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contents >

SCOUG's recent
initiatives.....109

PIUG: Patently on
common ground.....109

Achievement at the
intersection of li-
braries and tech-
nology: The OCLC
Users Council.....112

InfoPro's user
advisory panels in
action.....113

news news news.....114

d.c.UPDATE.....119

nfaisNEWS.....119

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SCOUG's recent initiatives

by Reva Basch,
Aubergine Information Services

SCOUG, officially known as the Southern California Online Users Group, has gained influence and recognition far beyond its original geographic limits. Members occasionally refer to it, only half-jokingly, as the Seven Continents Online Users Group. The user wish list and the database quality rating scale, the themes of the 1989 and 1990 SCOUG retreats, respectively, gained considerable attention from both users and the online industry in the United States and abroad.

SCOUG started in 1976 as an informal network of about 50 public, academic, and corporate librarians, and other information professionals. There now are several hundred members, many of them online service vendors and database publishers who recognize the unique opportunity that the annual retreats present for learning firsthand what their customers really are thinking.

> SCOUG confronts the tough issues

The first SCOUG retreat, about seven years ago, focused on the future of the information industry, the information-gathering environment, and the information professional's career. The second one - which was held amid rumors that Dialog Information Service, Inc. was up for sale, but before the acquisition actually took place - took as its theme, "Suppose We Bought Dialog." Obviously this group does not shrink from tackling the major issues.

SCOUG began to achieve prominence after the 1989 retreat, which saw the genesis of the official User Wish List. The online industry took users' suggestions to heart, and many vendors subsequently introduced improvements in specific response to what SCOUG members had gone on record as desiring.

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PIUG: patently on common ground

by Andrew H. Berks,
American Cyanamid Co.,
Medical Research Division;
National Chairperson, PIUG

> In the beginning . . .

The Patent Information Users Group (PIUG) was formed in 1988 out of a need for patent information professionals to discuss issues of concern independent of vendors and publishers. In the period leading up to 1988, database vendors (e.g., STN International, Orbit, Dialog, and Questel) and publishers (e.g., Chemical Abstracts Service [CAS], Derwent, IFI/Plenum Data Company, Institut National de la Propriete Industrielle [INPI], and others) were making large investments in patent information products, in many cases without consulting their customer base. The PIUG was created to work with and influence these services to the benefit of the user community.

From its beginning as a group of 15 users meeting in Crystal City, VA, in May 1988, the PIUG has grown today to approximately 130 members who represent many major

(continued on page 111)

bling furiously, asking pointed questions, and contributing some interesting ideas of their own. Clearly, there is vast territory between "here" and "there," but information providers will have to traverse it, somehow, if they expect their companies to survive into the 21st century.

SCOUG's unofficial motto has been, "If online is the answer, what is the question?" This year, they tackled that question directly, and came up with plenty of material for the information industry to ponder. *

*(Berks - PIUG into perpetuity,
continued from page 109)*

research-based U.S. corporations, as well as a few independent companies. We currently meet twice each year, in conjunction with the annual U.S. Derwent subscribers' meeting (usually in April) and the IFI meeting in May. This schedule allows most members to piggyback a PIUG meeting onto at least one of these patent information meetings.

We have a newsletter and bulletin board (BBS), on Dialog's DialMail. The BBS is very successful, and is used by a wide variety of users for a wide variety of purposes. It has been especially useful for communications on patent image CD-ROMs, and recently there have been a lot of job ads on the BBS.

For a general background of the PIUG, Nancy Lambert, who has been the PIUG secretary since its founding, has written two excellent articles that discuss the history of the organization (*World Patent Information*, 1992, 13[3]:148; and *Database Searcher*, 1993, 9[1]:36). As a general overview of the environment of the PIUG, the period leading up to the creation of the PIUG in 1988 was an era of new products and services. The landscape we know today was largely defined by 1988. Around that time, however, there were a number of policy issues that greatly threatened the user community. Restrictive usage policies, expensive services, and the Dialog Information Services, Inc./American Chemical Society (ACS) lawsuit, among others, had potentially great impact and needed urgent attention.

By 1993, many of these policy issues either have stalemated or played themselves out. Derwent has done an excellent job of listening to its customers, and has responded accordingly in key areas, such as liberalization of the terms and conditions, preservation of the BCE chemical structure codes, improvements to the Plasdoc polymeric structure codes, and striking a deal with STN to mount its products. These issues all have been the subject of loud user comments and complaints in recent years. CAS/STN also has clearly improved its responsiveness in the past year.

➤ Technological Issues now are coming to the fore

New networks, such as the Internet and the National Research and Education Network (NREN), new software (e.g., client server systems for end users and multifile search engines for online services), and CD-ROM products, are becoming available now and will have major impacts. These new products will define who is left behind in the coming years and who is successful, both as searchers and providers.

The aim of the PIUG will be to represent user needs as new technologies are developed. I think the firms that are developing these products want this input, and the PIUG lends them a forum for presenting ideas to an experienced and critical audience. Because of the excellent reputation of the PIUG and its members, firms developing new patent information products look to us for leadership regarding the demands of the marketplace, both as an organization, and by calling on PIUG members as individuals, and groups of individuals, as consultants.

Along these lines, one of our more successful activities was a roundtable discussion, with 12 vendors and producer representatives participating, entitled "The Future of Online Searching," held at our meeting in May 1993 in Crystal City. There was a highly productive discussion of mutual concerns, of vendors struggling to deal with new technologies that threaten the status quo of patent information, and users who want and need new products. There was no definitive conclusion at the end, but the future will arrive whether or not we are ready. By staging an event such as this, the PIUG places itself on the forefront of bringing users, producers, and vendors together to develop the best possible products and services. The PIUG probably will continue to organize programs such as panel discussions and educational events at both national and regional levels.

The success of the PIUG can be attributed to a supremely capable core group of approximately 20 people, who have provided both consistent leadership and the intellectual power to keep the organization interesting. The PIUG also has a good infrastructure, with the BBS and a tradition of regular meetings that our far-flung membership finds convenient.

The BBS is open to the public on DialMail. Membership in the PIUG costs \$10 per year, and is open to individuals who are not employed by database vendors or producers. Vendors or producers can receive the mailings for \$10 per year. Send membership applications and checks to Pat Dorlor, DuPont CR&D, BMP 14-1100, Wilmington, DE 19898. *