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The patent information users' group – Twenty excellent years: PIUG's impact on patent information

2008 marked the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the Patent Information Users' Group (PIUG). During this period, PIUG has not only thrived in the United States but gained a much wider presence and is now also known as "The International Society for Patent Information". It has also had a significant impact on patent information.

A history of the early years of PIUG was published in 1991 by Nancy Lambert [1].

1. Anyone can join, almost

A founding principle of PIUG was that membership was for individuals, not organizations. Free of restrictions based on corporate memberships or subscriptions to specific products or services, users of patent information have been able to join PIUG at will and avail themselves of the opportunities and benefits of a professional organization established for their specific needs.

Initially, PIUG membership was not open to employees of organizations which were providers or marketers of patent information. Later, they were permitted associate membership with restrictions on participation. Because of the increasingly blurring line between users and providers, with some individuals functioning in both areas, PIUG's membership policy is once again under review, with a task force designated to recommend a membership policy which now best serves the needs of patent information users.

2. [PIUG List] and <http://www.piug.org>

The establishment and growth of PIUG coincided with the increased availability of e-mail and the introduction of the world wide web. The computer-facile membership of PIUG readily embraced both formats.

From its rather humble beginnings in DialMail, the PIUG Discussion List (<http://www.piug.org/list.php>) has become an international forum for discussion of patent information matters, allowing anyone with internet access to participate. Subscribers and regular readers of the list are regularly exposed to a fascinating array of questions, answers, opinions and, on occasion, breaking news.

Newcomers to the field, or those who work largely on their own, can feel less isolated if they subscribe to the PIUG Discussion List. Yes, there are others out there, doing the same things, dealing with a lot of the same issues. Ask "Does anyone know...?" and usually, somebody does. Questions about unusual matters are answered, copies of obscure documents are obtained, meetings are announced, people in subspecialties make contact with each other,

and once in a while, arguments break out, views are exchanged, and feelings run high.

Information-related proposals and activities by national and regional patent offices, most recently in particular the US Patent and Trademark Office, have been the subject of critiques and lively exchanges on the PIUG list. Representatives of some these offices respond from time to time, indicating that they are following the discussion and taking note of the feedback.

Vendors of patent information willing to observe the "information, not advertising" guidelines have a targeted forum in which to present their products and services. Users also engage in frequent correspondence about patent information products and services – what works, what doesn't, tips on how to fix the problem the vendor can't help you with or won't admit exists. Sometimes, the mere suggestion of a PIUG discussion list posting can turn a frustrated customer into a happy one.

The PIUG Discussion List has also answered a previously unmet need in that it provides a central place for posting employment opportunities, and for putting these postings directly into the e-mail in-boxes of qualified potential applicants. Placing employment opportunities on the PIUG Discussion List has occasionally been the subject of controversy, but these objections have been overridden by the support of both job seekers and those who, pre-PIUG, struggled to advertise patent information positions in places where qualified applicants would see them.

On a more somber note, an obituary posted to the PIUG Discussion List has been used on a number of occasions to announce the loss of one of our members.

The PIUG web site (<http://www.piug.org>) provides an additional resource to both members and non-members, with information about the organization and a knowledge base of useful links, with more detailed information available on the members-only section.

Yet another collaboration and discussion tool, the PIUG Wiki, was introduced in October, 2008 [2].

3. Anyone can attend

PIUG was founded by a group of patent information professionals who were concerned that users of patent information in the United States lacked a unified independent voice at a time when patent information meetings were for the most part gatherings of subscribers to specific services, where attendance and agendas were controlled by the service providers, or were based on corporate membership in an organization such as the Patent Documentation Group (PDG) in Europe. Meetings of other organizations, such as the Information section of the American Chemical Society (CINF) and the Special Libraries Association, were open to individ-

ual members but patent information was not a primary topic of interest.

Initial annual meetings of the PIUG were small, one-day events often held in conjunction with other meetings, such as the Derwent or IFI subscriber meetings, and often in Crystal City, Virginia, then also home to the US Patent and Trademark Office. When subscriber meetings came to an end in the United States, the PIUG, under the able leadership of Dr. Sandra Unger, came to the rescue. Beginning in 1999, multi-day PIUG meetings have been held annually, often in Crystal City, but recently in cities in different regions of the United States, giving people for whom long-distance business travel is not possible an opportunity to attend. The PIUG Northeast Conference began in 2000, and the PIUG Boston Biotechnology Meeting was first held in 2007. Registration at all meetings is open to all who are interested in attending.

Attendance at PIUG meetings provides a forum for education, networking, catching up with friends and former colleagues, volunteering and eating. Representatives of national and regional patent offices now regularly participate in PIUG meetings, as attendees, presenters and exhibitors. Programs have been wide-ranging and consistently of interest, and anyone who fails to come away with at least one useful piece of new information and one new professional contact has not been paying attention.

With the advent of multi-day meetings, an exhibit room was added. Providers of patent information products, including major vendors, patent offices and smaller companies with specialized products or services, now had the opportunity to interact with a concentrated group of customers and potential customers, many of them experienced users.

4. A funny thing happened on the way. . .

At the time PIUG was formed, patent information products and their vendors were relatively few in number, and problems and inadequacies could have a major effect on their users. For instance, at one time the World Patents Index database (then Derwent, now Thomson Reuters) was available only on one online host, Orbit (now no longer in existence as such), and if Orbit was temporarily unavailable, online searching of WPI came to a halt, although subscribers to the various categories of printed or microform card indexes could continue flipping through drawer after drawer, or reel after reel, of them. Initial PIUG committees were formed to coordinate and communicate issues with databases, printed products, online hosts, user documentation and similar matters. The membership wanted its complaints and suggestions to be listened to, acted upon.

For example, at an early annual meeting of the Patent Information Users' Group (PIUG), held in a conference room in the IBM offi-

ces in Crystal City, Virginia, discussion centered on Derwent's proposal to discontinue chemical fragmentation coding for patents which were to be included in the upcoming Derwent Markush database. Some PIUG members were not happy about this: the codes had general uses not necessarily related to specific structures. Derwent's position: they could not provide resources for both Markush indexing and fragmentation coding. At some point in the discussion, a question was asked: Why can't the fragmentation coding be generated automatically from the Markush connection tables? It took a couple of years, but the suggestion was eventually implemented, and fragmentation code searching has continued to be available.

But times change. Patent information has proliferated in so many ways, on so many different platforms, that the challenge has shifted from attempting to correct problems within a limited sphere to trying to keep up with all the new and different ways to search, organize and display patent information. PIUG has changed as well. The product-directed committees have disappeared and emphasis at annual meetings is on learning new ways of doing things.

5. Concluding remarks

The founding members of PIUG envisioned an organization which would benefit users of patent information and influence providers. PIUG has been that and more, a vital organization which has had a significant impact on users of patent information, who have a professional organization which provides for the needs of members and fosters education, communication and networking, as well as on providers and vendors of patent information, including patent offices, which have access to a target audience of customers or potential customers who let them know what they need and who provide feedback, both positive and negative. It seems likely that the next twenty years will be at least as interesting.

References

- [1] Lambert N. A succinct history of the Patent Information Users Group. *World Patent Inform* 1991;13(3):149–51.
- [2] Wolff TE. The PIUG Wiki – a new medium for PIUG collaboration and discussion. Presentation at the PIUG 2008 Northeast conference; 2008.

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