

## TTO accesses network of 200,000 experts to enhance marketing

Often faced with a vast range of industries to target, one of the greatest marketing challenges for TTOs is developing the necessary expertise to accurately determine the potential of multiple inventions in myriad markets and identify the most likely potential licensees. No matter how skilled and knowledgeable, it's virtually impossible for a single staff to possess that breadth of expertise in-house.

Recognizing the enormity of this challenge -- and the critical importance of finding a solution -- the Science and Technology Ventures (STV) office at Columbia University in New York City has enlisted the services of Gerson Lehrman Group (GLG), which provides access to a network of over 200,000 experts in a wide range of functions and industries.

"GLG approached us about year ago," recalls **Brendan Rauw**, MBA, STV's portfolio director. "What was attractive to us was the opportunity to access an extensive database of experts."

The need for such a network was clear to Rauw. To illustrate he cites wireless technologies, where Columbia has developed a number of innovations. While he understands the importance of deep market knowledge to effectively marketing those innovations, that depth is beyond the reach of staff juggling multiple projects and priorities. "Often it's not clear if the market is going to a particular standard," he notes, and it's also often a mystery "why the industry might say 'no' to something we think is a great approach."

### 'Multiplying' yourself

The Columbia team had already been seeking to expand its capabilities through a Fellows program, which uses grad student interns to

help develop IP marketing plans and strategies. (For more on the program, see *Technology Transfer Tactics*, September 2007, page 67.)

"Beyond the Fellows program I was looking to bring more to the table to inform early stage technology decisions; even with the Fellows there was still a gap in the capabilities we had available to us," Rauw explains. "Many of the technologies that come to us are by definition early stage, and are in market niches we don't have experience with or information on because it is a small, specialized sector. You really need someone who has worked there, is familiar with how the markets have evolved, where the market is at present, what the needs of companies are in that sector, and how our technology fits in with the current offerings available."

That's where the experts come in. "The most valuable ones are those that can fill niches -- it's powerful if they can help you prioritize, even as early as putting tweaks in your research for different applications," explains **Dmitri Mehlhorn**, managing director of global operations for GLG.

"Business experts might convince you to test different areas, [and you can gain] validation from business leaders that this invention has potential applications." In addition, he says, those experts "can directly inform how you talk about the market."

The GLG network, he explains, includes people with technical expertise and business backgrounds. "This allows TTOs to do two things: One, they can validate the specific technology in ways that lead directly to deciding what they will market, what market segment they should be targeting, and how to describe the capabilities -- and of course, whether to go to market at all," says Mehlhorn. Industry experts can also bring competitive factors to light that may impact your

decision-making, he adds. "While your portfolio of IP will certainly have some ideas that seem good, you might talk to a technical expert and learn that something else is out there that is about to become dominant, which may change your point of view."

## How it works

TTOs gain access to the experts by purchasing a license to the network. They are then given an interface portal allowing them to 'peer' into the database. Using keyword searches, users can see who has the specific expertise they seek, and can then read their bios and view their hourly rates. Some of the experts are "on call" and can be contacted directly by the TTO. Others have to be requested through GLG.

"For example, we may have a sensor technology that can be deployed remotely, but we don't know where it can be used, in what context, and what types of companies would be interested in commercializing it," Rauw explains. "We contact GLG and say we need someone with technical expertise in this type of sensor technology with a PhD in electrical engineering and industry experience."

GLG then finds appropriate experts in the database and provides a description of the technology (the experts have all signed 'umbrella' CDAs with GLG, so Columbia does not need an

individual CDA for these consultations). When an expert indicates familiarity with the technology and a willingness to be consulted, Rauw's team coordinates a conversation with the expert that includes one of STV's licensing officers. "Once we have identified an expert, we will provide whatever materials we have, like papers or published patent applications, which they review in advance," he says. The call itself usually lasts 30 to 45 minutes. "It can range from a discussion of where the market is evolving, to when the technology will be ready, to what the economics of this niche are and who the target customer would be," says Rauw.

Such access does not come cheaply. "[Subscription] fees are determined by several factors, like the number of users, geographies the client wants to access (i.e., Asia vs. the U.S.), and the number of industries," Mehlhorn explains. "A for-profit client with four users who wants to target one geographic area might pay \$80,000 a year. However, we have a sliding scale for non-profits, who get a discount of 50% to 60% -- or even more. We are flexible."

"They give us special pricing as a non-profit; we pay the experts by the quarter hour," adds Rauw, who says the fees range anywhere from \$199 to over \$1,000 an hour.

For TTOs that can't afford the freight, the GLG approach still offers a lesson when approaching an unfamiliar market with new

## Consultant helps TTO staff see with different eyes

It's only been a few short months, but already Columbia University's Science and Technology Ventures office has learned to look at some technologies in different ways after consulting with outside experts who are part of a network established by Gerson Lehrman Group.

"One example would be a coal gasification technology," says STV's portfolio director **Brendan Rauw**, MBA. "We came in with our own hypothesis of what markets would be most appropriate, but out of those discussions came an internal re-prioritization of our marketing and commercialization strategies."

"We learned that there are two different major markets -- you can convert coal into energy, or into fuels," says **Volodymyr Nikolenko**, PhD, portfolio analyst for STV. "After our discussions, we started looking more into the fuels markets."

Nikolenko says consulting with outside experts also led to a re-prioritization of the countries in which he wanted to have patent protection. "It's a very expensive process, so you have to think carefully when you select countries," he explains. "For example, one of the important factors is the infrastructure to transport the coal from where it is produced to the gasification plants."

One of the experts consulted worked with a company that builds coal gasification plants, Nikolenko notes. "He described the markets from his point of view, as well as the important market drivers in the coal gasification industry," he says. "We came away with a better understanding of who the licensees could be, as well as a better understanding of potential customers," Rauw says.

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technology. Find a way -- through alumni, board members, industry contacts, or a professor in the field -- to get an expert's input on your marketing plans.

## **Getting their feet wet**

Rauw describes his initial work with GLG as "initially an experiment," noting they have now been working together for about six months. "The first month, we scheduled one call, the second month two, and now we do about two a week," he says.

Rauw says the network has been an excellent resource. "Some of this information you *never* get without talking to someone in the industry. And finding it on your own -- as we have found through the Fellows program -- is intensely time-consuming; you have to set up the call, the CDA, rates, or do an analysis on your own, which you may or may not be able to do," he observes. "This gives you a turnkey approach, and rapid market feedback." Rauw says that there have definitely been occasions "where we changed our perception of a technology or an opportunity." (For a specific example, see the sidebar "Consultant helps TTO staff see with different eyes".)

As with any new initiative, says Rauw, "there are always things that can be improved." In this case, he concedes, "scheduling can be a headache." He quickly adds, however, that "if there is a downside to this, we have yet to identify it."

Rauw does note that working with GLG or another outside source of market expertise "will not solve *all* your problems; some technologies are so early stage the inventor is truly the expert in that field, and no one can predict the future." He adds that "other TTOs should be doing this," and Mehlhorn says some already are. "While we are a ten-year-old company, we have only been serving TTOs for about a year," he says, noting that the firm is currently working with "about half a dozen" TTOs.

Rauw recognizes that Columbia is "fortunate" to have one of the larger TTOs, and therefore has more financial resources for programs like this. As for staff time, however, "this is resource-light," he asserts. "It doesn't take much for the TTO to maintain, and it's a good alternative to buying more research or bringing more people in-house."

How should a TTO measure the value of outside sources of expertise? "You can evaluate it more effectively after three years or so," says Mehlhorn. "That's when you should expect to see an uptick in revenue generation and licensing. However, even after the end of year one you should be able to assess whether you are putting more focus on better inventions."

And what is Rauw's short-term evaluation? "It has exceeded expectations," he concludes.

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