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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Multi-Client Studies

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Back in the early nineties, after the initial assignment rush that attended the founding of my publishing consulting practice began to wane and I needed to goose revenues, I took a leaf out the playbook of much larger consulting companies and conducted two major multi-client studies. Such studies involve getting multiple organizations interested in a particular issue to support research culminating in a report that describes the research, tabulates results, and summarizes and interprets them. The value for the supporting organizations is that the deliverable is worth more than the amount of money each puts into the study. The benefit to the organization carrying out the study is that the total amount of money collected subsidizes a major research effort and provides a reasonable profit.

The first step, of course, is to pick a topic of sufficient interest to stakeholders in a changing, or better yet collapsing market or a burgeoning customer demand. Then give the research project a sexy name that will encourage them to listen to a proposal. The names for my two multi-client studies were The Changing Landscape for College Publishing, which addressed forces buffeting the college textbook publishing business and The Developing Worlds of Personalized Information, which dealt with the future of professional and scholarly publishing.

The next step is to define the methodology. Both studies would use the same one, basically. Research would be carried out through a combination of in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews and written questionnaires. Next determine how the qualitative and quantitative data and conclusions and recommendations would be presented in a final report.

Then we had to find potential sponsors and sell them on their need for the study. Fortunately, my partner, Carol Gold, whom I brought in for her unmatched market research expertise in the publishing area, and I had enough industry connections we knew well enough so that we could get an audience without having to make cold calls. We sounded believable enough to get 13 sponsors for the college publishing study at 15 grand each. They were Barnes & Noble, RR Donnelly, IBM, Kinko’s, The Maple Press, Xerox, and seven publishers, including WC Brown, WH Freeman, Houghton Mifflin, McGraw-Hill, Macmillan, Thomson, and Times Mirror. Most of these names will be familiar to readers of this column, others not so much perhaps.

We did a bit better with the professional and scholarly publishing study, again at 15 grand per sponsor. Besides RR Donnelly and Lotus Development, we had 13 publishers and information services organizations, including Butterworth Heinemann, Elsevier, Engineering Information, Harcourt Brace, McGraw-Hill, Mead Data Central, RS Means, The New England Journal of Medicine, OCLC, Scientific American, Thomson, Times Mirror, and Williams & Wilkins. It was great, but not totally great. Carol and I had both had lengthy stints at Wiley, but we couldn’t get Will Pesce and his crew to back either study.
The in-person interviews were conducted in numerous locations around the country in respondents’ offices; they lasted an hour on average. For the college publishing study, I conducted all of these interviews myself (it was back to my old acquisition editor days, when I used to roam college campuses looking for potential book authors.) For the professional and scholarly publishing study, I teamed with four outside interviewers to conduct over 150 in-person interviews, 90 with users and buyers of information and 60 with representatives from organizations involved in the information distribution chain. For the telephone interviews in both projects, Carol and I used an interview guide as a checklist and selectively recorded interviews (the tape recorder picked not only the sound of our voices, but also my fountain pen scratches as we took notes.)

The written questionnaires involved larger numbers of respondents. In the case of the college publishing study, different sets of written questionnaires were distributed to different groups. We mailed one questionnaire to the 829 members of the *Textbook Authors Association* and received 350 responses (pretty good.) With the help of *Barnes & Noble* and the *National Association of College Stores*, we emailed another questionnaire to college bookstore managers and received 1,033 responses. Faculty members and students helped us hand out and collect a third questionnaire for students; we received 320 responses.

For the professional and scholarly publishing research project, we mailed 7,522 questionnaires to users and buyers of professional and research information. Lists of names were provided by the study’s sponsors. To obtain an adequate response, we offered the incentives of making a contribution on the respondents’ behalf to the *March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation* of sending a summary of survey findings to requesting respondents. A month or so later we sent out a second questionnaire mailing to non-respondents. This time we included a crisp one-dollar bill and a small note requesting a speedy response. The dollar dramatically increased response rates across all sponsor lists. “It’s amazing,” our report noted, “how well this techniques worked with professionals!” All told, of the 7,252 questionnaires that were delivered successfully, 1,986 responses were received — a 27.4% response rate, which among professionals is considered very healthy. Disciplines represented among respondents included architecture and construction, business and finance, computer science and engineering, education, and medicine and health care. We also heard from librarians and industry players. A little over a third of respondents were in the 25-39 age range, a little less than half were 40-59, and 10% were over 60. Eighteen percent of respondents worked in companies with fewer than 10 employees; 24%, 10-99 employees; 16%, 100-400; 9%, 500-999; 24%, over 1,000; and 9% didn’t answer that question. All in all, we reached a diverse collection of respondents.

Developing and selling a multi-client study, doing interviews, and writing a multi-client study report involves some expenditure of funds, but mainly time and sweat. Printing and mailing questionnaires costs some money. A major expense accrues from the services of a company that not only tabulates answers to multiple-choice questions but also cross-tabulates them (e.g., of those who have electronic databases available to them at work, how many use them and how many use them often?).

The final expenses involve printing the report, hiring a hall, and feeding the sponsors at a conference where the report is presented, and sponsors get to ask questions and provide feedback. The *Changing Landscape for College Publishing* came out in June 1992. It contained six cartoons penned by Mort Gerberg, who drew cartoons for *The New Yorker* and *Publishers Weekly*. The *Developing Worlds of Personalized Information* came out in September 1993. It contained humorous stock photos. Both reports were perfect bound, in 8-1/2 by 11 trim size. They were printed-on-demand on *Xerox* DocuTech machines. It was the early days of on-demand printing, so printing lead time was a couple of days at most. I was able to tell sponsors that reports would be available at 11:59 pm on the last day of the month that we promised they would be ready.