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ATG Interviews Stephen Rhind-Tutt

President, Alexander Street

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ATG: *Just prior to ALA Annual Alexander Street caused quite a stir when you announced that you were becoming a ProQuest Company. It surprised a lot of people. What led to your decision to join ProQuest? Why ProQuest? Why now?*

SR-T: Almost since Alexander Street was founded, we've been approached by companies wishing to acquire us. For sixteen years, I and my fellow investors said "no." However, the market changes in the past few years made us reconsider.

The catalyst was seeing how important video in the academy is becoming and the realization that we were too small to take full advantage of the trend. I could see that large vendors were going to enter the space, and that we'd not be able to compete as effectively in the future as we'd done in the past.

Having started down that path, I began to see other advantages. Joining with the right partner could really propel us in other fields, too. For example, when talking with ProQuest, we imagined putting Alexander Street's original newsreels of Pearl Harbor alongside contemporaneous newspaper front pages; linking ProQuest's music journals to our audio tracks, so that users could listen to Alexander Street music mentioned in the text; adding our contemporary, ethnically diverse writers to the content in *Literature Online* (LION) and streaming Alexander Street's theatre-performance videos alongside; allowing our business databases and their extensive line of business journals to enhance one another.

At Alexander Street, we've developed many of our products specifically to avoid the specific subject areas and/or media offered by large vendors like ProQuest, Gale, EBSCO and Newsbank. The results have been collections that are almost all complementary to those of the bigger publishers. We've known that faculty want comprehensive resources. An acquisition would let us offer those in a better way.

A key concern for me was to make sure that Alexander Street's new home would provide a cultural fit. As the negotiations progressed, I began to see that ProQuest was such a fit; many of their values were the same as ours, such as open communication, engagement with customers, passion for what you do, innovation, and ownership.

ATG: *What specifically led you to believe that ProQuest shared values like open communication, engagement with customers, innovation, etc.?*

SR-T: These values are literally written on the walls at ProQuest, but that's not what convinced me. Before the acquisition, I expressed reservations about ProQuest to Andy Snyder.

I didn't pull punches. I was honest. You're big. I don't see you caring about staff. I don't see you innovating. He could have come up with platitudes, but he didn't. He organized meetings with specific staff to overcome my concerns. He did so in an open way. He explained how ProQuest does take care of staff and when I talked to staff I found them open too and excited about where the company was headed. He gave me specific examples of innovation — like PQ's new Insight Series and he talked through how I could contribute. Simply put he overcame my objections.

I've worked for several large companies and I can honestly say with 120 days of experience under my belt that PQ does care about employees. This isn't an attempt to curry favor with my new employers, it's a reflection of what I've seen at top level meetings in the company. (It's not because PQ is being nice per se — it's because it's the best way to get the best out of people.)

And for the record this interview is open. I'm speaking in the same way I would have before the acquisition...no-one's dictating what I say!

ATG: *Can you tell us about the negotiations? From your perspective, what was essential to make the deal happen? What did you insist on? What did ProQuest insist on?*

SR-T: The sale document runs to hundreds of pages, which will give you some idea of how long the negotiations were! For us the key thing that mattered was less the price than making sure that we were "doing the right thing" for all the parties concerned.

At Alexander Street we love what we do, and all of us were extremely keen to see that the work we've done and what we've built wouldn't be wasted, but instead would live on and grow. We've always felt tremendous gratitude towards our customers, business partners, and employees for all the guidance and support they've given us over the years.

In business as in life, circumstances can change quickly. What Eileen Lawrence and I were looking for wasn't a guarantee that everything would stay the same, but that our baby and now teenager would have the best chance to grow into a solid, contributing adult.

ATG: *When you announced the deal you said that one of the arguments that convinced you to make the deal was that ProQuest could accelerate and expand the vision for Alexander Street. How so? What else was on Alexander Street's wish list?*

SR-T: Our vision at Alexander Street has been to build the ultimate websites in literature, music, theatre, women's history, and other fields. We want to provide access to the best content, from all sources, no matter how

difficult to license, with the best functionality and the highest usage.

No website in a discipline can be truly comprehensive without journals, eBooks, and dissertations. Every website trying to do this must have an outbound discovery service — with tools that ideally are applicable across large swathes of content, not just silos. Now, with Alexander Street and ProQuest working together, these things are possible.

ATG: *Where does Alexander Street fit into ProQuest's overall strategy?*

SR-T: Alexander Street will be the streaming media engine behind all of ProQuest. It will be the developer of phenomenal discipline-specific websites in fields like music and literature. It will innovate. It will continue to build important niche databases that are true to the Alexander Street mission "to make silent voices heard."

ATG: *It sounds like this new arrangement will really allow you to expand your offerings. Are there any specific new niche databases on the drawing board at the present time? What can libraries look forward to from Alexander Street in the coming months?*

SR-T: Lots! We're just about to launch our new *Borders & Migration Studies Online*, we've just launched *Caribbean Studies in Video* (the full Banyan archive), great new education oriented videos from the *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* and lots more. In 2017 expect us to launch more than 10 new titles. We'll also be revamping up our video offerings — with new functionality, a simpler UI and new PDA features. We've just signed an agreement exclusively to deliver feature films from SONY-Columbia on PDA.

ATG: *As you know the trend toward consolidation is a major concern for a number of people in the industry. What do you say to those who think that the acquisition of Alexander Street by ProQuest has a negative impact on the market by restricting competition?*

SR-T: My strategy at Alexander Street specifically has been *not* to offer the same solutions as companies like ProQuest. Editors would come to me with ideas around newspapers, journals, and eBooks, and I'd say, "No, we can't hope to provide a superior experience in that space. Let's leave it to them and focus on what we do best."

ProQuest's acquisition of Alexander Street will increase competition. I'm willing to bet that following the announcement, other organizations have bumped up the importance of video and are preparing to launch competing products. And here within Alexander

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Street, we now have additional resources that are going to make our products much more competitive.

A good parallel might be what happened with Adam Matthew. Prior to the SAGE acquisition, they were a small, albeit respected, competitor to Alexander Street, Gale, and ProQuest. After SAGE's investment, with the infusion of expertise and added salesforce power, they've become a more formidable competitive force. The net result is the most thriving primary-source competitive landscape since the heyday of microfilm.

ATG: *Who is currently on the Alexander Street management team? How much autonomy do you all have? How are you being integrated into the ProQuest's organizational structure? Who do you report to?*

SR-T: The management team remains as before. Key staff include Andrea Eastman-Mullins, our COO; David Parker, our licensing and editorial VP; and Eileen Lawrence, our Senior VP and indefatigable sales champion. Julie Stevens continues to be responsible for Alexander Street in Asia Pacific and Adam Gardner for Europe.

I report in to Rafael Sidi, Senior VP and General Manager of ProQuest Information Solutions — my first boss in sixteen years!

ProQuest has been clear from the start that they want us to continue the good work we're doing and build on it, and so the issue of autonomy hasn't yet arisen. I'm sure from time to time there will be questions of resources, and I expect the conversations will be similar to those I had before with Alexander Street's board.

ATG: *Speaking of staffing? In the recent past ProQuest had to let some employees go. Will this affect the delivery of information to you and their customers?*

SR-T: Not at all. Even without accounting for Alexander Street, there are more people working at ProQuest now than there were a year ago. At Alexander Street specifically, far from letting people go we've just hired two new customer service reps to make sure we can cope with the additional traffic as a consequence of this deal.

ATG: *What benefits can libraries expect from Alexander Street becoming a ProQuest company? How will it impact the delivery and discovery of your products? How will they be integrated into the ProQuest platform?*

SR-T: Lots of benefits. Let's start with usage. In the next couple of months, the thousands of users of ProQuest will be able to seamlessly access to 60,000 video titles in every search in the ProQuest platform simply by subscribing to *Academic Video Online* (AVON). Those who already subscribe to AVON will find usage jump substantially, as their users are led to video resources in the same ProQuest platform search result, for the first time. Other cross-linkages will follow, driving up usage and value.

In music, we plan to integrate ProQuest's *International Index to Music Periodicals* (IIMP), also known as the Music Periodicals Database, with Alexander Street's extensive *Music Online* offerings.

You'll soon see ProQuest's *Literature Online* enhanced substantially by the addition of Alexander Street's literature resources. We'll create a combined offering that's much more current, diverse, and rich than anything else available.

There are many, many other benefits to come over time — including a unified administrative portal, better training programs, stronger video functionality in ProQuest's products, and more.

ATG: *Do you have any projections as to how much usage of Alexander Street resources will increase due to the ProQuest acquisition? Have you seen any growth in subscriptions due to the increased exposure you are getting in ProQuest databases?*

SR-T: It's only been a few days since we've switched on the ability to search Alexander Street content from within ProQuest's main platform, so it's too early to tell. We have been seeing substantial growth in subscriptions and usage, but this is probably due to our recently opening our platform to external search engines like Google.

ATG: *How is the deal affecting current prices? What future pricing changes should libraries anticipate?*

SR-T: The deal isn't affecting prices at all. We're going to make decisions on future pricing exactly as we would have done as an independent company.

ATG: *It seems to us that price increases are inevitable, if not necessary, to develop, create and deliver products that merge existing ProQuest offerings with Alexander Street products. What are we missing?*

SR-T: If Alexander Street sells more as a consequence of this deal, we should be able to cover additional costs of migration. And we are selling more!

To me the key thing about pricing is to deliver services that are good value for money. It's up to us as publishers to get our costs sorted out to be able to do that. And if we don't then we should not expect them to sell!

ATG: *What about product development? How much of a say does ProQuest have in what Alexander Street will bring to the marketplace?*

SR-T: Our basic job for the past sixteen years has been to create great products. ProQuest can help us do that. For example, ProQuest's platform development team has created sophisticated tools far beyond what we had at Alexander Street.

Over the next three years or so, I want to build out discipline websites like *Literature Online* and *Music Online* to become, quite simply, the best resources in the field, allowing new research and much better learning. That's what I was planning to do when we were independent — but now we can integrate and link to dissertations, eBooks, newspapers, and much more from ProQuest.

ATG: *Can you be specific as to what platform advantages ProQuest will provide? What sophisticated tools are you referring to? How do you see libraries taking advantage of these tools?*

SR-T: ProQuest has a team that tracks exactly how users are interacting with our databases. We can see using "heat maps" where users eyes go on screen, and we track which parts of interface are leading users to useful information and which are leading to dead ends. That translates to award winning interfaces, higher usage and much more functional tools.

The same is true in other areas. Librarians can look forward to much more sophisticated usage statistics that show in depth how users are engaging with Alexander Street content. Users can look to new data mining tools that will allow analysis of content. And developers will be able to interact with our content via APIs, so providing much richer interactions.

ATG: *Alexander Street has been an innovator in open access with your Video Commons hosting service. Will that continue in the ProQuest era?*

SR-T: Absolutely! Our hosting services continue, and now they're free to AVON subscribers with an upload tool and unlimited space for local content. We've also embarked on two other open initiatives. The freely available *Open Music Library* (openmusiclibrary.org) was launched just before the acquisition and is growing quickly. Before the end of this year expect to see a major improvement that will make it even more valuable. We've recently published the *Ruth Benedict Papers* to kick-start our free anthropology open archive.

ATG: *We know that it's early days but can you give us a progress report on how things are going? What is on your wish list for the future now that Alexander Street is part of ProQuest?*

SR-T: As you can imagine, there was a good deal of concern internally about how it would be. I'm pleased to say that by and large things are going very well. The problems that we've bumped into are nagging little annoyances around switching email systems, coordinating different calendars, and such. The sales reps are really enjoying collaborating with their new ProQuest colleagues, while continuing to be customers' key points of contact for Alexander Street products, as before. It's all been very good.

My plan is to have Alexander Street evolve and thrive as a critical part of ProQuest.

ATG: *You have always been an astute observer of our industry, what do you see as the future of librarianship and libraries? And how do you think that future will impact content providers like Alexander Street and ProQuest?*

SR-T: I could write many pages on this! Here's a quick few lines...

Librarians and higher education publishers can't succeed without each other. Together we have to provide a service to our mutual patrons that really helps them learn better, research better and drive better results.

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If I look back over the past 15 years or so I see that most of the big improvements in our field have been driven not by libraries or traditional publishers, but by organizations like Google, Facebook, and Wikipedia. Over the next 15 years we can do better, by focusing harder on what our users' needs really are. The most important of these for me is to untie the business of tenure and credentialing from old formats like books and journals. Websites, indices, video, software, 3D models, and countless other forms of expression are making definitive scholarly contributions and receiving substantial usage. We have to develop mechanisms to have their authors receive academic credit. In doing so we'll become less tied to journals and books, and we'll innovate faster and more effectively.

ATG: *Stephen, this must be an exciting but exhausting time for you and Alexander Street. Are you able to make time to relax and re-energize? What activities help you make that happen?*

SR-T: I just took two weeks of vacation in Greece. Costa Navarino. Beach. Kids. Reading *Ministers at War*, a great monograph that explores in depth what a tough time Churchill had keeping his team in check during World War II. Visiting Olympia and seeing the original stadium and ruins. I didn't check email. It was GREAT!

However, towards the end, leaving the beach for the hotel room in 95-degree heat with that saltwater sticky feeling one gets, I couldn't stop myself looking forward to engaging on those swirling issues like open access, outbound discovery, open linked data...

ATG: *Thank you so much for taking time from what must be a chaotic schedule to talk to us.*

SR-T: Thank you for interviewing me. 🐿

Both Sides Now ...
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So *value* is not only measured in the contents of the product/service/technology purchased, but also in the *personal value* that the purchase represents to both parties. A significant commission payment, a possible promotion, keeping one's job can all be counted as *values* coveted by the sales rep. For the library person, the *value* in the purchase may represent an upgrade to the library's collection and reputation, recognition from the Library Director acknowledging the wisdom of the librarian for the purchase or just the ability to get home each night at a reasonable hour due to using a new resource.

In 1981, the great **Phil Collins** released his first solo album after many years with the group, **Genesis**. Most reviewers at the time called *Face Value* an honest album.

In the world of negotiations, honesty by both sides goes hand-in-hand with understanding the *value* each party will derive by completing the buying and selling process in an open and forthright manner. 🐿

Mike is currently the Managing Partner of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, "Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success" has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. www.gruenbergconsulting.com