



NASIG Newsletter

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The Apple Doesn't Fall Far from the Tree...Or Does It? Pt. 2 of the 2010 Marcia Tuttle International Award Winner Report

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The NASIG Chronology tells the story at http://www.nasig.org/about_history_chronology.cfm:

April 1984 - Sixteen American Librarians attend the UK Serials Group Meeting. John Riddick begins to think about a similar organization for North America.

As a recipient of the Marcia Tuttle International Award, I had the opportunity to use the award to support a sabbatical trip to the United Kingdom during the spring of 2010 to explore technical services operations at eleven academic libraries—as reported on in the December 2010 issue of the *Newsletter*—and also to gain a deeper understanding of UKSG, what makes it tick, and how it differs from NASIG.

As the chronology notes, NASIG was established after a group of U.S. librarians attended early UKSG meetings. UKSG founders served as consultants to get NASIG underway, and its founding principles are based on UKSG. Both organizations sought venues to promote discussion and provide educational opportunities related to the serials information industry. Both have annual conferences that are acclaimed as “the best” for those involved in the serials (and now e-) information chain.

UKSG is a vibrant, growing organization that has been involved in standards setting for the industry through representation on international committees, advising

government officials on funding for the British Library; and providing input to the Higher Education Funding Council for England. When its conference moved from university-based to conference center settings in 2008, attendance increased significantly.

With NASIG roots in UKSG, affectionately called “big sister,” can we look to them for lessons to identify ways to deal with decreasing membership numbers even prior to the economic downturn, reduced representation from the commercial sector, and reduced conference attendance since the economic downturn?

Let's Take a Look at the Tree...

UKSG has two hired staff: a business manager and an administrative assistant. Three officers (chair, treasurer, and secretary) are elected, with another fifteen elected individuals serving on its main committee. The organization has four committees: Publications, Research, Education, and Marketing, each represented by an officer on the main committee; there is also an editorial board for its publication, *Serials*.

...and the Apple

In contrast to UKSG, NASIG has no hired staff. Its Board, which is the equivalent of UKSG's main committee, is comprised of five officers and six members-at-large, all elected positions; its *Newsletter* editor serves as ex-officio. NASIG has seventeen standing committees,

with committee chairs appointed from the all-volunteer “work-force.” A significant amount of work managed by UKSG hired staff is distributed among a number of NASIG officers and committee volunteers.

UKSG offered institutional and individual memberships once its activities grew; a variety of publishers, national libraries, intermediaries (such as subscription agents, systems or software providers), and universities maintain membership. The individuals to whom I spoke estimated that approximately half of UKSG’s members are from academic libraries. Vendors from commercial and society publishing and systems providers exhibit during the annual conference; in addition to numerous representatives from those groups, all ranges of librarians attend, from collections, acquisitions, and systems—but minimally from catalogers, which is less surprising to me now that I understand the lack of cataloging activities at UK universities. Indeed, I found it difficult to identify librarians at the conference, and often found myself in informal and engaging discussions with publishers and vendors. In addition to its conference, UKSG offers seminars and workshops throughout the year in different parts of the country. These have proven to be highly popular offerings, though in 2010 numbers were down slightly, evidence that economic woes are heating up in the UK.

Some of NASIG’s concerns regarding its membership and conference attendance relate directly to competition for decreasing, or non-existent, professional development dollars. NASIG continues to receive praise for its conference, including this June 2010 post from Roy Tennant, senior program officer at OCLC, at <http://blog.libraryjournal.com/tennantdigitallibraries/2010/06/06/nasig-rulez/>.

However, other organizations, such as the American Library Association, and conferences with expanding programming on electronic resources, such as ER&L, vie for the attention of the individual librarian. Vendors and publishers have reduced the number of individuals they send to many conferences and many viewed NASIG’s non-exhibit policy as a huge drawback. It was definitely a sign of poor economic conditions to see that one major subscription agent, a mainstay at NASIG

conferences for years, sent two-thirds fewer representatives to the event in 2010.

This is not new information for the NASIG Board. Several recent changes to the conference philosophy and to membership categories have been implemented in the last two to three years, including the introduction of organizational sponsorships three years ago and the introduction of vendor exhibits at the 2010 conference. Bylaws changes this year include the first organizational membership category, which may spur an increase in membership and conference attendance from individuals in the publishing and vendor sectors. NASIG struggles with ways to provide additional member benefits and has charged its Continuing Education Committee with developing educational programming that can be conducted regionally, similar to that offered by UKSG. This has been slow to gain momentum, but should—in addition to increased marketing and outreach to all sectors—be a high priority for the organization if it wants to offer more than just a “great annual conference.”

One of my UKSG interviewees was quite blunt in his appraisal of NASIG’s viability. He recognized that the recent changes were a step in the right direction, suggesting that NASIG decide what it wants to be and clarify its mission. He felt it was critical to attract budget and decision-makers from libraries to the annual conference. They are there, perhaps not in great numbers, but the conference’s previous guidelines against commercial sales pitches was considered a deterrent to many members of the commercial sector, who wanted quality time with those individuals. It will be critical to market their presence to those in the publishing and vendor sector.

All the individuals I spoke with were impressed by NASIG volunteerism, noting that UKSG has fewer volunteers, but they are just as hard-working. A couple did suggest that work by so many committees dragged out decision-making processes. Are we *too* democratic? NASIG planned to hire support staff, an initiative that fell along with the economy. Should the organization pursue that option again, the board should revisit the

job description, as well as the work of all its committees. Are we spread too thin? Are we trying to be everything to everybody? NASIG should, as part of clarifying its mission, decide where to concentrate its efforts, which might result in a reduced number of committees. Concentrate on fewer initiatives. From a personal standpoint, I would be excited to see a stronger educational focus as one way to provide member benefits that will increase the bottom line—both in member numbers and in financial security.