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Marketing of Information Products and Services through a Consortium Approach

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Abstract

The consortium approach involves participation of a group of individuals or organisations in ventures of common interest. The author presents a model consortium for marketing of information products and services. The consortium named as CSIR-INFOCON, i.e., CSIR Information Consortium. Details of its composition, participating organisations and the services and products proposed to be marketed by the Consortium are also given.

1. INTRODUCTION

A 'consortium' may be defined as a group of organisations or individuals who come together for the common purpose of planning and executing major projects by pooling their individual resources and expertise.

The consortium approach is a new business trend and innovation. Its beginnings can be traced to Japan where there is a strong tradition of joint ventures by business organisations, industry and the Government. Recently, a number of Japanese business organisations and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry have jointly promoted about 30 major projects in the field of electronics, computers and telecommunications.

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In the United States also, a clear shift is taking place towards a military-civilian consortia in undertaking several developmental projects.

Some of the major consortium based projects in Europe include the *Eurofighter* aircraft and the recently completed underwater *Eurotunnel* linking France and England. The *Airbus Industrie* which builds the famous 'Airbus' series of civil transport aircraft is an example of the success of the consortium approach involving aircraft companies from several European countries. A large number of such initiatives are also being taken in countries like South Korea and Taiwan.

Following the economic reforms introduced in India since 1991, the consortium approach is gaining ground in the planning and execution of many major projects. The Dabhol Power Project in

Maharashtra is a recent example of a consortium which is executing a 695 MW power station estimated to cost over seven billion US dollars. This consortium includes the Enron Corporation of USA, the Governments of Maharashtra and India, and several Indian and foreign financial institutions.

2. BENEFITS OF THE CONSORTIUM APPROACH

The consortium approach is found to be beneficial in several respects that include the following :

- Large investments by the Government on major capital projects can be avoided, thereby transferring the scarce resources to welfare oriented projects like rural development, health care, education, etc.
- Investments on a project are shared by all organisations participating in the consortium.
- Each organisation contributes its own specialised expertise which otherwise might have to be procured from elsewhere at added cost.
- The risks of cost and time over-runs are reduced.
- The consortium may bid for bigger projects within the country or abroad based on the experience of successfully completed projects.

3. CONSORTIUM APPROACH TO MARKETING INFORMATION PRODUCTS & SERVICES IN INDIA

There is good scope for forming consortia in India for producing and marketing information products and services, as a profit-oriented business venture. There is a growing demand for information services in the country, particularly from the industrial and corporate sectors. Secondly, there are a large number of specialised libraries and information centres having good document collections, experienced information handling personnel and other modern facilities required to establish and operate such consortia.

This paper seeks to present a model for setting up a consortium for developing and marketing information products and services in the subject fields of science, engineering and technology in order to test the viability of such a venture. If this model proves to be successful, it can be applied to other subject fields like agricultural sciences, life sciences, etc.

4. A PROPOSED MODEL FOR AN INFORMATION CONSORTIUM

When we think of setting up an information consortium in the field of science, engineering and technology as a model, the initiative has to be taken by the Country's premier research agency, namely, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), because of the several advantages it has, as mentioned below :

- There are about 40 research laboratories/ institutes under the CSIR covering diverse subjects in the field of science, engineering and technology.
- These laboratories/institutes which came up during the last four decades or so have well-equipped libraries and information centres with specialised document collections in the relevant subject areas.
- The document collections in the CSIR laboratories/institutes are estimated to exceed 2.5 million volumes having book value of over Rs. 50 crores.
- INSDOC which is the national scientific and documentation centre in India is also

under the CSIR, as one of its major Institutes.

- Libraries and information centres under CSIR have highly-qualified and experienced personnel capable of developing and marketing wide range of information products and services.
- Several of these libraries and information centres have already introduced modern facilities for quick access, storage, retrieval and dissemination of information.
- A dedicated data communication network, SIRNET is already linking various CSIR libraries/information centres.

The proposed Consortium may be named as 'CSIR-INFOCON' (i.e., CSIR Information Consortium). To give an independent identity to the consortium, it may be treated as one of the main divisions of CSIR on par with its existing Patents Unit and Manpower Unit.

The Consortium may be constituted with an initial organisational set-up comprising of the following key personnel:

(a) Director

(b) Joint Director

(c) Chief-Executive Officer

(d) Marketing Officer

(e) Operations Officer

(f) Finance Officer

(g) Secretary (Administration)

A renowned scientist, or even one of the retired directors of CSIR, may be appointed as a full-time Director of the Consortium. The Director of INSDOC may be the *ex-officio* Joint Director of the Consortium. A library or information officer with considerable experience in planning and developing information products and services may be appointed as the Chief Executive Officer of the Consortium.

Other officers of the Consortium may be selected by direct recruitment or drawn from among the existing staff in CSIR on deputation basis.

Accommodation, secretarial and other support facilities may be provided in the CSIR Headquarters office, or in INSDOC, as deemed necessary.

The Consortium may set up an Advisory Council to assist it in all matters relating to the production, marketing and sale of information products and services. The Advisory Council will be composed of the following :

(a) *President :*
Director of the consortium *(ex- officio)*

(b) *Vice-President :*
Joint Director of the consortium *(ex-officio)*

(c) Chief Executive :
Member-Secretary *(ex-officio)*

(d) *Marketing Officer :*
Member *(ex-officio)*

(e) *Finance Officer :*
Member *(ex-officio)*

(f) *Members* (Five) :
Heads of Libraries/Information Centres in CSIR Laboratories/Institutes (on rotational basis)

(g) *Members* (Five) :
Nominees from industrial associations (e.g., CII), Chambers of Commerce, major public/private sector companies, etc. representing the user communities (on rotational basis)

(h) *Members* (Five) :
Specialists in computer and communication technology, marketing, information products & services (to be nominated by CSIR).

Total members = 20

The tenure of the members of the Advisory Council (other than that of the ex-*officio* members) may be for a period of two years. On the expiry of their term, new members can be inducted in their places.

If this experiment of setting up of the information Consortium as one of the major division/units of CSIR is successful commercially, the Consortium may be converted either as a registered society or even as a Public Limited Company eventually.

4.1 Service Units

While the Consortium and its secretariat may be located in the CSIR Headquarters for administrative convenience, the production, marketing and sale of the information products and services have to be carried out through several service units located in different CSIR libraries/ information centres.

As a first step in this direction, the libraries/information centres in the following CSIR laboratories which have significant document collections and which are already providing a variety of information services may be deemed to be, *ipso facto,* the service units and participating members of the Consortium :

- INSDOC, New Delhi.
- National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi.
- National Aerospace Laboratory, Bangalore.
- Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, Hyderabad.
- National Chemical Laboratory, Pune.
- Central Drug Research Institute, Lucknow.
- Central Fuel Research Institute, Jealgora.
- National Metallurgical Laboratory, Jamshedpur.
- Central Glass & Ceramic Research Institute, Calcutta.
- Central Electronic Research Institute, Pilani.
- National Environmental Engineering Research Institute, Nagpur.
- Central Electrochemical Research Institute, Karaikudi.
- Central Food Technology Research Institute, Mysore.
- Central Leather Research Institute, Madras.

Other libraries/information centres may be added on to the above list, depending upon the needs.

4.2 Infrastructural Facilities

The Consortium and the service units may be provided with the following facilities, if they do not already exist;

4.2.1 Equipment facilities

- Direct Telephone.
- PC with inbuilt modem and fax.
- Interfaces with SIRNET, ERNET and INTERNET.
- CD-ROM database retrieval systems.
- High-Speed terminals for online access to international databases.
- Photocopying machines.
- Printing and reprographic facilities.

4.2.2 Memberships in Professional Associations

The Consortium and other service units may enroll themselves as members in several foreign professional associations, information/document delivery centres, etc., in order to avail their services and then make them available commercially in India.

For example, memberships in the following overseas professional associations/ document delivery centres may be considered :

- ☐ American Society for Testing Materials/ NPL, New Delhi.
- ☐ Materials Information/ NML, Jamshedpur.
- ☐ American Institute of Aeronautics & Astronautics/NAL, Bangalore.
- ☐ British Library Document Supply Centre/ INSDOC, New Delhi.

4.2.3 Union Catalogues

While a National Union Catalogue of Scientific serials exists for access online or through CD-ROM, similar union catalogues for other type of publications held by all CSIR libraries may have to be compiled for use of the Consortium.

4.2.4 Specialists' Databank

The success of the Consortium, as a commercial venture, depends on its ability to identify and make use of the specialised knowledge and services of the scientific and technical personnel working in various CSIR Laboratories. For this purpose, a *specialists data bank* containing the following information on each specialist may be maintained :

(a) Name, address and telephone number of the specialist

(b) Name of CSIR laboratory in which he is working

(c) Areas of specialization for purpose of trouble-shooting operations and consultancy services

(d) Terms and conditions of the services offered, and

(e) Manpower.

The Consortium and its constituent units may require additional manpower for the day-to-day operations and services.

Brilliant students coming out of INSDOC, DRTC and University Departments of library and information science may be selected for appointment as 'trainees' or 'apprentices' in the Consortium office and its service units, for a period of two years under the Government of India Apprenticeship Scheme which provides for payment of 50% of the stipend by the Government.

Depending on the volume of business growth and profits, regular professional staff may be appointed as and when the need arises.

4.2.5 Funding

CSIR may consider providing an one-time grant of Rs. five lakhs to the Consortium as seed-money. A Revolving Fund may be opened to account for the expenses incurred and payments received.

The Service Units may be allowed to absorb the initial operational expenses within their annual budgets till such time when the Consortium is able to be self-supporting and earn a profit.

The Industrial Development of Bank of India (IDBI) provides 'venture capital' for entrepreneual projects of this nature through banks and the Technology Development & Information Company of India. This source of funding may also be considered, if necessary.

5. CONSORTIUM PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

The range of information products and services that the Consortium could offer commercially is briefly outlined in the following paragraphs.

5.1 State-of-Art Reports

The Consortium may commission the preparation, printing and sale of state-of-art reports, critical reports, technological forecasting reports, data compilations, etc., on emerging topics on its own initiative with the help of the specialists covered by the Data Bank. Such reports can also be prepared on specific demands from the industry.

5.2 Test Reports

Most CSIR laboratories have several specialised analytical equipment and test facilities. The Consortium may serve as a focal point for marketing test services and issuing test reports. It may bring out a compendium of the test equipment and facilities available in the CSIR laboratories and distribute it to potential industrial users in order to promote better commercial utilisation of these facilities.

5.3 Consultancy Services

The Consortium may also assist the CSIR laboratories in their efforts to market their consultancy services by undertaking extensive publicity campaigns, arranging visits to individual laboratories by industrialists, entrepreneurs, etc.

5.4 Information Access

The Consortium may formulate uniform policies and procedures for providing access to all CSIR libraries and information centres for reference and consultation by all bonafide users through a scheme of a common corporate and individual paid-membership.

5.5 Publications Lists and Document Loans

The Consortium may arrange to bring out lists of specialised and industry-oriented publications such as, technical reports, conference proceedings, manuals, handbooks, data reports, etc., that are available in CSIR libraries. For example, some time back, the Information Centre for Aerospace Sciences and Technology in NAL, Bangalore, brought out a publications list on 'Composite Materials' and distributed it to user organisations in Aerospace and Defence .

Such publication lists on emerging technologies may be compiled and distributed among all potential users in the Country. Publications required by any user may be issued on loan on payment of specified charges (say, Rs.100 for each document loan upto 4 weeks).

5.6 CSIR Accession List

In addition to such ad hoc publication lists, the Consortium may issue a monthly Combined CSIR Accession List covering the latest documents added to all its libraries and distribute it free of charge to all user organisations to promote document loans.

A pre-paid coupon scheme may also be considered to simplify the loan procedures. Using a pre-paid coupon with a face value of Rs.100, it should be possible for any one to borrow a document from CSIR libraries on loan for 4 weeks.

5.7 Literature Search Services

Many CSIR laboratories have set up facilities for literature search online or from compact-disc databases.

These Laboratories are already offering literature search services to outside users also, on payment of nominal charges. The Consortium may evolve a common policy and strategy for marketing this service nationally on uniform schedule of charges, after obtaining the permission from the database producers, where necessary.

5.8 Translation Services

INSDOC, New Delhi, has set up a large Technical Translation Unit and offers a nation-wide translation service in the field of science and technology. To support this activity, it maintains a databank of technical translators.

All that needs to be done now is to channelise this service through the Consortium and to market it on a wider scale commercially.

5.9 Reprints Service

The National Science Library of INSDOC, New Delhi, and several other CSIR libraries have extensive collections of current and back volumes of scientific and technical journals. Some libraries like those in the National Aerospace Laboratory, Bangalore, and the Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, Hyderabad, may have large collections of technical reports, patents and other non-book materials.

At present, INSDOC and other CSIR libraries, some of which have been designated as NISSAT Sectoral Information Centres, are already offering a reprints service.

The Consortium may centralise this service by taking the following steps:

(a) Publicise and market this service extensively

(b) Introduce a pre-paid coupon scheme with pre-printed order forms on the lines of the photocopy service of the British Library's Document Supply Centre

(c) Receive all requests for reprints centrally in the consortium office

(d) Account for the pre-paid coupons and redirect the order forms to INSDOC or to the concerned CSIR Library which may have the source document for supply to the user on 'ship-to' basis

(e) Approve a policy under which a reprint from a source document that is not held in INSDOC or in any other CSIR laboratory is procured from the overseas document delivery centre and supplied to the client directly by the service unit concerned.

5.10 Other Information Products and Services

As the Consortium gains experience and understands the market and its demands in more detail, several other information products and services could be planned and introduced to meet such demands.

6. CONCLUSION

Marketing information products and services more effectively, economically and profitably can be done by a consortium rather than by individual library or information centre as at present.

The present liberalised and competitive business environment prevailing in the country is the most appropriate time for experimenting with this new concept and approach.