

Profile: Dan Tonkery



Brunch at Dusty's –
photographed by
Andrew Tonkery

Dan Tonkery just loves real estate. We met at his golf course condo in Palm Harbor Florida on a day that started frosty and ended in the 70s. Dan spends his time between his French Country farmhouse in rural New Jersey and (another) golf course residence in Texas. He recently sold his last property in West Virginia, where he was born in a coal-mining region and attended the local one-room school. His first job while he was in school was on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad as a crew caller and yard clerk. This was his introduction to automation, using the key punch machine to inventory the coal cars and consignments and sending paper tape to the main company in Baltimore. (Sometimes we wonder just how much things have moved on since 1962.) His summer sales job was as a Fuller Brush man, selling kitchen and cleaning products door to door, and for 12 weeks he was the number one sales rep in the US, but then he moved on to selling the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Automation and selling were to continue to be the key parts of his career.

After pre-med at David Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee, he studied biomedical communications at the University of Illinois in Urbana. A publicly-funded post-graduate programme took him to the National Library of Medicine (NLM) where he stayed for ten years. This was the very

early days of automation and Dan automated about everything he could find in technical services at NLM. His specialty was technical services infrastructure, i.e. online serials control, acquisitions and cataloging. From manual systems to automated processing, 20,000 serials were moved from paper to a mainframe system, the \$2 million acquisition budget was used to buy everything from Brazilian PhDs to Russian journals and Dan built his first online acquisitions system to handle these complex purchases. By the time he left in 1979, every technical services process was automated.

Then Dan moved to UCLA as Associate University Librarian for Technical Services where everything was totally manual, and the systems department's only function was to prepare the microfilm Union List of Serials. Within three months Dan had drawn up a development plan, laid off the systems department of 19 people and then used their salaries to pay for building ORION, an automated technical processing system. The system automated the 19 branch libraries, 90,000 live serials and a \$5 million acquisition budget. This was a complete transition from paper to online, and the ORION mainframe system was operated from 1980 until 2000, using CLSI for circulation and run by one programmer and two assistants. He had the entire campus hard wired with co-ax

cable and gradually all functions were decentralized to local department libraries. Soon the library was the main user of UCLA's academic computing center and Dan had sold time-sharing agreements with many local libraries, such as the Getty Museum, University of California Irvine and Redlands University. IBM was so impressed they wanted to use the UCLA platform as their academic computing platform. In the end ORION was only replaced because of Y2K concerns.

In the meantime a headhunter had called, but Dan was enjoying himself. (Did we mention that within a few weeks of arriving in LA he had met Linda?) After a while, Dick Rowe – for it was he who had contacted the headhunter – called Dan at home and persuaded him to fly to Boston. The conversation in the freezing parking lot ended with Dick offering jobs to Dan, Linda and Amira Aaron, Dan becoming the Senior Vice-President North America for Faxon. After a successful few years, Dan wanted to move to CD-ROM, but the Faxon board turned him down. He felt this was too good an opportunity to lose so he set up a CD-ROM development company, and the first customer was ... Dick Rowe.

Horizon Information Services developed and worked with the Library Corporation and with government departments to put their databases online. Back in LA they sold Bibliophile which would allow a public library to save enough in six weeks to justify buying the CD-ROM system. With partners Oliver Pesch and David Devine, they decided this was the time to sell and the 'finalists' were EBSCO and Colin Harrison's Menzies Group. EBSCO was the final winner, but at this time Colin was buying Readmore and invited Dan to New York. This was 1986 and Readmore had no automation, so Dan went back 30 years and started again from punched cards. Dan wanted to move onto PCs but their Philadelphia-based contractor said it couldn't be done. One of the programmers, Dan Stevenson, passed Dan a note at the end of the meeting that said "Call me". The three programmers left and started a new company which built the serials processing system, strongly supported by Colin. Specifying was easy and the system was quickly up and running. This allowed Dan to increase the turnover of the company from \$30 million to \$300 million by selecting those clients that needed fast same-day service and were prepared to pay for it. The first corporate customers were First Boston, followed by the Bank

of New York and then 30 medical schools and most of the pharmaceutical companies. Microsoft, Boeing and the pharmaceutical companies had between five and 20 Readmore staff in their offices, fulfilling orders on the spot, all with online acquisitions, claiming and routing. At Microsoft the staff included five cataloguers (in an office next to Bill Gates and Steve Balmer). As an example of operations there, over 1,000 copies of *PC Week* were on Microsoft staff's desks on Monday morning, flown in on a hired plane from the printer's. Any industry newsletter with Bill Gates in had 12 copies automatically sent to his mother.

In 1989 Menzies informed Colin that they wanted to get out of the library market. Dan and Colin Harrison tried to buy the business, but were trumped by the Blackwell family. The Readmore name had far more recognition, so although Dan reported in to Terry Collins and Miles Blackwell, the Blackwell name wasn't used for Readmore in North America and indeed many people didn't realize that the company had been sold. In January 1996 everything changed, the Blackwell family went through a family dispute and Miles Blackwell left the company. The new management immediately let anyone associated with Miles go, and both Dan and Terry left.

During a year of gardening leave Dan set up TDT Ventures and invested in an electronic publishing company, an online traffic school and online restaurant ordering service in Fort Collins, Colorado. He continued to work with publishers and libraries re-engineering their processes. During this time Faxon was bought by Dawson, and the North American management badly needed help. Dawson approached Dan to run the North American operations and with many of his ex-Readmore colleagues like Amira Aaron and Marilyn Geller, Dan set out to rebuild Faxon. They developed innovative products like Subs Depot, License Depot and Information Quest and revitalized the company. Soon Dick Rowe re-appeared with RoweCom money and stock and convinced Dawson to sell the company. Dan stayed on in the US with responsibilities shared with Dick, so Dick did the corporate desktop sales and Dan remained with the academics. The desktop business was expensive and was consuming all the cash and more. In the end Dan left Faxon and RoweCom and went to work for Dixon Brooke at EBSCO. EBSCO was concerned about the library industry and was afraid that RoweCom lacked the financial strength to

complete their business plans. EBSCO began planning for a possible RoweCom crash but never figured that the entire worldwide RoweCom/Faxon organization would actually completely collapse. EBSCO had hoped for an orderly decline in business and was prepared to handle the erosion over time, but that was not to be and the entire RoweCom organization was sent into bankruptcy. EBSCO worked long and hard at getting all the RoweCom companies out of bankruptcy and handling the integration into the EBSCO company.

At EBSCO, as VP Business Development, Dan helped the libraries get through the crisis with RoweCom, and started his innovation again. He was responsible for the A–Z service, worked in publisher relations and for the last two years focused on consortium relations. This involved travelling over 100,000 miles a year and at the end of 2009 Dan left EBSCO looking for a change of pace. He wants to be more project oriented, write and continue his relationship with the industry.

This relationship has included being involved with the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) for 24 of its 25-year history. He was on the board for 12 years, served as Treasurer and President. (Who can forget the famous Presidential speech with wet suit and surf board.) He is still active with UKSG and on our *Serials* Editorial Board; he works with the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) and has been heavily involved in standards with the Serials Industry Systems Advisory Committee (SISAC), the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) and the International Committee for EDI on Serials (ICEDIS). Dan feels strongly that standards are what “make things work”. After being mentored at NLM, Dan has always tried to mentor a number of librarians and after 40 years there are a lot of Dan’s ‘mentees’ out there.

Reviewing the industry, Dan feels that the golden age of subscription agents was the 70s and 80s and that is long gone. The agents now need a focused service more involved in support and access to e-products with a totally different service load. The support people are no longer just customer relations, but need to be technicians, familiar with ERM system maintenance, link resolvers and with the ability and tools to diagnose and fix those problems. The door is open for a new type of company to come in, based on e-only and with the right staff, support and resources. The

new paradigm will be sharing: sharing functions, sharing resources, sharing regionally with lots of outsourcing. Existing library consortia will change their operations to move into library management functions, cataloguing, collection development and even bigger collaborations. OCLC can do more to facilitate this and should be the back office for more and more functions. The library should end up as the service node for particular research units and support university research centres. Google has the potential to be the biggest library supplier in the world, depending on what level of information they will collect and manage, they may even move into library management. Will OCLC and Google ever collaborate to rule the library world?

Back on the home front, Linda and Dan started dating in October 1979, were married in May 1981 and have been together ever since. Linda was head of the Circulation Department at UCLA Library. Andrew was born in 1982 and is now a well-known photographer and has moved back to LA (check out www.andrewtonkery.com). Their two other sons are a San Francisco bankruptcy lawyer and a San Antonio banker, so a wide variety to look after them in their old age. Linda is his constant support, and is as well travelled as Dan. It is her job to look after the houses that Dan keeps buying, and as we were doing our interview, Linda was stripping wallpaper in the bathroom. As we know, Dan’s hobbies are golf and real estate (sometimes combined). He says he’s “never met a house he doesn’t like” and it looks like those partnerships will continue to flourish.

Hailey, aged three, being introduced to the delights of the Fair Oaks Country Club golf course by grandfather Dan

