

No Shelf Required
Interview with Michael Bills

Interview Information:
Interview Date: Sept 7, 2011
Interviewer: Sue Polanka, No Shelf Required
Interviewee: Michael Bills, Baker and Taylor

Sue Polanka:

Hi, everybody. This is Sue Polanka with No Shelf Required. Today is Wednesday, September the 7th and I'm on the phone today with Michael Bills. Michael is the Director of Sales for Digital Products at Baker and Taylor. Michael, thanks so much for talking with me today.

Michael Bills:

Thanks very much for having me, Sue.

SP:

It's great to be able to speak with you today about Blio, which is an eBook reader that was launched to the consumer market last September. And it might be a, a new name for many libraries so Michael, if you can start by telling us more about what Blio is and what it does?

MB:

Yes, thanks very much. Well, as you mentioned, Sue, the Blio Reader, which is the invention of KNFB Reading Technologies, the partnership between Ray Kurzweil, well known for accessibility inventions and The National Federation for the Blind, is a new eReader in the marketplace and actually one that allows for the, the faithful representation of books as they were designed and originally published in print to be delivered in digital format. So, preserving full color, full layout and then introducing some accessibility tools and engaging presentation functionality. And as, as the consumer adoption has proceeded over the last year, that has been aided quite a bit by equipment manufacturer relationships that Baker and Taylor has established. So, the Blio Reader actually is being pre-installed in new netbooks, laptops, tablets from Dell, HP, Samsung, Toshiba, and others and then very recently also being bundled now with Android phones and smartphones from T-mobile just starting up this summer. So, the installed base of machines by the end of this year that will have the Blio Reader preinstalled is about 25 million machines. So, of course, that consumer adoption is preceded our work on a library platform that would allow the circulation of materials in Blio format. And that, of course, will be delivered via a platform that we've called Axis 360, which we announced formally at ALA and are in the process of setting up our initial customers on for this, this coming months, actually October. First, we should have a couple of our first customers using access to deliver Blio content out to their libraries.

SP:

Can you tell me a little bit more about how the access works, particularly with the, the checkout of the materials?

MB:

Yes, it is... Axis is the hosted repository for the library. So, it is a branded site, of course, operated off of Baker and Taylor's servers and infrastructures so it does

not require any capabilities for machinery at the libraries. And the circulation of material holds managements, etcetera, is administered on the platform and it provides what we think is a very engaging showcase for the library's digital collection. We have a, a splash page we call the Magic Wall which...

SP:

The Magic Wall.

MB:

...showcases, you know, 36 titles from the library's collection with jackets spinning every few seconds to show yet another title that patron would be interested to be reading. And we've designed the platform, you know, Baker and Taylor is not among the first with, with an eBook circulation platform and for that, we think we have an opportunity, certainly, hearing the feedback from libraries about platforms that they're familiar with, things that work well, things that they wish worked better, and we've tried to incorporate some of that into the design of the program. So, one of the, the chief aims is to make it easy for patrons to get the things that they would like to read onto the devices but they like to use. So, the, the combination of access and Blio is what allows us to achieve that. Circulation is actually delivered via the Cloud through the Blio book vault, so that when a patron checks out a book, they can open the Blio Reader on any device that they have it installed on, sync that device with their Cloud vault in the sky, and have that material delivered down to that device including any notes or highlighting and, of course, resuming on the page that they left off at the last place that they had read that material.

SP:

So, if a person has an Android device and they also have a netbook, as long as both can connect to the Cloud, they can read the book that they check out from the library on either device and it will pick up on the page it left off?

MB:

Absolutely, yes. And actually during the, the course of that check out, you could access your borrowed book on up to 5 devices.

SP:

Okay. Can it- so, does that mean that 2 people could read it simultaneously or does it just... I'm sure just maintain a 1 page number, right?

MB:

It is 1 page number.

SP:

Yeah.

MB:

And, and the Blio ID that you're syncing in the vault is an individual ID.

SP:

Okay.

MB:

So, one machine actually can serve a number of readers if you have Blio Reader on your machine and log in with the with a different set of credentials, you'll actually see that shelf of material that belongs to that person.

SP:

Right.

MB:

Okay so it does allow for sharing within a family... to access discrete collections.

SP:

Now can you download the Blio reader on any other types of products like other existing eBook readers or is it simply for the netbooks and phones and desktops?

MB:

The, the release is currently available in the market place, run on all Windows machines, on iOS devices, so the touch iPhone and iPad, the various Android devices whether their phones or tablets, and there are versions for the Windows Mobile 7 platform as well as Web O. S., if that's still going to be a viable platform and what's under development as well.

SP:

Okay.

MB:

And so, our aim has been to make the Blio Reader available to the machines that people like to use in their everyday life, not requiring a dedicated eReader. The closed devices that are now used for years, I call them close because they would not allow you to install software include...

SP:

Right.

MB:

The Sony Reader and Combo, et cetera.

SP:

Right.

MB:

So further down the road in our development of the Axis platform, we're going to be incorporating ePub in PDF file format delivered via Adobe Digital Editions.

SP:

Okay.

MB:

So that users of those devices will also be able to find material on the Axis website...

SP:

Okay.

MB:

At their local library.

SP:

Right. So, Michael, what kind of titles are available for purchase either to the consumers or for libraries?

MB:

Well, the publisher relationships that Baker and Taylor has has allowed us to build a very strong base of digital content. In the consumer world, we actually have arrangements for something over 400,000 titles on available for sale via the Blio Bookstores. And as we have launched the library's circulation platform, we

are approaching those publisher contacts and getting explicit rights for library distribution.

SP:

Okay.

MB:

And so, all of the publishers that work in the library community are going to eventually we have content available via the access platform. We are up to, I think, at this point, about 90,000 titles committed from publishers working in the library. And of course, from week to week as our publisher folks are taking that addendum around, we are able to turn on blocks of content because we have already converted it into the Blio format, and it is available in the retail world. We flip a switch and then it becomes visible and... and purchasable by our library as well.

SP:

And the, the libraries purchase using a variety of different business models or is it essentially the one-book, one-user with the checkout model?

MB:

It is the one-book, one-user checkout model, right now. As we see, of course, out in the market place, publishers are beginning to think about different business systems and how they work with libraries. The Harper Collins model comes to mind. But other publishers now looking at some help, they might work in the library community including some of those who have not previously made digital content for library circulation. It will be very interesting, I think, to see a range of business models. And, of course, as any publishers allow for simultaneous access or short-term loan or any of the various business models, we will be offering that access as well.

SP:

Okay. Now, much earlier in the discussion, you had mentioned that the Blio Reader offers some functionality for accessibility. Can you tell me more about that type of functionality?

MB:

Yes. It's, it's something actually that we're, we're very proud of for being able to bring a fully accessible eReader to the library community. It is, of course, mandated in some communities or states even that that whatever services are offered out to the public make accommodation for those who require accessibility enhancement products. And so, the Blio Reader, of course, coming from KNFB, incorporates large print on demand, text-to-speech functionality with synchronized word highlighting and that highlighting can, can be controlled by the user's speed and pitch, range of voices that, that might be available either on your machine or for purchase out on the web. There also, the combination of the highlighting and text-to-speech in the reader actually makes it a very useful tool for (inaudible) or reluctant readers...

SP:

Sure.

MB:

Where the pace of the narration can be slowed or speeded as needed. But it's, it can also be set to pause at intervals, allowing an instructor and reader to have some exchange. For instance, the text-to-speech might be programmed to, to stop after every sentence and give those people a chance to review the sentence, perhaps use the highlighter to highlight nouns and verbs in different colors or diagrams.

SP:

Okay, okay.

MB:

And, of course the, all of the, the mouseovers give full text instruction, icons are turned into text for those who some visual disability. And there's another piece that I'm trying to, struggling to find here, Sue. It is... let's see here...

SP:

Actually you while you're struggling to find it, if I could ask about, if you can multitask, the text-to-speech, do I recall that Blio has actual authors and actors reading some of the content, it's not just computer generated?

MB:

That, that's true, Sue. There's a new kind of eBook product, I guess I don't know that it's been officially named yet, but we call them enhanced eBooks.

SP:

Right, right.

MB:

That combined true audio narration with the synchronized text highlighting so that an eBook becomes a combination of an eBook and a digital audio book.

SP:

Okay.

MB:

And some publishers have actually taken that a step further and it's not just... a... an actor's, excuse me, narration of the text, but they've actually married up perhaps a, a full sound track. The folks at Disney at work on some things that take a full animation movie soundtrack and embed that along with the text so that as you click and activate text-to-speech, in essence, you're hearing the movie and the pages are being read aloud and automatically flipped and take you through a whole storytelling experience.

SP:

Very neat, very neat. Now are these kinds of things available for libraries, too, not just the consumer?

MB:

Several of the studio audio narration books are available to libraries already.

SP:

Okay.

MB:

I think some of the, the examples that we've seen, the Disney title that I mentioned as well, are sort of experiments with what the format allows publishers to build into books. And those, we expect will be made available to retail before they are made available in the library world.

SP:

Right okay. Well, if someone would like more information about the Blio Reader, about Axis 360 or any of the content, what's the best way for them to find more information?

MB:

Well, really the, the best path, of course, is the established paths with Baker and Taylor. Please get in touch with your sales representative and we're, we're expecting to set up our first libraries, as I said, but are happy to arrange demonstrations and to give more detail about the service anytime someone would like. Of course, we have a microsite on the Baker and Taylor website as well. If you go to Baker-Taylor.com/axis360, there's a link to register for more information as well. And there is one aspect, Sue, if I, if I can ask my own question of myself. I'm interested to, to let folks know, I guess, some of the, the rationale for Baker and Taylor's entree into the digital world and why we think that it makes tremendous sense for libraries to choose their established book vendor as their digital provider as well.

MB:

eBooks and eBook platforms, as you're well aware, have existed on the periphery of what a library uses to manage its day-to-day business. It's required a separate selection process, extracting usage statistics perhaps from that third-party platform trying to marry them up somehow with your own systems data. We are pursuing a, a much tighter integration with both the selection and acquisitions work flow. We will be making digital products, of course, a part of our ongoing collection development services and programs. And so, things like our first look carts and notifications plans, continuations and orders are being extended to include digital notifications. And then we're pursuing data exchange with the ILS vendors that will help us accomplish a couple of things: to bring the eBook platform well inside the system that the libraries using for its day-to-day operation.

SP:

So that it wouldn't be separate. You could checkout through the traditional system and still track your use all on one place?

MB:

Exactly, Sue.

SP:

That'd be great, yeah.

MB:

Both for real time authentication of patrons against the ILS patron database as well as data exchange down into the circulation module so that there's a single place for running statistics for both digital and physical circulation. And then that last step as well, that allows for the availability of digital items to display in the library catalog.

SP:

Yes.

MB:

And the checkout to be able to originate directly from the catalog where every library wants its patrons to be working.

SP:

Well, it sounds like you definitely listen to the customers because those are several things that many complain about now that they can't do with their current eBook vendor or the way they're just purchasing eBooks- everything being so separated so... Well, I wish you much luck and I can't wait to see what comes next with Blio and Axis 360 and thank you so much for taking time to talk with me today.

MB:

Sue, we really appreciate the opportunity and many of us here are great fans of your blog.

SP:

Wonderful! Well, I thank you.