

## **Setting the standard: Gary Smith talks about Techstreet and the global use of standards information**

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*In 2003, Thomson acquired Techstreet Inc, a company that provides full-text industry standards and specifications to engineers, researchers, and technical and information professionals worldwide. In this interview Rodney Yancey talks to the General Manager Gary Smith, to find out more about the value of standards information, and the success of Techstreet.*

### **Introduction**

When Thomson acquired Techstreet Inc. in August 2003 it was a little known company to most of us. Techstreet is now part of the Thomson Scientific business unit and continues to forge a name for itself both inside and outside of Thomson. Founded in 1996, Techstreet is a digital content delivery company that provides full-text industry standards and specifications from the world's leading Standards Developing Organizations (SDOs) to engineers, researchers, and technical and information professionals worldwide.

So what exactly are standards? As explained by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), "simply put, a standard is a documented agreement, established by a consensus of subject matter experts and approved by a recognized body that provides rules, guidelines or characteristics to ensure that materials, products, processes and services are fit for their purpose."

That may sound simple to ANSI, but the definition may leave the layperson befuddled. So, I sat down with Gary Smith, General Manager of Techstreet, to learn more about standards and the Techstreet offerings.

**Rodney:** *What did you do prior to joining Techstreet?*

**Gary:** I joined Techstreet after six years at Thomson Gale—the largest global reference publisher—located in Farmington Hills, Michigan. My most recent role was Vice President of Technical Services, where I focused on innovation and technological solutions for libraries. I also had responsibility for billing and support of online services and was a driving force in the

successful launch of the new Gale Online Delivery System. Before becoming Vice President of Technical Services, I was the Vice President of International Sales.

**Rodney:** *What do you see as your greatest successes?*

**Gary:** As VP of Technical Services, I oversaw the design and release of a new platform that Gale will be building future products on, and migrating existing products to. As VP of International Sales, I merged numerous companies and organizations into one cohesive business unit, doubling the size of the business with impressive growth outside the U.S.

**Rodney:** *What was life before Thomson?*

**Gary:** I spent 10 years with ProQuest/UMI in Ann Arbor, Michigan where I helped to design the online system, ProQuest Direct.

**Rodney:** *What is your education background?*

**Gary:** I have a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and a Masters of Business Administration from University of Phoenix Online.

**Rodney:** *Online? You received both degrees totally virtually?*

**Gary:** Yes. When I started at the university, I was working for ProQuest. I was one of their most valuable technical people—at least I like to think so—but because I did not have a degree, my career hit a brick wall. I chose online education because my job and travel schedule made going to school difficult. I ended up having to drop several classes because of trips to places like Saudi Arabia and Taiwan. But the virtual nature of UOP Online meant that I could learn without having to be in a particular place or time, and UOP Online offered the only program that didn't require two to four weeks per year on Campus.

**Rodney:** *I can see the convenience, but it still must have been tough juggling work and school?*

**Gary:** Yes, it was tough but it was necessary to advance my career. I'm also a husband and father, so I had a lot on my plate at the time. Looking back, it was worth the hard work and dedication.

**Rodney:** *Yes, you're now General Manager at Techstreet. Tell me about Techstreet.*

**Gary:** Well, we're the online standards superstore. Our Web-based tools and services help customers save time and money and more efficiently acquire and manage their information

resources. We help companies build better, safer products, achieve national and international compliance for global competitiveness, and reduce the time required to bring their products to market.

**Rodney:** *How did the company start?*

**Gary:** Techstreet was the brainchild of two college kids—Andrew Bank and Gregg Hammerman. They started the company in their college apartment as engineering students at the University of Michigan. These two young men saw that companies both large and small needed flexible and convenient options for licensing industry standards. It's quite impressive that what began as an Internet start-up, run by two entrepreneurs, has developed into what you know as Techstreet today, with nearly 15 employees and \$6 million in annual revenue. Andrew still plays an indispensable role in the company as our Director of Business Development.

**Rodney:** *It is rather remarkable. I certainly wasn't thinking about standards when I was in college. Are there other companies offering the same services?*

**Gary:** Our main competitors are IHS/Global Engineering Documents, Construction Book Express, ILI Infodisk and the SDOs themselves.

**Rodney:** *That's interesting, you compete with the SDOs, but don't you also rely on them?*

**Gary:** Yes, they own the copyrights to the standards documents that we deliver to our customers. The SDO mission is to promote the use and growth of their standards. We act as a distribution channel. When the SDO has a solid direct business, they feel they don't need to distribute through Techstreet. But we're making progress. Andrew is very tenacious and has done a great job building relationships.

**Rodney:** *Why wouldn't someone go directly to an SDO for their standards documents?*

**Gary:** Well, first we are seen as an objective third party. We offer customers one relationship from which they can obtain all their information needs. Otherwise, they would have to go to each SDO separately. Also, the SDOs require customers to buy everything. We offer customer-focused solutions. Customers can build their own solution.

**Rodney:** *What about the other competitors?*

**Gary:** IHS is by far the largest. They've been around since 1959 and own a large portion of the market. Construction Book is a relatively new player with an aggressive online presence.

**Rodney:** *How do you compete?*

**Gary:** Today's users demand smaller, more affordable, and more customized licensing packages. Unlike IHS, we only sell what the customer needs. We are location neutral, meaning you can buy our standards anywhere there is Internet access. We also offer automatic updates, immediate online access to usage reports, and customized usage reports.

**Rodney:** *What differentiates you from the others?*

**Gary:** Our innovations and customer focus. In 1998, we became the first standards provider to offer documents in downloadable PDF format, nearly 12 months before any other standards reseller. Also, in 2001, we developed the first and still the only free Standards Updating Service to help standards users monitor changing standards. And in 2003, we introduced the first and still the only Web-based standards subscription service that allows users to build their own packages from dozens of standards collections with location-neutral, web-based access.

**Rodney:** *Still, it must be difficult to penetrate the market?*

**Gary:** Our biggest obstacle right now is content. Although the business has done a great job, the truth is Techstreet has been run on a shoestring budget. Bulking-up our content would take a significant financial investment.

Our business was built on tracking current standards. IHS does have a tracking system, but they act as a big company would. We are close to our customers and that gives us an advantage.

Customers say we have the best delivery method and customer support. These are good foundations to build on. With added content, we'll be well positioned to give competitors a run for their money.

**Rodney:** *Are there particular markets where Techstreet is strong?*

**Gary:** Geographically speaking, standards are used all over the world, but our biggest U.S. markets are Texas and California. London is number one internationally. Looking at vertical market segments, we are strong in energy, petrochemicals, construction, food, water and wastewater and to a lesser degree manufacturing, telecommunications, information technology and pharmaceuticals. But we are working hard to strengthen content in those areas.

**Rodney:** *I would think that standards would be different in the U.S. compared to other countries. How much of your business is international?*

**Gary:** Some standards vary from country to country, and we provide the information accordingly. About 30% of our business is international, 70% domestic.

**Rodney:** *What obstacles do you face?*

**Gary:** Standards have been slow to make the transition from print to digital format, so it's like going back in time. Engineers are very slow to change. Some people still ship printed material back and forth.

**Rodney:** *Thomson acquired Techstreet in 2003. How do you see Techstreet fitting alongside the other Thomson Scientific solutions?*

**Gary:** A lot of patents are based on standards, and the reverse is also true. Also, a lot of scientific literature references standards, so what we offer does have a relation to the patent and literature side of the business.

**Rodney:** *Do you feel that being acquired by Thomson is a positive for Techstreet?*

**Gary:** Absolutely! Thomson's future sales model will be the key to the organization's success. To move the business forward, we'll need a significant investment from Thomson. We're confident that investment will be forthcoming.

**Rodney:** *But you mentioned that one of your advantages is staying close to the customer, where IHS is viewed as big business. Are you concerned that being a part of an organization as large as Thomson will alter that perception?*

**Gary:** Thomson hires General Managers like me to keep the entrepreneurial spirit and bring order to chaos. It's this approach that distinguishes Thomson from other large corporations. I think Thomson strives to remain customer-centric and put the resources in place to stay in constant contact with the markets they serve.

**Rodney:** *In closing, what attracted you to Techstreet?*

**Gary:** I've always worked on the Cinderella projects. Techstreet is small and there is a lot of growth potential. Just as I did at Gale, I look forward to advancing Techstreet's position in the marketplace. It's a challenge that I welcome.

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