



## *A Profile of J T Stephens, President, EBSCO Industries Inc.*

*Interviewed by John Merriman, Editor of Serials*

There was a famous cartoon of a shy young man standing in front of the manager's desk and being asked: "...and what else can you do, apart from being the boss's son?". Had the young Jim Stephens been asked that question he could have honestly replied: "I know nearly everything there is to be known about selling magazines." The son of Elton B Stephens, founder of the company in 1943 and a highly successful businessman and entrepreneur, it was not an easy task to follow in father's footsteps.

Born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, USA, with one brother and two sisters, Jim had a normal school life where he was a member of the Scouts and active in school affairs. From an early age it was instilled into him that you have to work hard to succeed. At the age of eight he sold his first magazine subscription to a local doctor. Spurred on by this success, he was soon selling to friends and neighbours. He worked every summer vacation and as he grew older extended his activities over the southern states where he made door to door sales and was paid on a straight commission basis, and of course lived in cheap hotels.

School days over, Jim moved into higher education, first obtaining a BA in history at Yale in 1961 and a master's degree in business administration at Harvard in 1964. A few years before, EBSCO had opened an office in Boston and Jim did not miss the opportunity to work there during vacations. Here he enhanced his experience by selling to academic and special libraries. Between Yale and Harvard life took a new turn when he enlisted in the Army as a

Reserve Officer, serving for fourteen months. He is rightly proud of his paratrooper's badge.

Having completed his academic studies, together with an old school friend he set off on the journey of a lifetime, or what is now called 'finding yourself'. In fifteen months of travel they visited countries in Europe, Africa, the Far and Near East, and India. Surviving on about £6 a day and travelling light, he still found space for some EBSCO brochures. Inevitably he called on libraries during this travels. The most common question he was asked was: "why do American agents never answer any letters, whereas we get very nice letters from an agent in England." This brought home to him the importance of good customer service and the basic courtesy of answering an enquiry.

September 1965 was a milestone - it was the month he joined EBSCO, a company which had already played such an important role in his life. He had no doubts that this was where his future lay. He immediately enrolled as a trainee at Vulcan Industries, an EBSCO company specialising in metal manufacture of retail store fixtures. Moving to EBSCO Subscription Services, he was also responsible for establishing a corporate marketing department for the company. He believes that for a company to succeed you maintain that which is good that others have established before you, and you make positive change happen. Armed with this philosophy, the company developed rapidly under his guidance, first as Director of Marketing, and from 1971 as President and Chief Executive Officer. He has

been greatly assisted by his brother-in-law, Dixon Brook.

1971 saw the implementation of the first computer order fulfilment system. 1972 began another trend which has been an important part of the EBSCO philosophy - acquisition of other subscription agents; in this instance the Franklin Square Agency, which, although 20% larger than EBSCO, had pursued a policy of high sales and very little profit.

Jim's concern about customer service is reflected in the spread of regional offices, which offer a personal service to their customers. They are also responsible for sales, the collection of accounts receivable, visiting libraries and being visited by librarians. All the regional offices are backed up by the resources in Birmingham.

The first European office was set up in Amsterdam in 1975 by Wim Luijendijk and Rudy Houtison. Currently there are twenty seven offices, including five in Asia, seven in Europe and three in Australian/New Zealand. Jim believes that this is the best way to develop an international business. They may open from scratch or as the result of a takeover. Control could be difficult, but this is not seen as a problem with a classic management structure, sharing of values, commonality of procedures and regular monitoring and visits from HQ.

In the 1970s he saw the importance of the electronic dissemination of information. 1974 marked the introduction of EBSCONET, the online subscription service to enable customers to claim and order online. With the development of CD-ROMs and PCs it was logical to become a database distributor which would enable customers to understand the inventory of contents of all the issues they received. In the mid-1980s, they were licensed to use Medline. About the same time they had a chance to acquire a small secondary publisher of citations and abstracts covering general reference magazines from its 22-year old founder, Tim Collins, manager today and still an entrepreneur. Thus, EBSCO became a proprietary publisher of a database cataloguing articles in general reference magazines - EBSCO Publishing was born. Today EBSCO Publishing has over three hundred employees. Broadening their services to the library world, they were soon into electronic information and began to package

licensed full text with citations and abstracts to the articles. While keeping EBSCO in the forefront in technological development, unlike some companies Jim has never lost sight of the importance of selling magazines.

As President of arguably the largest subscription agency in the world is it all work and no play? With a seventy hour working week it may seem like the latter, but in spite of the long hours Jim does enjoy time with this family. He married Julie in 1970 and they have two boys and two girls ranging between 18 and 26 years old. His eldest son, like father, is on a world trip, hopefully with a few EBSCO brochures in his bag! They love to travel as a family and their destinations have included China and Vietnam. Then there is the little hideaway on the north coast of Florida. Outdoor activities are popular, including hiking, camping and horseriding.

Jim himself travels about 30% of his time, so to while away the hours in planes and hotels it is not surprising he is a keen reader of historical novels and biography. Within the local community he has served on the Board of Trustees of two schools and is on the Board of Trustees of Birmingham Southern College.

In a family firm the relationship between father and son is often fraught with personality problems. Jim has been fortunate to have a highly successful father who has not only given him a free hand but also help and encouragement.

Jim believes he has a key role as a strategic direction setter. At the same time, he has a strong disposition for detail and the importance of day to day work. A hands-on management style comes naturally to him. It is not surprising that he regards himself as particularly respectful of EBSCO's personnel talent, and spends much time developing good management practices and staff relations. He is very visible to all grades of staff and is not office-bound. He endeared himself to me with the surprising comment that he thinks budgeting is a waste of time and prefers to work from a benchmark off the last year's figures. I bet he never learned that at Harvard Business School!

Raised to believe in the work ethic and that the company is an integral part of his life, it is hoped that this motivation and dedication will be passed on to the next generation, thus ensuring EBSCO remains a successful family company.