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Reflections about the Faxon Company: Beyond Vision, the Reality of Shatterproof Windows and the Demise of the Faxon Company

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Reflections about the Faxon Company

Abstract

Connie Foster, editor of *Serials Review*, opens this issue with reflections about the Faxon Company. She is joined by several contributors who had close ties with the subscription agency either as former employees or as clients. In an effort to document some of the milestones of the Faxon Company and results of an upheaval in the business community with the bankruptcy of divine/RoweCom/Faxon Library Services, the contributors also willingly share some experiences with and insights about a former serials subscription agency giant with services that spanned three centuries.

Beyond Vision, the Reality of Shatterproof Windows and the Demise of the Faxon Company

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When vandals tried to break into my son's slightly used truck parked on a college campus, they created a huge spiderweb effect on the driver's side window, but the glass remained intact. Evidently technology provides glass with special polymers or other chemicals (I'm way out of my field now) that prevent total break-outs. We used that hefty gray tape to hold the "web" until the window could be replaced. I bring the concepts of slightly used and shattered windows to reflections about recent events surrounding the Faxon Company (or,

Faxon, a Dawson Company; RoweCom, Faxon Library Services; divine/Faxon Library Services).

In 1918 Frederick Winthrop Faxon purchased the Boston Book Company on Beacon Street (founded in 1881), a gently used book company dealing in back issues and sets. Faxon brought his own identity and stamp of service to the business and expanded into the F.W. Faxon Company as a serials subscription agency, sold it to a relative, his cousin-in-law Albert H. Davis. Davis sold to his son Albert Hassam Davis, Jr., who later sold major shares to his daughter and son-in-law (Judy Davis and Richard Roy Rowe). Rowe shortened the name to Faxon to fit nicely into automated system vendor codes. And there ends the gently, slightly used subscription agency history.

The year 1994 brought monumental changes to this company. A judge ruled in late November 1993 that Judy Davis was owner and sole voting shareholder of the company, and so Dick Rowe departed. On February 5, 1994, at the Faxon Clients breakfast during the American Library Association's midwinter meetings, Davis made the official announcement. With this shift, the Faxon Company had its corporate windows shattered, but not punched out. Swets & Zeitlinger acquired some of the non-North American assets in August 1994. In October some of that gray tape, the Dawson Company, fixed the damage for awhile and retained the much-respected name of Faxon, as well as much of the corporate culture and service for the North American assets. I suspect, however, that split or dual roles existed within the corporate structure. Dawson itself was a book, newspaper, and subscription agent firmly grounded in England since 1809.

In 1999 Richard Rowe, who by now had formed his own company RoweCom, sought to reattach himself to Faxon/Dawson with RoweCom/Faxon Library Services, since Dawson was ready to sell. Through all these changes, the Faxon name refused to die. Its strong identity with subscription services and its value for market recognition in branding service with innovation and trust were issues directly communicated to Dick Rowe by client advisory boards as this transition occurred. Once more Rowe tried to achieve some of his visions for a viable yet technologically advanced subscription agency and to generate a model of commerce that truly did exceed his grasp.¹

While attending a North American Serials Interest Group Conference in San Antonio, Texas, in May 2001, I watched a flurry of shocked, worried, and amazed faces emerge from a plenary session as personal digital assistants buzzed with messages that divine.com would purchase the financially beleaguered RoweCom and give the company a surge of financial stability. The deal was consummated in November 2001 by the fledgling software and services firm whose founder admitted that “Divine wanted RoweCom’s digital content delivery technology ... but had to buy the whole company to get it, and the company’s main business, managing periodical subscriptions, proved to be a financial fiasco.”²

Having watched this corporate window shatter and steadily weaken during the fall of 1994 and again in 2001, and realizing my responsibility for a sizeable serials budget, I recommended a vendor change after twenty-one years with the Faxon Company. Until 2001, the decision not to shift accounts was based primarily on increased work that would

ensue (i.e., recoding vendor numbers, ensuring accurate orders)--more than any other factors. But this final acquisition, and a dot.com one at that, really brought the ceiling down rather quickly into the throes of bankruptcy, lawsuits, and buyouts. By the end of 2002, the future of divine/RoweCom/Faxon Library Services was all too clear. Publishers and libraries lost money and materials, and not stated enough, hundreds of people lost jobs, while others teetered on the brink of uncertainty.³

And now the ultimate irony, EBSCO, once Faxon's chief competitor and the only other domestic, privately held, family-owned agency, is the acquirer and absorbs into its own family tree the roots of a family business that preceded it by nearly a half century. The remaining employees in Westwood (as of this writing in September, only about thirty of the original five hundred) occupy one building of the four that once formed the corporate headquarters.⁴ What or who will be retained as the business dust settles?

Librarians have been soundly scolded for lack of foresight and business savvy, for failure to check the stock markets or conduct regular queries on companies with whom they do significant business; librarians have been chastised for viewing subscription agents as friends rather than distant strangers and for ignoring or not reacting to warnings that yield no positive karma, for clinging to the "business as usual" model. Librarians, as well as others in the information industry, are indeed outraged, confused, worried about the bankruptcy proceedings, loss of money and materials, concerned with fewer choices and less competition, and bewildered and frazzled in coping with forced vendor changes and the enormous amount of work caused by this whole situation.

Before we forget all too soon what that company brought to the industry or dwell too long on the dark side, consider the following reflections (and admonitions) as a way of documenting events and accomplishments that defined a once proud agency within a volatile information industry that dominates our working lives. While we may never view a replacement window with quite the same certainty as an original, perhaps these vignettes can reside in our collective memories and render highlights and realities of one serials subscription agency and its services--best remembered as the Faxon Company.

Notes

¹ “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp,/Or what’s a heaven for?” by Robert Browning as quoted in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 5th ed., s.v. “Robert Browning, 1812-89.”

² Leslie Walker, “The Company That Bought the Bust,” *Washington Post* 12 June 2003, sec. E, p. 6, col. 3.

³ G.M.E., “RoweCom Failure Leaves Subscriptions Hanging,” *American Libraries* 34, no.2 (February 2003): 13-14.

⁴ Constance L. Foster, *The Faxon Company: Linked to Three Centuries, A Company History, 1881-1991* (Westwood MA: The Faxon Company, 1994): 97-98.
