

## CASE IN POINT

by CD Anderson

André van Tonder, MD of WorldWide Information Services



# WWIS:

## David Trumps Goliath in Subscription Services

The owners of WorldWide Information Services, or WWIS, have reinvented the subscription agency, endearing themselves to suppliers and clients alike with their commitment to superior and personalised service.

The company that is known today as WWIS had a successful start in the 1950s (see the factbox for more detail), but by the late 1990s it was a poorly performing, non-core asset in the JSE-listed AdvTech Group. “My business partner – Fiona Bester – and I just knew that we could turn this business into something unique and profitable,” says WWIS MD André van Tonder. “We both have a passionate interest in libraries and offering excellence in information services,” he enthuses. And so, in 2005, the two of them instituted a management buyout, re-launching the company early the following year.

“We had to reinvent the company, which was a challenge on the shoe-string budget we had. For example, we were operating with a twenty-year-old

Oracle system, before investing in our current state-of-the-art system, and doing the deliveries to clients ourselves,” he recalls. However, their hard work has paid off. In the last three years, WWIS has doubled its turnover and net profit. Van Tonder ascribes the company’s success to the dedication and hard work of their seven other staff members. “We operate on a principle of profit-sharing, so they all work as if it’s their own company,” he adds.

### Listening to customers

Last year, the company scooped the award for international agent of the year from the world’s leading scientific publisher, Thomson Reuters – no mean feat. “For a South African company like ourselves, which

competes against the international subscription agencies, it's been an adapt or die scenario. Listening to and understanding what your customers want is the simplest way to identify what you should change about your company, your products and your services," maintains Van Tonder.

In publishing circles, subscription agencies act as intermediaries between the suppliers and publishers of academic, scientific, technical, medical and business journals. They sell periodical subscriptions to libraries, researchers and the legal and medical professions, among others, in return for a commission from the publisher. Van Tonder says: "We effectively become the custodian of all the information of the publishers. It's our role to create an awareness of their products, and to sell these products to the market in a professional and mutually beneficial manner."

Subscription agents handle thousands of publications with many price and currency fluctuations, often at a very small service charge. They pay the supplier the cost of the publication upfront and rely on publishers for a discount and commission. "Agents are unlike both their institutional customers and suppliers. Publishers are businesses with profit targets, whereas libraries are cost centres responsible for supporting information needs. Subscription agents like ourselves serve as a central focal point servicing a wide variety of customers and suppliers by delivering procurement and after-sales solutions," he elaborates. The key for the sustainability of an agency like WWIS is in the 'value add', which, Van Tonder says, is dependent on the satisfaction of these customers and suppliers through the delivery of customer tailored procurement methods and excellent hands-on after-sales service.

### Small and agile

Van Tonder believes that the company's humble beginnings and its unique operation enable it to be innovative in its approach to client service delivery and adaptability. "We are not hamstrung by hierarchy and red tape, and we are able to offer an intensive, specialised service to our clients," he says. As a local company, WWIS has an in-depth knowledge of the market and its dynamic staff are focused on building strong relationships with clients across all market sectors," notes Van Tonder.

However, changes in technology, in the market, as well as the competition of the established global players offer some challenges to WWIS. Handling both electronic and print formats, it is important for subscription agencies, and particularly WWIS, to maintain the latest and most accurate data in order to offer the best products and services. Van Tonder believes that WWIS, through its personalised service, provides rapid entry, registration and activation of new orders,

whilst maintaining strong relationships with existing clients. "As licence restrictions and copyright issues become more complex, especially in the electronic information environment, as well as more varied to each publisher's needs, it is important to maintain relationships with the relevant organisations such as the South African National Library and Information Consortium (SANLiC)," he says. Electronic databases and electronic journals need to be accurate and always available, so WWIS maintains a thorough online system through TDNet, which offers customers a comprehensive one-stop e-solution for journal management, federated searching facility across external resources and internal repositories and research portals. In addition, Van Tonder further explains, "WWIS offers a single contact to clients for both electronic and print journals, while our consolidated service for print journals includes a door-to-door delivery service, automatic claiming system for the replacement of missing issues and the option of the automatic updating of check-in records via bar-code scanning."

This year, one of Van Tonder and his co-directors' focused objectives is to expand WWIS's operations into Africa. (Magaretha Bruwer and Julia Mofokeng were appointed directors in 2010.) During the recent Standing Conference of Eastern, Central and Southern African Library and Information Associations (SCECSAL) in December 2010, WWIS made important contacts with institutions in neighbouring SADC nations, including Botswana, Mozambique and Namibia, as well as further north, in countries like Kenya and Nigeria. Van Tonder explains: "The expansion of the business into these new areas offers great opportunities for both WWIS and the countries concerned, giving them access to up-to-date literature that could benefit the reputations of universities, libraries and research on the continent." □

### Humble Beginnings

*The origin of WWIS is Universitas, a well-respected and successful South African subscription agency founded 1953. In 1991, the corporate and government operations of Universitas were acquired by Mast Commercial Operations, and renamed Mast Publications. A mere five years later, in 1996, Mast was bought by the JSE-listed AdvTech Group as part of its expansion into publishing. In early 2006, the current WWIS management team bought out Mast from the AdvTech Group, renaming and restructuring the company into WWIS, reflecting a new, more focused strategic direction for the company.*