Spreading the WORD

Patrick McGovern
The Global Approach

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Spreading the Word

Patrick J. McGovern takes a global approach to publishing the latest advances in technology.

by Chelsea Greenwood

The next book you read may change your life. Just ask Patrick J. McGovern, who traces much of his success as the head of a $3 billion technology publishing company to a book he checked out of the library as a teenager, Giant Brains, or Machines That Think.

"It was about how, through electronics, you could build large memories that would be able to retain many more facts than the human mind could ever remember," McGovern says. "So I got all excited about this type of enhancement because it seemed to me that the human brain was the most unique organ of Homo sapiens."

The book not only instilled in him a lifelong love of science, it also impressed upon him the power of the written word. "I saw how information can motivate people to get excited about new ideas and engage in new innovation," says McGovern, 71.

Now, more than 50 years later, McGovern has parlayed his passions for technology and communications into International Data Group, a technology-publishing, research and event-management company with $3 billion in revenue in 2007. IDG's more than 300 magazines and newspapers in nearly 90 countries include Computerworld, GamePro, InfoWorld, Macworld, Network World, CIO and PC World. These print publications are accompanied by a strong online component comprising more than 450 Web sites, which host more than 80 million unique visitors monthly.

McGovern has earned numerous accolades, including the James Smithson Bicentennial Medal from the Smithsonian Institution, the Magazine Publishers of America's Lifetime Achievement Award and a spot on Inc.'s 2004 list of "25 Entrepreneurs We Love."

"We have 250 million people who get our information every week," McGovern says. "I'm proud of the impact we've had in helping to advance information technology around the world."

Those 250 million people can thank Edmund Callis Berkeley, whose aforementioned 1949 book inspired a young McGovern to create his own computer in 1953. His award-winning project earned McGovern a scholarship to MIT. "While there, I studied biophysics and neurophysiology because... before you could improve a computer, you have to understand how the human brain and the nervous system were designed and how they function."

McGovern, who was editor of his high-school newspaper, soon became editor of MIT's The Tech newspaper, which further
**Pat McGovern's Success Strategies**

"The key to any business success is making someone else successful, so always look for ways you can help other people succeed."

"Give employees what they need to allow them to focus on customers and prospects."

"Always hire the very best people you can, the most talented people, and give them all the help, resources and confidence you can."

"Be constantly optimistic and encouraging, so, when people have difficult times, they know from their chairman that the best is still yet to come."

"I find that learning promotes longevity, and that the best way to learn is to travel. You see new ways of doing things, new possibilities for business."
bolstered his interest in the relationship between technology and communication.

"I was curious as to how we can better communicate with people," he says. "How can we present information in ways that are more easily understood, so that people can learn much more quickly, understand it much more quickly and recall it as needed much more quickly?"

By the time McGovern graduated in 1959, he had worked his way up from a part-time in Computers and Automation, the first U.S. computer magazine, to associate publisher. He soon sold his car for $5,000 and used that as capital for founding IDG in 1964.

"When we started, we put international as the first word of our name because we felt that the subject was so important that we should dedicate ourselves to going all over the world," he says.

McGovern’s global business model had its share of skeptics, he says. "People told us at the time, 'Pat, you're crazy.' Media was sort of a nationally focused business, and it was very unusual for a media company to operate in many, many countries."

But McGovern stood firm in his commitment to disseminate information across the world: "We felt that it's very important to achieve our mission to help everyone around the world advance their quality of life and standards of living by giving them this information."

IDG soon expanded into Japan, Germany, France and the United Kingdom—all with great success. In fact, in 1980, IDG became one of the first U.S. companies to establish a joint venture with the People's Republic of China; IDG now has 42 publications there.

McGovern says that especially with today's unstable economy, his global approach is something of a financial safety net. "I sleep very comfortably at night because we have 100 separate businesses. Even if one or two run into some problems, you're not very exposed to any major risk."

As chairman and founder, McGovern admits that he initially took a micromanaging approach to his growing company. "I wanted to see every new hire, every new commitment," he says. "Then, when I came back from a couple weeks out of town, there were about 15 inches of paperwork in my in-basket. I thought, 'I'm slowing the growth of the company instead of helping it succeed.'"

He then examined what it takes to run a successful business.

"You need a really inspired, enthusiastic manager who is proud to do that and who can motivate hires, motivate people and be very good with the customers. And then you need to treat that person the way you'd like to be treated—with trust. 'Give me the resources I need; get out of the way; let me get my job done; I'll call you if I need help.' That's what I did."

Now, he describes his management structure as decentralized. Each of IDG's 100 companies has its own CEO and board of directors. "So they're treated like independently managed companies," McGovern says. "The key is that they should be focusing their time on their customers and prospects and quickly adjusting to changing conditions. And they know their country better than we could. We try to help them by passing best business practices."

McGovern, who calls himself the "No. 1 company cheerleader," credits IDG's low turnover to this decentralized approach: "People say, 'Hey, I love it here. I get a lot of freedom when I try new things, and we move very quickly.'"

Meanwhile, McGovern—who has homes in New Hampshire and California—has been devoting much of his time and energy to the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT, which he and his wife, Lore, created in 2000 with a pledge of $350 million.

"Mental illness and brain disease have a huge impact on the quality of people's lives," McGovern says. "We thought, in the process of achieving cures for mental illness, we could explain to people how people receive, analyze, store and retrieve information so they can better communicate with each other and we can improve education in the long term."

In the long term for IDG, McGovern would like to see its reach increase to 2 billion people by 2020. "I hope we can continue to be of service to more and more people," he says. "It's satisfying to see how—using our information, our training services and all the know-how services—people have increased their income, increased their quality of life and productivity, and therefore standards of living have gone up worldwide."

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