
Seagull Convention? – A personal view of IPI-ConfEx 2007 in Sorrento*

Well over 300 IP information professionals from more than 20 countries gathered at the beginning of March in Sorrento for five days of intensive workshops, presentations, demonstrations and networking. This was the fourth annual IPI-ConfEx, latest in a series that began in Lisbon in 2004. And considering its relative youth this event now occupies a surprisingly dominant position in the calendar of such events, being joined in November 2006 by a sister-event aimed specifically at the biomedical sector, the Pharma-Bio-Med ConfEx. Ford Khorsandian of TPRI and his star-studded Board of Counselors are to be congratulated on conceiving these much needed events and bringing them to fruition so effectively.

If IPI-ConfEx 2007 had a theme, it wasn't at all apparent, though for part of the central day it split into "parallel" sessions, the Engineering Track and the Chemical & Bio Track. In reality this simply allowed delegates to take a single-session break from the auditorium to spend an hour or two of unhurried time in the spacious exhibition hall, chatting with the two dozen vendors assembled there. When I think back to some of the cramped and telephonically challenged rooms in which I have tried to set up a booth in the past, this was an ideal environment.

The quality of the auditorium presentations easily matched the efficiency of the venue, and there were some truly exciting ideas among the forty or so contributions. I mentioned the subject split - I actually joined in the engineering track despite my background, specifically to hear about the success achieved by Philips IP & Standards in relocating its search department to Bangalore. But apart from that the main interest for me was the substantial participation from pharma companies, in the form of presentations from Novartis, P&G, sanofi-aventis, Bayer, Solvay and two from Pfizer. In fact it was the first Pfizer contribution, the first of the entire conference, that gave me greatest cause for thought, as it explored the way that Big Pharma was tackling data integration. Ben Gardner's main theme was the application of taxonomies and ontologies to draw hidden meaning from diverse data sets, but the subject really came alive when he began talking informally about Web2.0 culture, going beyond accepted phenomena such as blogs and wikis into the less explored territory of folksonomies and tagging. I was also greatly entertained by an articulate exploration by Bayer's Wolfgang Thielemann of the relative potencies of index terms and full text searching for retrieving relevant pharmaceutical patents. That theme came up several more times during the final day, most notably in Stephen Adams' *The Text, the Whole Text and Nothing But the Text*. This two-part master-class type presentation was typical of the educational material for which Stephen has deservedly acquired an unrivalled reputation. But the heavy stuff was nicely interleaved with hilarious quotations complying with organiser Ford Khorsandian's opening instruction for us all to "have fun" at the conference. Typical examples were phrases accidentally allowed to remain in the published versions of specifications, such as [*Charles: What is this?*] included in a rather opaque claim in US6060604, presumably having been "temporarily" inserted by a baffled attorney.

There was also a thoughtful explanation from P&G's Mark Calcagno of his attempts to cluster patents using chemical structure information gleaned from DWPI manual and fragment codes, rather than from more easily accessible metadata.

Presentations like that made IPI-ConfEx so worthwhile for me. It is a unique chance to get into one-to-one conversations with like-minded colleagues whose careers might otherwise seem worlds apart from my own. I went to many of the early PIUG meetings in Crystal City and New Jersey during the 1990s and made welcome contact with IP professionals like Mark. I had assumed that he had moved on from the job he was in when we first made contact, and he may have thought the same of me, but in reality we are both unreservedly infatuated with the subject to this day. I also met Sandy Mullen and Ian Sinclair, formerly in senior positions at Bayer and Pfizer respectively, on a similar basis, and could straight away take up where we left off a couple of years ago. A more predictable reunion was my early morning encounter with a typically pipe-smoking Nicolas Grandjean, my close collaborator for almost ten years while we both worked as consultants to the drug industry on patents and data analysis. He was second on Monday morning's programme, describing "clever data integration" and emphasising as ever the imperative for careful data preparation before undertaking analyses. Currently with Novartis in Basle, Nicolas will probably not read this, or if he does he will still forgive me if I describe him as genius in this field. I do meet such people, and the insights I get at events like this allow me to recognise them.

Please don't get the idea though that this was an old-timers' reunion: Many of the most interesting conversations I had were with first-time IPI attendees – including Ben "wisdom of clouds" Gardner already mentioned. Cornelius Enuezie (now a respectable colleague of Nicolas) was there too – his earlier career with Current Drugs, RWS and IMS doesn't bear close scrutiny. But the delegates were united by an obvious passion for the subject.

I have already alluded to the careful choreography which has become a hallmark of events organised in association with TPRI. The three previous winners of the IPI award (Pierre Buffet, Ursula Schoch-Gruebler and Jacques Michel) were introduced to us at the beginning of the conference as were most of the Award's international selection board. Then over dinner on the first evening we endured the suspense accompanying announcement of the 2007 recipient – which turned out to be IFI's Harry Allcock. No doubt an actual award will be made at the forthcoming PIUG meeting.

I am unsure how much of this IPI-ConfEx material will ultimately become publicly available. Delegates received a "hot-off-the-press" CD-ROM, and it's quite possible that some or all of these valuable presentations will ultimately find their way onto the internet, on IPI's website or perhaps elsewhere. Our own PATMG Jamboree (held in 1998, 2000 and 2002) could conceivably have stepped into the vacuum created by the efficiency of PIUG in organising US-based annual meetings, but my personal view is that things have turned out quite well with the establishment of IPI-ConfEx.

** My title is not profound – I just think there must be a "famous" film or song, probably from the 1930s or thereabouts, mentioning seagulls over Sorrento. Anyway, the phrase sticks in my mind. But not a single seagull did I see, just blackbirds and suchlike.*

Peter Steele

Sorrento Italy is Host to IPI-ConfEx 2007

The 340 Patent Information Professionals attending the International Patent Information Conference & Exposition in March were treated to a splendid combination of highly informative presentations and excellent networking opportunities. This photo montage gives a glimpse of the IPI-ConfEx activities. Visit www.IPI-ConfEx.com for more information.

Also, please MARK YOUR CALENDARS FOR THE NEXT IPI-CONFEX, which takes place in the heart of Barcelona in early March, 2008.



Mike Fuller (Patent Attorney, Knobbe Martens, Olson & Bear) gives a legal perspective on freedom-to-operate searches

Stephen Adams (Managing Director, Magister Ltd.) presents an IPI-MasterClass on considerations of full text databases for searchers



Networking Luncheon at IPI-ConfEx 2007



Ben Gardner (Research Informatics, Pfizer) opened the conference with a presentation on strategies for integration of information

