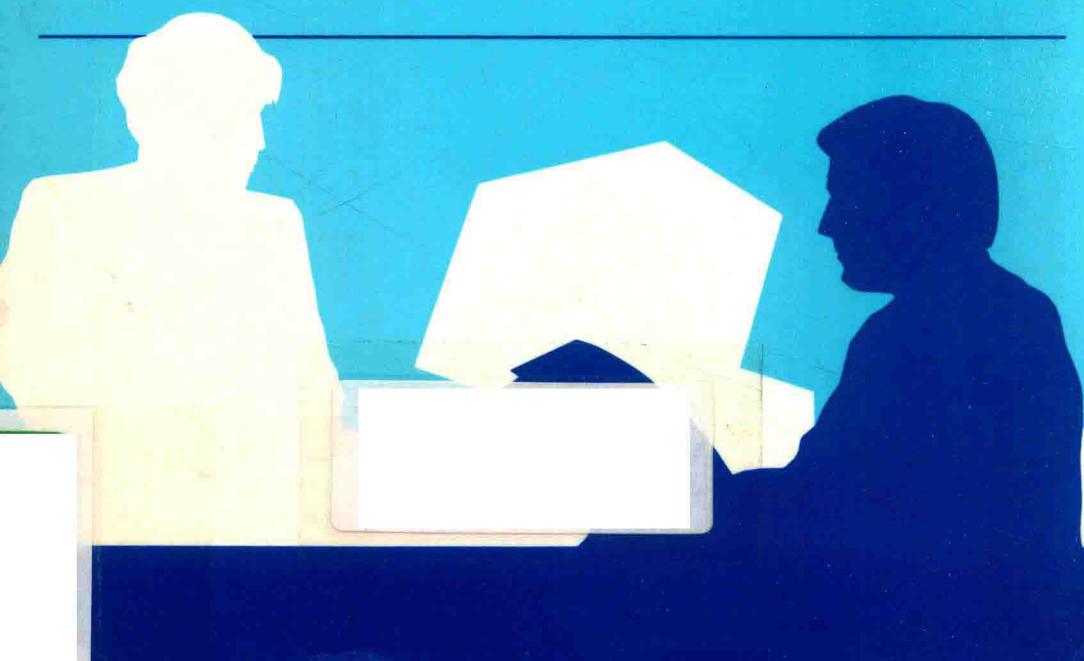

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS

**A GUIDE FOR
THE INFORMATION ENTREPRENEUR**

ALICE SIZER WARNER



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Acknowledgments

I flew from Boston to Syracuse, New York, to be guest lecturer for Professor Leigh Estabrook's marketing class at the School of Information Studies. After class I was to meet our African foster son Michael for a leisurely, much-looked-forward-to luncheon; then Michael, a chemical engineering graduate student, was to drive me to the airport to catch the late afternoon plane home.

Leigh met my early flight and, driving to the University, told me that Dean Evelyn Daniel would be listening to me speak (they assumed I wouldn't mind). Leigh thought that Evelyn was going to ask me to teach at Syracuse the next summer—if I proved any good as a teacher.

I met with Leigh's class in the room with the big table and the sun and the coffee pot, and Dean Daniel joined us for all of ten minutes. I was given a message to stop at her office after I had finished teaching.

So, toward the end of the morning, I did, not knowing if she knew what Leigh had told me. We chatted about the class and the weather and the airlines, and were just about to turn to serious discussion when her office door crashed open and Michael appeared and threw his arms around me. I stammered introductions, and that in its entirety was my interview. I got the job, I taught the course, and *Mind Your Own Business* grew out of it all.

A lot of people (besides Leigh and Evelyn and Michael—who since have, respectively, moved on to Illinois, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania) helped create this book. Almost two hundred people—information practitioners, professors, former students—shared what they felt important. Their words, their opinions, their advice, their tales are what make this book real. Alone, I could not have done it. Those who contributed were promised anonymity and this has been honored: slight rewording protects privacy, prevents identification. No eyes save mine have connected names with tales, and none will. Thank you, all of you.

Most writing happened at the small computer in the corner of our living room. Some cutting and pasting was done at Cary Library in Lexington, Massachusetts, on their infinity of large uncluttered tables. Part of the manuscript was written in pencil during an unexpected stay in Hanover, New Hampshire, proving I am not as irrevocably wedded to electronic keyboards as I had feared.

Judith Monteux organized mailing lists, printed labels and prepared envelopes while simultaneously assuming responsibility for tasks in other parts of my life so I could concentrate on this one. Professor Richard Palmer (then of Simmons, now an ardent Californian) helped design the letters and questionnaires.

Alexandra Baker read two whole manuscript drafts and made invaluable suggestions; someday I hope to know as much about using the English language as she does. Susan McGuire interrupted a busy conference schedule to sit up all night to critique an early draft and Joanna Walsh spent a weekend with one of the final drafts. Melissa Mickey contributed thoughtful comments as did our daughter, Wendy Lindstrom. Barbara Felicetti provided continuous support and encouragement, reading bits and pieces as writing progressed, acting both as mentor and cheering section.

Ross Yeiter of Venture Founders Corporation checked the section on venture capitalism. Barbara Wallace of Management Communication Services verified the section on government procurement. Lois Lyman prepared the index, using professional talent I envy. Neal-Schuman's Andrea Pedolsky served ably and with steady good humor as chief editor.

Caleb Warner, as always, did most.

I thank you all.

Foreword

“Professional suicide” was the library school dean’s prophesy when, in late 1971, I clumsily described to him the idea of starting an information company. Perhaps he was right. I got involved in one anyway.

I entered library school at age forty-one, when our fourth and youngest child started high school. My goal was to become certified as a school librarian so that I could be paid for work I’d been doing for over a decade as a volunteer. I had helped with library start-ups in schools in our own town of Lexington, Massachusetts, and when Lexington finally installed professional librarians, I helped start libraries in over fifty Boston inner-city schools—schools which had never had library service. Being an itinerant library-starter was glorious fun. I carried scissors and glue and book jackets and marking pens in a cardboard box my husband spray painted dark green, as he felt it unseemly for the library lady to appear carrying a carton marked “Extra Dry Gin.” I cheerfully charged volunteers who worked with me twenty-five cents a day for the privilege and we used this money for jacket-fastening tape. I even wrote a small book about how to do it all; I get absurd pleasure out of knowing a few copies are still used today.

So I was pretty smug when I arrived at library school, as I felt I knew it all already. This didn’t last long. First, I found that librarians are, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, “certificated” and that only cows are “certified.” And I rapidly discovered that there is a great deal more to librarianship than I had thought. Cataloging isn’t just little numbers on the back of the book, it is organization of knowledge—awesome. I’d never heard of a “special library” and had no idea that librarians worked in insurance companies or for airlines or with the armed services. That computers could have anything to do with libraries was also a new idea; I remember being packed into an auditorium to watch a slide-projector show a computer being programmed to print out a picture of Snoopy. Each course I took felt like

climbing a mountain and as with tops of mountains (from which all you can see are other mountains) each course made me realize how very much I didn't know. Obviously there was more to all of this than getting books and little children together.

Three experiences at library school were pivotal. The first was a meeting where we heard about recent graduates' jobs and Guest Perry told about starting Houghton Mifflin's library by herself. "Why didn't you get someone to help get it going?" I asked, remembering my green box. The germ of that idea hounded me. The second experience was being called by the president of a company whose products were folding canes for blind people and nose cones for rockets. He wanted to know if I could organize vendor catalogs in the drafting room to make the lives of his design engineers easier. But those messy looking piles of catalogs totally intimidated me and I mumbled something about not having studied that in school yet so I didn't know how—and please, would he call me next year. He never did, but the fact the such service was needed stuck with me.

The third experience was getting to know another student as eager as I to monopolize the one left-handed student desk in each classroom. Her name was Betty Eddison and we shared the feeling that neither of us saw ourselves as replacement parts for practicing librarians who might be leaving their jobs. We were too old to start at the bottom, and as we had not climbed traditional library ladders we couldn't start further up.

So we decided to create our own jobs. I paid my fateful visit to the dean and Warner-Eddison Associates was born just after graduation in May 1973.

Mind Your Own Business is not about Warner-Eddison any more than it is my personal life story. What is important is that our experience of starting an independent information/library services company was not unique. The same thing was happening all over the United States and Canada, but we didn't know it. We had felt our company to be created via immaculate conception; we knew no one else doing anything similar. During those first months, however, we found starting an information service was a little like having a rare disease: at first you think you're the only one in the world so infected, but then others with similar symptoms creep out of the woodwork and you find you're not alone any more.

FIND/SVP had been started by Andy Garvin in New York several years before. Annette Hirsch (now Annette Mathias) was running a Cleveland information service as were Susan Klement in

Toronto, Sue Rugge and Georgia Finnegan in California, Max Davis in Syracuse, Chris Samuels in New York. Kelly Warnken was working near Albany and Barbara Felicetti was in western Massachusetts. There were several more early players including Jo Chanaud from Denver, Patricia Schick and Marnie Swanson in Edmonton, and Michael Dagg in Ottawa. Each of us invented our own wheels. One veteran, responding to the questionnaire sent out in connection with this book, answered the question, "What do you wish you had been told before you started?" with "... that FIND/SVP already existed."

What happened then was that those of us who had had no role models became role models overnight, whether or not such was deserved (most of the time it wasn't). The Information Industry Association, very new itself, sought us all for membership. Some of us appeared on a panel at the American Society for Information Science (ASIS) October 1974 meeting in Atlanta. While there we were interviewed for an article in *ASIS Bulletin* on information brokers,¹ though none of us remembers who first started using the terms "information broker" and "information-on-demand companies." An article I wrote, "Information Services—New Use for an Old Product", came out in *Wilson Library Bulletin* in February 1975² and stirred much interest.

Wilson Library Bulletin also put together a minidirectory of what they called freelance librarians in that same issue. There were eleven names on that list—there probably should have been twice as many, at most. A decade later, more than forty times that many fee-based information services have been identified. So a great deal happened, very fast.

My connection with Warner-Eddison Associates, Inc. ceased in January 1980, and I now work as The Information Guild. My office is at home, joining The Instrument Guild, my husband's development engineering company. Warner-Eddison gave me a lot; I made a great many mistakes, did a few things right, and learned a tremendous amount about the information world, about business, and about myself.

My work now is writing, teaching, and consulting on the how-to's of business, with a special interest in catching students and readers in the beginning, exploring decision stages. As I used to be an itinerant librarian, I am now an itinerant teacher-consultant, and I love it.

NOTES

1. The February 1976 issue of *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science* features "The Information Brokers," opening with an article by Seth Goldstein called "The Information Brokers: Can They Succeed?" (p.10). This is followed by "Information Brokers: Who, What, Why, How" (pp.11-20), contributed by the following nine information entrepreneurs: Georgia Finnigan, Sue Rugge, Andrew Garvin, Annette Hirsch (Mathias), Susan Klement, Patricia Schick, Marnie Swanson, Alice Sizer Warner, and David Weiss.
2. Alice Sizer Warner, "An Independent Librarian Looks at Information Services—New Use for an Old Product," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, February 1975, pp.440-445. Accompanied by "WLB's Minidirectory of Information Specialists" and by a bibliography by Maxine W. Davis, "A Quick Guide to Freelance Librarianship".

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Introduction

Mind Your Own Business has been written to share what it is like—really like—to be an entrepreneur in the library and information fields and to give hands-on guidelines for people who are considering trying it (whatever “it” is) for themselves. What you are going to read are the details of starting an entrepreneurship—where to get help and how to decide if all this is for you. Also covered are the kinds of services and products information entrepreneurs are selling. An entire chapter is given over to how to plan a business, including how to present a believable business plan to lenders and investors.

There is considerable discussion about money: where to get it, setting prices, keeping records, preparing taxes, figuring profits. Money is often people’s least favorite subject, but for the entrepreneur money becomes very central.

The longest chapter is on sales and marketing, providing guidelines on how to sell easily and successfully. This subject is of course crucial, yet few information people know much about it and virtually no one in the information field has written about it.

The final chapter covers management issues that a business-owner faces, including managing time, hiring and firing, insurance and other benefits, changing with the times, and the home as the workplace. Ethical issues are also addressed. Each chapter is followed by detailed notes.

Since I felt that what I knew about information businesses, added to what I could read and observe, was still not enough to write this book, I decided to cast as wide a net as possible and ask people in the field what messages they felt *Mind Your Own Business* should carry. Almost five hundred letters and questionnaires were sent out. One hundred fifty former students were asked what aspects of my courses on how to start and manage information businesses had been useful, what needed improvement or expansion, what additional issues should have been addressed. Professors at sixty-odd United States and Canadian schools of library and information science were asked about information entrepreneurship in the curriculum and about the kinds of questions students ask. Over two hundred fifty self-employed

people from fee-based information companies were asked to share what working for themselves is like and to offer advice on what elements a book such as this should address. A few staff members of fee-for-service sections of university libraries were asked their opinions.

Over a third of those who received the questionnaires responded. Their opinions, experiences, advice and guidance are woven throughout *Mind Your Own Business*, much in the form of direct quotations, although—at their request—without attribution.

Some students who had already started businesses when they attended my workshops or courses found them useful in light of what they were doing; their own contributions to those discussions were, of course, invaluable. A few students started entrepreneurship after our time together; they found planning their businesses as part of class homework especially useful. This entailed presenting a written business plan and defending it orally. Students can make amendments to written plans right up to the last minute of the last class, and most do: hearing the plans of others always triggers refinements to one's own.

The vast majority of students I questioned, however, reported that starting a business was not for them after all. One student wrote, "That idea is on the back burner now, permanently." Many had not realized that business means getting out, selling, and dealing with money easily, wisely and enthusiastically. These may be the students for whom the class meant the most, although many did not realize it at the time. They are to be admired for having strength to make that decision.

In the United States and Canada there are a growing number of opportunities to study entrepreneurship as a career alternative via mini-courses, short summer courses, or workshops. One-day continuing education classes have been offered by the Special Libraries Association, the American Society for Information Science, the Medical Library Association, the National Online Meeting, and some of the online user groups. Susan Klement has taught "Alternative Careers" at Kent State, Michigan, Toronto, and elsewhere. The University of Wisconsin gives a unit on information brokering and Florida State University in Tallahassee experimented with a course called "Problems and Studies in Librarianship: The Information Entrepreneur" (their syllabus refers to "The Extra-Institutional Librarian"). I have

taught "Information Management" at my alma mater, Simmons College; I've had the privilege of teaching at Syracuse and Michigan and Hawaii and more.

For the most part, however, schools still refer to alternate career paths, including entrepreneurship, within existing courses, orientation sessions, or career-planning workshops. This occurs, generally, for two reasons. First, it can be difficult to justify to a tuition-paying employer the benefit of enrolling the employee/student in a course called "How to Leave Your Job and Become an Independent Entrepreneur." The second reason is well expressed by a veteran dean who writes: "One of the problems I have is the need to keep a relatively small program from fragmenting even further. The pressure for more courses and more specialization is continuous. However, as long as the student body remains about the same or grows only slightly, and more importantly as long as students rarely take more courses than are required, the offering of more courses to the same students only distributes those students in ever smaller classroom sections. One salami can only be sliced into so many servings."

According to the professors who responded to my questionnaire, students are curious about information entrepreneurship since most are barely aware of the option. Questions are predictable: Who does it? What do you do? What kind of money can be made? What geographical areas are best? Where do you get the money to get started? Do you need insurance? What special skills are needed? What courses should I take? How do you get started? What models should be followed? When is the right time to make the move? Where is the market? What should I charge? What are the risks? What are the rewards? What is marketing? How do I make contacts? Do libraries resent you? Many have difficulty conceptualizing what building one's own business entails, and ask: How do I apply for such a position? Where are the jobs, how do I find a job? They don't realize they must *make* the job, not find it.

As they are first to admit, some of these professors and instructors still have only a theoretical grasp of what working for oneself really means. Even the teacher who consults on the side can't really understand; the teacher/consultant can always count on regular teaching income plus employer-paid insurance and other benefits—financial tranquilizers unknown to the full-blown entrepreneur. A long-time educator telephoned to say, "There weren't teachers for automation when automation came along, and it's the same with

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entrepreneurship—teachers don't know how to teach it." "What would be easiest for those of us who teach," wrote another, "would be a text that catalogs specific jobs/careers and indicates clearly the experience, capital, and other initial requirements associated with job entry." Another professor longs for "a step-by-step manual with case studies at the end."

Unfortunately, running a business, and therefore teaching about it, is not that simple. In full knowledge of how many halves make a whole, I recommend for information entrepreneurs a graduate degree with courses consisting of half library/information science, half computer science/applications, and half business administration.

Working for oneself rather than for an institution appeals to most of us at some stage of our lives. Entrepreneurship as a career alternative for library and information people is certainly more visible now than it used to be, and a lot of entrepreneurs appear successful and happy with the choice.

"There's always at least one in every class," says one professor, "usually someone with young children who can't see any other way." (At the other end of the age scale, over a dozen respondents to the questionnaire said they wanted to keep going after retirement from regular employment.) Practicing entrepreneurs can testify to increasing numbers of students in schools of library and information science who are doing research and writing papers on the phenomenon of the librarian-turned-businessperson;¹ barely a week in an information entrepreneur's life goes by without at least one request from a student for an interview or for some sort of information. Practicing entrepreneurs can also testify to the number of people beyond student years looking for advice on how to set up businesses of their own; responding to these people is a predictable occupational hazard that must be dealt with.

One issue is clear: this is an industry that has yet to come out of the closet. We have no industry standards. We do not know how viable most entrepreneurship have been, are now, or will be. What we have is a phenomenon that refuses to be pinned down. There is too little financial disclosure. The suspicion, totally unproveable as few want to talk about it openly, is that many are not showing strong profits and some are barely breaking even. Business naivité, head-in-the-sand attitudes toward finance, concentration on the process

(doing the search) instead of the market (who buys and why), false pride or ego, and reluctance to accept and act on good advice are among the usual reasons.

The future for information entrepreneurship is bright indeed for those with a clear eye on what customers want to buy and who can deliver quality goods and services to those customers at fair prices. There is enormous potential and all the room in the world for the entrepreneur with energy, resources, courage to do things right, ability to sell, imagination, personal integrity—and a little bit of luck.

NOTES

1. An example of a student paper that was later published is Susan R. LaForte's "Information Brokers: Friend or Foe?," *Public Library Quarterly*, Winter 1982, pp.83-91. This is a history and summary of information brokering based on literature review and interviews.