.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE:** Running, fitness, yoga and meditation. Cooking when I am home. Spending time with family and friends.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by **Richard Bach**, *Shibumi and The Summer of Katja* by **Trevanian**, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by **Ken Kesey**, and several works by **Henry David Thoreau**.

**PHILOSOPHY:** "Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they've been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing." — **Muhammad Ali**

**MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** Saving my company from **SIS** bankruptcy with minimal damage for staff and customers, while showing growth within ten months after this takeover.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** More career and growth opportunities for staff, better services for publishers in different areas. More time with loved ones. Staying healthy and happy.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** More consolidation in publishing and services. Growth of small companies with better/more flexible services. Change in aggregation business (less big deals/more focused packages). Technology companies to reinvent themselves including services to their offering. Different alternatives for smaller publishers to be supported by (not just large publishers and/or aggregators). Societies spending more time in their membership businesses to readjust/strengthen their relations with their members. 🌱

**PE:** For about ten months, recharging was out of the question. It was automatic pilot. However, I believe I made most of the quieter summer months by travelling less, spending a lot of time with family and friends, living much healthier, and doing lots and lots of sports. I love running for mental clarity, I lift weights to get rid of any negative energy, I enjoy yoga to breath better, and I am just discovering meditation, and that is a miracle on its own. I think I am ready for the new season with renewed energy. I am, in fact, very excited about our planned strategy for 2016!

**ATG:** *Thank you so much for taking time from what is obviously a hectic schedule to talk to us.*

**PE:** I am sincerely honored that you have asked me to share my experience and thoughts. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Please note that Charleston has a very special place in our professional lives, as the 2003 conference was where the first step for **Accucoms** was taken! 🌱