In the second installment of Corner Office, *LJ* interviews Tim Collins, president of EBSCO Publishing. Just out of college, he started Popular Magazine Review in 1984 with his stepfather. The tiny magazine abstracts company was snatched up in 1987 by EBSCO Industries, parent of EBSCO Subscription Services. Now, the company Collins has nurtured for over two decades ranks as one of the leading electronic publishers of articles and reference databases. (See *LJ* 8/08 for the Corner Office kickoff, an interview with Patrick Sommers and John Barnes of reference/information giant Gale.)

The amiable Collins put EBSCO Publishing (EP) on the map through a combination of first-rate search and user-friendly interfaces, a long list of strategic acquisitions, and a dedicated, stable staff. When Collins joined the company in 1999, EP bought NoveList, then another small start-up, which connects readers with books. Collins readily admits that being owned by a private company “is a huge advantage.” Unlike companies with shareholder responsibilities, he says, “We’re not focused on the next quarterly report.” The recent debut of EBSCOhost 2.0 in July (see InfoTech, *LJ* 8/08, p. 21), with its intuitive Google-like search box, attests to that: “It’s all about getting traffic...[W]hen you think long term, in this business, measuring usage is more important than measuring revenue,” says Collins.

Now headquartered in two buildings in Ipswich, MA, EP is also focusing on reducing its carbon footprint through solar energy and other green solutions.

*LJ*: How does the new interface fit into your strategy?

Collins: EBSCOhost 2.0 is very much central to our strategy—to put the end user first and foremost—and we continue to enhance it. We’ve had a lot of positive reviews from librarians and a lot of positive feedback from end users. Our traffic is up 30 percent this past week from the peak in the spring.

You’re trying to work with end users.

Collins: We’re trying to design an experience that will help them be successful. We tested [interface] prototypes in usability labs, where you can measure users’ eye movement. With our old interface, some of our most important features weren’t actually in a place where they were looking. We reworked the layout, added some eye-catching icons, and applied more structured [design] of the page. The testing that we did verified that users were much more likely to use these features now. A lot of this stuff isn’t rocket science if you do your homework. But it takes a lot of time.

What other pieces are you working on?

Collins: Right now, we’re working on “Image Quick View,” which is a feature where we go ahead and identify the pictures, chart, graphs, and tables in articles, have editorial folks tag them, and then feature them in the interface. We’re working on the ability to limit your search—so you can say you only want articles that have images. We’re working on the ability to search the captions—if you just want to search captions. At the beginning of 2009, we’ll be processing these images and tagging them for over 9000 journals and 3.75 million images. The best part about this whole feature is we’re not charging for it.

How do you accomplish that?

Collins: In some ways, it’s pretty slick technology; in other ways, it’s kind of brute force. We have people going through and tagging all those images, charts, and graphs, identifying them, capturing the metadata surrounding them—caption, page number, and so forth—and that data is turned into a separate database behind the scenes.

Are you seeing customers facing cost pressure?

Collins: We have had some customers say, “We’ve received a cut of X percent; let’s try to work something out.” The reality is that it’s not like our costs are going down. Many of our products are the result of partnerships with third parties, and their costs aren’t going down. So we’re trying to work with customers, but there are certain realities.

We’ve seen some hesitancy on describing pricing.

Collins: Pricing depends on the library type, the library size, and the products they buy. If somebody buys 20 databases and desires to buy five more, we’re going to express our appreciation for the previous business by giving them a nice price on future business. You have a customized package for each library. Given that backdrop, there’s a reluctance to share information about the particular relationships you have.

Don’t libraries face overlapping products?

Collins: There are definitely competitive products out there. Given a time of budget concerns, I don’t know too many libraries buying three products. I think competition overall is good for libraries.

What are some strategies for retaining customers?

Collins: Our basic strategy is to create additional products. We figure the way to grow is to add more value. There are parts that are very complex, but it isn’t all that complicated. We have advisory boards, focus groups. We learned a long time ago that the best ideas seem to be coming from our customers.

What are you looking at outside the library community?

Collins: When we did EBSCOhost 2.0, we looked at a lot of the end users. We also looked at the most used platforms. Google gets all the air time, but there are an awful lot of other things. We tried to emulate some of the cool best practices out there. We asked focus groups what they actually use and what they like about it. We watched them use those services. I know we looked at Wikipedia, Amazon, for sure. Also Netflix—the obvious players.

Can you talk about your green initiatives?

Collins: This is very important to EBSCO Industries, our parent company, and to EBSCO Publishing and to me, too. We’ve embraced solar energy in a big way; we have just under 400 panels on the roofs of our buildings in Ipswich. We’re in the process of working through the approvals to put a wind turbine on our parking deck. We’ve done some of the more mundane things: changed light bulbs, changed light fixtures—we’re actually experimenting with LED fixtures. As you know, we’re on the Ipswich River, so we’re right now researching hydropower.

What was the effect on overall usage?

Collins: In our two main buildings, the ones on the river, our usage has gone down 11 percent and 14 percent, respectively, over a 12-month period, because those buildings have solar panels on them. We’re growing, we’re hiring people, so there’s more activity in the buildings. For the electricity usage to go down that amount is terrific. The systems generated 89.9 kilowatt hours a year. These investments have terrible paybacks—you don’t do it for financial reasons. You do it for other reasons.

What’s GreenTriE?

Collins: We’ve created a database focused on two areas: one is scientific research on climate change, and the other is materials for the common person to research what they can do to be more environmentally conscious. This is available free; we’re trying to get traffic from folks going to the library. We’re spending money to create our materials to make them available free.

Are you optimistic about public libraries?

Collins: I do think there’s great opportunity in public libraries, but there’s a challenge to make sure they market their services to their constituents. We make a bunch of our online content available on our web site. We put up best practices. We’re working with some customers to do things like local radio advertising—do you realize you have this great content available? They don’t say EBSCOhost. These are often multilibrary-type arrangements. But it can be grassroots, too. In our small town, you get a flyer saying here’s what’s available to you at the library.

How does the trend toward mobile devices affect EBSCO?

Collins: EBSCOhost can be used on different mobile devices now, and we have a project underway to develop that further. But certain types of content are better suited to a device. Reading a large article in a PDF on a little handheld is pretty challenging.

Your company seems pretty stable.

Collins: In the last few years, a lot of major players in library-land have been acquired. You end up with different management teams—it’s natural. A lot of folks have been with us a long time, doing a great job.