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ATG Interviews Liz Mason, VP, Gale Product, Gale Cengage Learning

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Vice President, Gale Product, Gale | Cengage Learning

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

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

ATG: *Liz, you're a fairly recent arrival at Gale but you've had extensive experience in the industry. Can you tell us about your prior background? How long have you been at Gale? What is your remit?*

LM: I joined Gale in May 2015, so I have just celebrated my one-year anniversary. At Gale I currently oversee the U.S. product organization, including our content strategy, development and production teams. Within Cengage, Gale is run as a stand-alone business, so I work closely with others on the Gale management team including marketing, sales and operations leaders as well as our international colleagues.

Prior to coming to work at Gale, I held multiple leadership positions at LexisNexis, focused on segment leadership and product management. I've also worked at two start-ups, most recently at a weather data start-up that applied Big Data techniques to historical weather data.

ATG: *About a year and a half ago, Gale also brought on board a new Senior Vice President and General Manager overseeing the entire business. It looks like Gale may be undergoing some significant changes. Can you give us the inside scoop on what's been happening? How does this position interact with yours?*

LM: Yes, Gale has brought several new leaders on board as our business evolves, and as our customer needs evolve. Paul Gazzolo joined as Senior Vice President and General Manager in November 2014 and is charged with overseeing all operations and strategy for Gale across the globe. Paul asked me to join his team of direct reports last year.

Growing our global business is a key focus for Gale and Paul also recently brought on Terry Robinson, Senior Vice President and Managing Director, overseeing all of the Gale International business. Terry is based in Dubai, where we recently opened an office. Terry has been instrumental in helping the company establish a presence in key regions such as the Middle East and Asia.

ATG: *As someone who plays a key role in bringing new information products to market what can you tell us about the process? How does it work? Is there anything unique about the way Gale does it?*

LM: The process starts with the customer and deep knowledge of our customers' strategic goals, workflows, and pain points. Recently, I made some substantial changes to Gale's product leadership structure to be aligned by our three core markets — K12, public and academic. This is how our marketing and sales organization is already set up, creating an effective triangle or loop of information where product strategy is informed by the day-to-day



insights from our sales and marketing teams.

Once we have a solid product concept, driven by customer need, we will do market testing to validate the concept, through a combination of focus groups, surveys, and ethnographic studies. Depending on the amount and type of new content needed, we may form an advisory board, recruit faculty to write and peer-review, and work with licensing partners. Content metadata and curriculum alignment decisions are integral parts of the development process, as they drive significant value. As we move into development, we follow an agile development cycle. The product manager sits with the developers, content engineers and designers and they move the project forward in sprints. After a sprint, the new iteration will be shown to customers for feedback and any course correction. As we near release, content is indexed and final QA (quality assurance) is completed.

It looks very orderly when I lay it out that like — in practice, there are many twists and turns, and many steps happening in parallel! Speed is important, but we don't want to miss important insights from the team along the way, so there is a constant balancing act.

I do think we have a great way of borrowing from best practices in product development across a number of industries, and I think one of our strengths is the use of shared space. Not just in the team rooms, but also in that we have a substantial majority of the team all in our office in Farmington Hills, which allows for spontaneous collaboration. We just held an all-day Hackathon this week that has resulted in some excellent new concepts.

ATG: *Can you share some of those new concepts at this time, at least those relevant to the academic market?*

LM: The concepts need more development, but I can share that there are very interesting ideas around Virtual Reality experiences for customers and AI tools for subject indexing.

ATG: *One comment that has been mentioned about Gale is that the products are frequently not scholarly/academic enough. Comments?*

LM: We really value feedback like this, and also value having an open dialogue with our customers. Gale has evolved from the print reference publisher that many customers know us as. Today, we're focused on being an education partner for libraries, including academic libraries.

Many of our products are created specifically for academic customers. Gale's digital archive program is put together under the guidance of one or more scholars prominent in the relevant field of study. For multi-part archives, we work with a board of advisors to shape the program broadly, and then with subject-specific scholars on inclusion criteria for individual archives within the program. In many cases we are working from an established bibliography, as was the case for ECCO and *American Fiction*. The monographs, manuscripts, ephemera and newspapers/magazines contained within an archive are useful for undergraduate researchers as well as seasoned scholars. We partner with renowned institutions such as the British Library, National Archives (Kew), Cambridge University Library, Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, American Antiquarian Society, New York Public Library, Harvard Law School Library, and Yale Law School Library (just to name a few) to bring essential documents to scholars, creating new and unique opportunities for research.

Similarly, for our imprints Macmillan and Scribner's, we have an academic board that recruits other academics to write college and graduate level original scholarship that is then reviewed.

Our recently released product, *Gale Researcher*, is created by academics. *Gale Researcher* features scholarly content aligned with the scope and sequence of introductory college-level courses. Organized by discipline, each content set is further segmented into relevant series and topics covering foundational and fundamental concepts within a survey course. Each series of topics is overseen by a series editor who is a scholar in the area of study. All of our contributors, including editors, have been vetted by an editor in chief (George Esenwein, PhD), who is overseeing development of the entire content set.

ATG: *We notice that Gale has expanded its digital archives program. Can you tell us about a few of the key additions? What is the underlying strategy behind this expansion? Why now?*

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LM: Our archive programming has been expanding and changing over the last few years in terms of the type of content we're digitizing — we're focused on more multicultural content — and the amount of content. We recently addressed these significant changes with a rebranding of the program as *Gale Primary Sources*.

The *Gale Primary Sources* program has published 35 new products this past year, covering more than 500 years of history. Through its nearly 100 content partners, **Gale** is opening up 15 million pages of rare content from different parts of the world to researchers and digital humanists. New archive programs that launched this spring represent the new face of the program, such as:

Archives of Sexuality and Gender, a milestone digital program that brings together primary source content on gender, sexuality and identity. The first part of this multi-part series — *LGBTQ History and Culture Since 1940*, represents the largest searchable digital archive of LGBTQ history;

Early Arabic Printed Books, the first major text-searchable online archive of pre-20th century Arabic printed books, required **Gale** to develop new technological advances such as optical character recognition software for early Arabic printed script; and

American Fiction, 1774-1920, which explores the development of American literature from the political beginnings of the United States through World War I, and includes thousands of works never before available online. It enables students and researchers to answer key questions about history, society, identity, psychology, race, gender and culture.

ATG: *There are a number of players in the primary source/digital archive space. What separates Gale's offerings from the competition? Are you focusing on particular subjects? Does your interface differ? Does it offer any unique functionality?*

LM: In addition to the academic-driven approach to our archive content, which we discussed earlier, we deliver this unique and multicultural content on an advanced platform. The platform provides data-visualization tools, essentially introductory digital humanities tools, which help researchers look at content in a different way, and draw new insights from the content. This platform includes term cluster and term frequency tools, and it works across all of our archives. So a researcher can look for connections across everything we have digitized.

Gale has also gone one step further. Many of our archives are fully indexed and the metadata and data are available for text and data mining and other forms of large-scale digital humanities analysis. We're also developing and testing a new service, "a sandbox" so-to-speak, to allow digital humanists to run different analyses and apply different tools to our data sets (as well as other data sets they may have access to). You'll be hearing more about

against the grain people profile

Liz Mason

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BORN AND LIVED: Born and raised in Kansas. After graduate school, lived in Atlanta, Georgia; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Charlottesville, Virginia. Currently residing in Birmingham, MI.

EARLY LIFE: High school in Overland Park, KS; B.A. Business Administration & Spanish, **Michigan State University**; Master of International Business Studies, **University of South Carolina** (all in the 80s).

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: 1989-1994: Product manager at a banking start-up; 1994-2013: 20 different jobs (and 24 different bosses!) at **LexisNexis**, starting as a Marketing Manager, then as a Director/Sr. Director of product management, then as Vice President & General Manager of several different market segments; 2014-2015 Chief Operating Officer at Weather Analytics, a weather data start-up. 2015: started at **Gale**.

FAMILY: Three children, two in college and one in high school; two dogs (beagle mix rescues) and one husband.

IN MY SPARE TIME: Reading, cooking, hiking. I keep a list of books I want to get at the library on my phone.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Scandinavian police procedurals, psychological fiction, family sagas, books where a relationship is told from both perspectives, coming of age stories, non-fiction on health topics, biographies of strong women.

PHILOSOPHY: Leave it better than you found it.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Stepping in for the Chief Technology Officer to get a key product completed for our most important customer.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I am in endless pursuit of a better work-life balance.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I am very intrigued by the impact of technology on learning. I believe we have barely begun to see how it can transform access to education. 🐼

this from **Gale** in the future — we're currently collecting customer feedback on our prototype.

ATG: *Gale continues to add new reference works to the Gale Virtual Reference Library eBook collection. What do you see as the future of that collection? In fact, what is the Reference Collection these days? Generally, it appears to be largely digital, not print, correct?*

LM: While **Gale's** revenue overall is more than 80% digital, we deliver our new frontlist titles in both print and eBook format, and GVRL represents eBooks from **Gale** as well as non-fiction eBooks from our network of more than 100 publisher partners. With more than 12,000 eBooks available, GVRL really offers something for all reading levels and content across popular subject areas such as STEM, DIY, and more.

Customers give us great feedback on our GVRL platform, as **Gale** has focused on making our eBooks as accessible and usable as possible. We offer ReadSpeaker technology (text-to-speech functionality), article translation in several languages, online book browse, and the ability to download articles as PDFs for offline access. **Gale** eBooks are Interlinked which allows customers to link directly from

their InfoTrac periodicals to contextually relevant articles within GVRL. GVRL allows unlimited concurrent users and downloads. As with many of our other resources, GVRL is integrated with Google & Microsoft tools.

Going forward, you can expect us to continue enhancing our platform, in response to customer requests, with more multi-media capabilities and additional customization features.

ATG: *As of now, it seems that print editions still play a part in your plans. Do you see a viable market for new print reference works? From your customer research can you say who is using print reference works in libraries?*

LM: Our goal is really to be wherever our end users are. If they still want print we will deliver print, and international customers continue to demand print.

ATG: *We understand that Gale Researcher, your newest product, is a bit of a departure for Gale. How so?*

LM: *Gale Researcher* is a new research platform that is designed to help students who may not be comfortable doing college-level re-

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search by connecting them to citable scholarly content that is aligned to introductory college courses across a range of disciplines.

Gale Researcher is a research platform and curriculum tool that provides peer-reviewed articles, images and video content. Working with our colleagues within **Cengage Learning**, we've been able to align content to the scope and sequence of key foundational classes across disciplines. *Gale Researcher* gives students a simple path to materials that are both topically relevant to an area of study and citable for research projects.

The built-in customization capabilities enable librarians to add links to other content — including a professor's content — and helps demonstrate direct, customizable support for key foundational courses. *Gale Researcher* can help drive closer collaboration between the library and classroom — an area we know librarians need support. Virtually all content within *Gale Researcher* can be shared via a persistent URL, allowing direct access from a Learning Management System (LMS) or syllabus.

ATG: *Aside from providing content, it sounds like Gale Researcher is equally helpful as a teaching tool for novice researchers. What role did librarians play in its development? Is there a Website where our readers can preview how this works?*

LM: We surveyed over 600 professors and 400 librarians when testing the initial concept, and over 150 librarians and faculty members were involved in focus groups and user interface testing.

We also tapped into research from our end users — students. We leveraged research from **Cengage Learning's** 21 Voices project, a multi-year, hands-on research program that gathers real-life insights from students about how they learn and what they need to be most successful. Our team also went out on campuses and asked students about how they approach research to understand their first steps when starting a research project.

We also know from surveys such as one we did last year with *Library Journal* — “Bridging the Librarian-Faculty Gap in the Academic Library” — that librarians and faculty need closer collaboration.

This qualitative and quantitative student, faculty and librarian feedback aided in the development of *Gale Researcher*, along with the academics involved in the product's development. Each series of topics is overseen by a series editor, who is a scholar in the area of study. All of our contributors, including editors, have been vetted by an editor in chief (**George Esenwein**, PhD), who is overseeing development of the entire content set.

There is a great video on the *Gale Researcher* Website here (www.gale.com/researcher) that explains clearly the pain points *Gale Researcher* is trying to solve for students, librarians and faculty.

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against the grain company profile

Gale, a part of Cengage Learning

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AFFILIATED COMPANIES: Cengage Learning

OFFICERS: **Paul Gazzolo**, Senior Vice President and General Manager; **Liz Mason**, Vice President of U.S. Product; **Jason Swafford**, Vice President of Software Development; **Jon Peach**, Vice President of Finance; **Terry Robinson**, Senior Vice President and Managing Director for International; **Brian McDonough**, Senior Vice President, North American Sales; **Harmony Faust**, Vice President of Marketing, North America; **Doug Blume**, Executive Director, Human Resources.

ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS, ETC.: The **American Library Association**. **Gale** is a member of **Portico**, and nearly all digital archives are preserved as part of **Portico's D-Collection Service**. **Portico** will make this content available to **Gale's** customers under specifically defined circumstances called “trigger events.”

KEY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES: **Gale** offers resources for library users at all ages — whether a pre-K learner, an adult looking to go back to high school to earn an accredited diploma, or a retired learner.

Focusing specifically on the academic market, **Gale** offers a robust array of resources — from the recently announced *Gale Researcher*, a new platform that connects students who may not be comfortable doing college-level research with citable scholarly content that is aligned to introductory college courses, to the millions of pages of digital archives available through the *Gale Primary Sources* program. Some of our most well-known archives include *Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)* and *Nineteenth Century Collections Online (NCCO)*. Through partnerships with leading institutions around the world, such as the **Smithsonian** and the **National Geographic Society**, we offer digitized primary sources of some of the world's most treasured content. The newly launched *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* and **Gale's Early Arabic Printed Books** resources also demonstrate the diversity in content **Gale** offers.

Readers can learn more at www.gale.com/academic.

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: **Gale** serves users at all types of libraries — school, public and academic, in the U.S. and globally.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: Approximately 500 globally

NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY (PRINT, ELECTRONIC, OPEN ACCESS, ETC.): We publish approximately 300 titles annually (all of which are available as eBooks). Our Thordike Press Large Print imprint publishes about 1500 titles annually.

HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY/PUBLISHING PROGRAM: **Gale** is a global knowledge provider to libraries that serve school, universities, colleges and communities. **Gale** provides curriculum-aligned content in databases, eBooks, primary source archives and makes it accessible through technology to deliver better learning outcomes.

Gale was founded in Michigan in 1954 by **Frederick Gale Ruffner, Jr.** While working as a market researcher and running into difficulty finding a directory of trade associations, **Mr. Ruffner** saw a need for curated reference content — and an opportunity. **Gale Research Company** was born. The company's first publication, the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, is still published today in digital format.

Now a part of **Cengage Learning**, **Gale** continues to enrich the library environment. We're committed to partnering with libraries to help them change lives in their communities and to showcase their undeniable value, helping solve real problems for real people.

ADDITIONAL ITEMS OF INTEREST TO ATG READERS: On the academic side, supporting digital humanities is a key focus for **Gale**. **Gale** was one of the first publishers to provide customers with access to the data and metadata behind our digital archive collections for text and data mining purposes. The *Gale Primary Sources* platform also offers search visualization (term graphing and term cluster) tools for researchers beginning digital humanities work. **Gale** is also exploring additional services through a sandbox -type offering for researchers.

In addition, through our *Gale Primary Sources* program, we're focused on digitizing more global and diverse content through our network of partner institutions across the world. The recent launches of *Early Arabic Printed Books* and the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* are examples of this effort. 



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primary method of paying for OA. Is that sustainable? From your vantage point what is that the most viable pricing model for the OA publications?

EA: My training is in science and technology policy, and questions of system-wide efficiency are always close to my heart. I am worried that flipping to OA is not going to be painless. The publishing industry has undergone a huge concentration in the last 35 years or so and I fear the transition to OA may accentuate this. The large publishers are offering innovative big deals that bundle APCs with subscriptions to paywalled journals, and these packages are highly seductive. The danger is that smaller publishers do not have the assets to make that kind of seductive offering. This could make the smaller publishers increasingly uncompetitive. Many smaller publishers who do not innovate will disappear together with their journals, or they will simply be absorbed by the larger publishers, thus furthering market concentration.

Coming back to the core of your question, the question is therefore not only one of being sustainable on the demand side but also on the supply side. There are a large number of publishers who offer APC-less gold publication

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There is also an on-demand Webex via Gale's robust training Website (as well as Webinars and other training support) here <http://solutions.cengage.com/gale-training/>.

ATG: *What can academic librarians expect from Gale products within the next two years? Within the next five years? What new services can we look forward to?*

LM: A key focus for Gale is to continue to identify ways we can take our content and technology from behind library walls and put it directly into student and instructor workflow.

Our customers can also certainly expect more digital archives with unique and rare content with global applicability. We're hoping to leverage our existing partnership with institutions in the Middle East and China to make that happen.

As we grow our archives program, look for more from Gale in the area of Digital Humanities. As I mentioned previously, we're exploring a sandbox type service to support this, in addition to our unique content and data.

Open Educational Resources (OER) continues to be hot trend in the academic space. Working with our Cengage colleagues, we're identifying ways institutions can leverage the

Gale content they've already paid for in the library to support these initiatives, and lower the cost of materials for students.

Lots of exciting things in the works!

ATG: *Obviously your responsibilities at Gale take up a tremendous amount of time but we were wondering what you do when you're not focused on the job? What personal interests do you have? What do you do for fun?*

LM: My husband and I have three children, two in college and one in high school, who serve as my real-life sounding board on how students learn today. I am a dog person, and we recently added a puppy to the family, bringing our dog count to two. I love to read, and I am really enjoying our wonderful public library, the **Baldwin Public Library** in Birmingham, MI.

ATG: *Liz, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us.*

LM: Thank you for the opportunity to share pieces of the Gale world with your readers. Our team looks forward to connecting more at Charleston and other industry events. As always, any feedback can be directed to me at liz.mason@cengage.com. 🐾