

## **PURDUE UNIVERSITY'S TECHNICAL INFORMATION SERVICE: PROVIDING INFORMATION TO BUSINESSES**

**By Suzanne M. Ward**

**Abstract:** The Technical Information Service (TIS) is a department of the Libraries at Purdue University in Indiana. TIS started in 1987 with a grant from a state economic development agency to provide information services and document delivery for Indiana business decision makers. TIS expanded in 1989 to provide these services to companies all over North America and overseas. The TIS philosophy is that if executives have access to quick and accurate business and technical information and documents, they will be able to make better decisions. The positive economic impact of these decisions will benefit the individual company in the short run, but in the long run will also benefit the larger economy. Although TIS is partially funded by a grant from the state of Indiana, most costs for providing services are billed back to client on a nonprofit, cost-recovery basis.

TIS serves many types of clients in the business community, such as corporate librarians, inventors, engineers, marketing managers, company presidents, administrative assistants, entrepreneurs, secretaries, and lawyers. Some clients request information and documents for their own use; others request information which will be passed along to other people in their organization. It is a challenge to develop a marketing plan which will reach such a diversity of clients with such a wide range of different information needs. TIS staff perform database searches, provide document delivery from a wide variety of sources including the Purdue University Libraries, locate industry experts, and make referrals to university departments and governments agencies.

Many clients do not have technical or scientific backgrounds, but require technical information either for themselves or for others in their companies in order to make business decisions. Often clients call TIS because they have no idea where to start looking for this information themselves. Besides identifying and obtaining technical information and documents, TIS staff often spend time educating clients about the nature or use of the material.

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Business people have many different kinds of information needs. Some information needs can be met by talking with colleagues, by contacting experts at trade or professional associations, or by hiring consultants. However, there are two major kinds of information that many business people need but often do not know how to obtain quickly and cost-effectively. These two needs are for research information and for document delivery.

What are some examples of research information needs?

- a list of U.S. companies which manufacture corn oil
- articles about continuous manufacturing operations
- a list of patents issued to a competitor
- articles about designing windowless offices
- agricultural statistics for China
- articles about the moisture content of concrete

What are some examples of document delivery needs?

- a sample issue of a financial newsletter
- an industry standard
- an unpublished research paper
- a technical report from the Japanese Ministry of Transportation
- a regulation or law
- a conference paper
- a government technical report

Business people need to find quick answers to their questions or document delivery needs to make decisions in their daily work. The information they want may vary depending on whether the business is in the manufacturing sector or in the services sector. The needed information also varies by the kind of employee, such as president, engineer, research, scientist, lawyer, librarian, or office manager. Some workers need one or two pieces of information a year to help them do their own job. Other employees, such as corporate librarians or legal assistants, may want dozens of different documents per week to fill the needs of other people at their firms.

Employees of large companies may be fortunate enough to be able to call on the services of their own corporate libraries to help fill these information needs. But the vast majority of workers do not have convenient access to a corporate library or to a local public or university library which supplies the kinds of information they need in time to meet their deadlines. Even if these workers can easily visit a large local library, they may not have the time to do their own research.

Beginning in the late 1960's, a few university and public libraries in the United States, Canada, and Europe established separate departments called fee-based information services to meet the information needs of business clients. In general, the fee-based services operate on a cost-recovery basis and offer both document delivery and research services. Usually the fee-based services are staffed by library professionals and support personnel whose primary job function is to provide these services. The staff use the library collection at their institution to fill their clients' document requests. Most fee-based services will lend books to clients as well as make photocopies of articles. Staff also use outside suppliers, such as other libraries, information brokers, or commercial document companies, to provide documents which are not available locally. In addition, the professional staff search both online databases and printed sources to answer clients' research questions. Charges vary from one fee-based service to another, but in general there is a flat fee for article photocopies or book loans. Research rates are usually billed at an hourly rate for the information specialist's time, plus database charges. Rush handling fees are additional.

Since the 1960's the number of fee-based services in the U.S. has grown from a handful to several hundred. Fee-based services are located at academic institutions of all sizes, at medium and large public libraries, and also at the libraries of some trade and professional associations, such as the American Medical Association. The staff working in these fee-based departments are able to respond quickly to clients who are willing to pay for value-added services. With a fee-based service, libraries can help users willing to pay for fast, customized service without overworking staff in the reference department and without neglecting the library's primary clientele, such as the students at a university. The library is also able to recover the costs of providing the specialized services.

The Technical Information Service (TIS) is the fee-based information service at Purdue University in Indiana. It is a department of the Libraries. TIS started in 1987 with a grant from a state economic development agency to provide information services and document delivery for Indiana business decision makers. TIS expanded in 1989 to provide these services to companies all over North America and overseas. The TIS philosophy is that if business professionals have access to quick and accurate business and technical information and documents, they will be able to make better decisions. The positive economic impact of these decisions will benefit the individual company in the short run, but in the long run will also benefit the larger economy. Although TIS is still partially funded by a grant from the state of Indiana, most costs for providing services are billed back to clients on a non-profit, cost-recovery basis.

TIS started operating in 1987 on a small scale with one professional, a part time clerk, and a part time administrator. Important first steps included designing a brochure, designing an advertisement, and developing a marketing plan.

At first TIS staff concentrated on attracting clients in the Indiana manufacturing sector. Staff mailed brochures to Purdue engineering graduates who worked in Indiana. Staff also talked with reporters who published articles in the business sections of local newspapers. In many ways, generating business at TIS is very similar to the steps any new business would take to attract customers.

Since 1987, TIS has grown to meet the increasing needs of its customers. By 1992, staff had expanded to seven full time employees: three librarians and four support staff. TIS also uses about one hundred hours of student assistant time per week to fill document requests from fourteen different library locations on the Purdue campus. In 1987 TIS is filled a few hundred document requests every month; TIS now fills over 1,200 document requests per month.

Many U.S. fee-based information services are located in urban areas with a large clientele of local business. However, TIS is located at a university in a relatively rural area. The population of the surrounding county is about 100,00, not counting a student population of about 30,000. There is a correspondingly low level of business and industry in the immediate area. However, Purdue University is internationally known for its academic programs and research in engineering and the sciences. The Libraries' collection are especially strong in these subject areas. So while TIS cannot count on a lot of business from local companies, Purdue University's reputation and its Libraries' collections have been invaluable in helping TIS build a customer base of companies all over North America and from other countries such as England, France, Turkey, Australia and Korea.

What do TIS clients need? They want copies of documents of every description. Sometimes they have a complete citation; many times they do not. Sometimes they can wait a week to receive an article in the mail; sometimes they need a fax copy within a few hours. Many requests are for easily obtainable articles, but others are for unpublished or limited distribution "gray literature" items which are difficult both to identify and to obtain.

What kind of clients does TIS serve? Clients include corporate librarians, inventors, engineers, marketing managers, company presidents, administrative assistants, entrepreneurs, scientific researchers, secretaries, and lawyers. Some clients request information and documents for their own use; others request information which will be passed along to other people in their organization. It is a challenge to develop a marketing plan which will reach such a diversity of clients with such a wide range of different information needs. TIS professional staff perform data-

base or manual searches in almost all subject areas. TIS fills about seventy-five percent of document requests from the collection at the Purdue University Libraries. The remaining twenty-five percent of requests are filled by using other library collections, commercial document delivery firms, publishers, or information brokers. Staff also locate industry experts for clients when necessary, and make referrals to university departments or government agencies. In a few cases a client's information request will be so comprehensive that TIS staff suggest that the client contact a consultant.

Why do businesspeople use a fee-based information service like TIS? There are many reasons. Some people do not want to spend the time to find copies of even easily obtainable articles from local sources. It is much easier and more cost-effective for them to fax a request list to TIS and receive the article copies in a few days. These clients like the idea of working with a single supplier to meet all their document delivery needs. Other people do not have the first idea about how to get copies of even "easy" articles and prefer that TIS staff locate and send the items. Still other clients find local sources for "easy" documents and send only the "hard" requests to TIS. Most clients recognize that it is more cost-effective to pay for expert document delivery and research services rather than to try to do this work themselves or to make business decisions without the information. There are many times when an information search or copies of a few articles will answer a business person's question quickly; the client does not have to spend his own time doing research or hire a consultant to meet a relatively uncomplicated information need.

Many clients do not have technical or scientific backgrounds, but require technical information either for themselves or for others in their companies in order to make business decisions. Often clients call TIS because they have no idea where to start looking for this information themselves. Besides identifying and obtaining technical information and documents, TIS staff often spend time educating clients about the nature or use of the material. For example, some clients need help understanding the difference between a law and a regulation. Others are uncertain about the use of industry standards, especially now that international standardization is becoming so important. More and more clients are interested in tracking new technology and in tracking competitors' new products, but are unsure about how patent information can help them meet these objectives. Information professionals at fee-based information services such as Purdue University's Technical Information Service can

help business people learn how to use modern information strategies to make them competitive in both the local and the global economy.

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