

THE DIRECTORY PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION

Rosemary Pettit

In the beginning was a large, extremely heavy Minute Book. Its pages are yellowing now, and it records that, on 17 December 1970, the first formal meeting of the Association of British Directory Publishers took place. Founder members included Benn, CBD Research, Maclean Hunter and Thomson - all still members. This meeting was much exercised by the Unsolicited Goods and Services Bill which, subsequently enacted, now governs many of the procedures of directory publishers.

In this respect, the formation of the Directory Publishers Association (as ABDP became) followed a well-trodden association path: outside threat induces competitors to seek protection in common strength. The 'competitors' now number over sixty directory publishers, including most of the larger companies. The threat, in this case, came not so much from government regulation (tiresome though some of the 'Unsolicited' provisions have been at times), but rather from directory cowboys who were, inter alia, alarming advertisers and threatening to take the bread out of the mouths of respectable publishers.

This mattered, and continues to matter. While disreputable and fraudulent directory publishers continue to operate, one step ahead of the police, from addresses in such countries as Germany, Switzerland and Lichtenstein, the UK is mainly free of the worst abuses. A recent court case, however, illustrates how watchful company accountants must continue to be. London-based Mass Media was fined £6000 at Hitchin Magistrates Court last December for billing firms for (unsolicited) entries in its *British Engineering and Electronic Construction Guide*. Hertfordshire Trading Standards took Mass Media to court and won its case.

Every year dozy, or naive, accountants' departments pay unsolicited invoices sent by fraudsters offering directory services. Companies are advised to be very careful in all cases and to read all the small print. The most recent swindle, circulating at full strength this autumn in the UK, has been from World Data Ltd. Issued in Austria, and sent from Germany, it looks like a BT bill. Don't pay it.

The Directory Publishers Association (along with other organisations such as the Association of British Chambers of Commerce, the DTI, Trading Standards, and so forth) clearly has a job to do in alerting and informing the public of fraudulent practices. Its Code of Practice - which all members sign on joining - says as much. To reverse the coin on fraud, the Code actively enjoins member publishers to good and lawful practice. Any

Rosemary Pettit is Secretary of the Directory Publishers Association, 93a Blenheim Crescent, London, W11 2EQ

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member of the Serials Group wishing to obtain a list of DPA members, together with their publications and a copy of the Code, may apply for a free Membership Book.

As distinct from its watchdog aspect, the Directory Publishers Association has a specific role, that of encouraging trade. It does this in ways which will be familiar to all trade associations: meetings, Conference, training seminars, Newsletters, fairs and information point. Underlying these are the informal contacts which are a valued part of all associations; the wine glass is often more productive than the overhead projector...the informal chat may give more insight than a raft of presentations.

Together with 'fostering bonds of common interest' (as the DPA Objectives put it), the Association is also charged with the task of promoting business directories as an ideal medium for advertising. This is done partly through distribution of the Membership Book to libraries and elsewhere and partly through the production of statistics. The figures speak for themselves. Starting from a low base (admittedly,) advertising expenditure in directories has climbed from 2 per cent to over 6 per cent, beating the expenditure share in consumer magazines and beginning to challenge the share in business magazines. The actual expenditure is equally convincing, starting from very low foothills forty years ago rising steeply to well over £523 million annually... an average annual growth rate of over 30 per cent.

Advertising in directories has been hit by the recession, of course, but not nearly so severely as in other, more glamorous, media. The reason for this may be as mimicked by the plot of schoolgirl comics: when times get tough the hero turns out to be the sincere, hardworking directory rather than the flashy fly-by-night who may never deliver. In any event, directories have the certain advantages of being highly focused on a market and on a target reader (often already searching for a product or service), they are easily accessible and they have a long shelf life.

For all these reasons, the directory - whether subscription- or advertising-based - offers highly specific and organised information. But this information is not always in hard copy. Increasingly, other media - such as CD-ROM and

Online - are pressing on the heels of the paper product. Many hard-copy publishers are also marketing CD-ROMs and many are leasing sections of their databases. As new technologies become proven and established technologies, the Directory Publishers Association now suggests that it is the association not only for directory, but also for database, publishers,

About a year ago, the association started its own awards scheme for 'the best directory of the year in the UK'; the presentations were made at a dinner in June. Over forty companies - not all of them members - entered the competition. Entries ranged from very well-established directories (usually in several weighty volumes) to lively newcomers seeking their place in the sun. Inevitably, the judges saw the faults of the entries as well as their advantages; some were incomplete or confusingly arranged and a few, when spotchecked, were forbodingly wrong.

But it was immensely encouraging for the DPA to see how publishers enthusiastically and confidently put forward their directories for appraisal. Most of the entries were good and some were truly excellent. The 1994 awards are being organised now and entry forms are available for any directory publisher. This year there will also be an award for a CD-ROM.

As with many associations, Europe and EC directives have become pressing in the last two or three years. The DPA is a small association and has found its membership of two larger associations - the Periodical Publishers Association and the Advertising Association - particularly useful in representations to EC officials and others. Such matters as copyright, database protection and distance selling are time consuming. They are also necessary if members are to be protected or trade forwarded.

The successful conclusion to the campaign against VAT on publications shows what can be done when interests unite and arguments are cogently marshalled. For those interested in such matters, the focus of the campaign changed over time: starting as a clear call against a 'tax on learning' it became, in the latter part of the autumn, a matter of figures, principally those on unemployment and loss of revenue (to the taxman). Ultimately, money speaks loudest to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

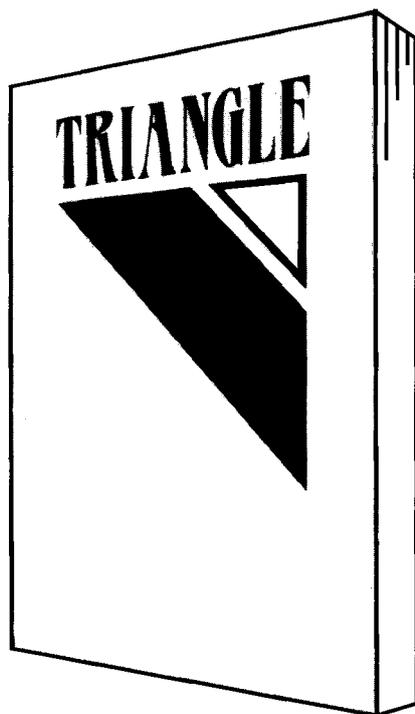
The CBI conference, 'An Effective Structure for Business Representation', held in December for trade associations was informative and thought-provoking, not least because it followed the President of the Board of Trade's strictures against ineffective trade associations earlier in the summer. It begged a question for the Directory Publishers Association: is the DPA an effective or an ineffective body? Looking at the DTI's checklist of criteria for a 'lead body' it might not appear to qualify.

The DTI asks if the Association can speak for the companies in the sector (probably yes) but are some key players not represented (only BT, but this is a very large company which does not join anything)? Are there too many associations in the sector (possibly yes in publishing, as a whole, but the DPA is the only one for directory publishers)? The DTI then moves to representation and the quality of representation. The DPA has only been active here through other organisations (the DTI does not object to this at all, rather the reverse). If

the DTI sought a quick response, could it get it (almost certainly, yes, little bureaucracy here)? Is the association devoting priority and attention to Brussels (see above)? How active is the association in export promotion, technology development, standards (see fairs, seminars, Code of Practice, awards)?

Only mixed returns there, if one is truthful. Set the standard against the aims and resources of the Association and there may be a different and more intelligent story: a rising membership, fulfilment of Two-Year Plans and a healthy and increasing bank balance. This has been achieved with the expertise and enthusiasm of (unpaid) Directors to balance a part-time Secretariat. Members like different facets of their association but they all value - and we know because we have asked them - the opportunity to meet and learn from their peers. What's more, the Treasurer has persuaded them that subscriptions ought, really ought, to come down in 1994! And that is what is happening.

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