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## **Working with a National Mapping Agency: A Commercial Partner's Perspective**

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# Working with a National Mapping Agency: A Commercial Partner's Perspective

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Any partnership between a state-owned enterprise and the private sector is complicated by cultural and practical difficulties that are as hard to overcome as those facing partnerships that cross linguistic or continental boundaries. So the story of Landmark's productive and generally harmonious relationship with Ordnance Survey over the past nine years raises issues that should not be regarded as peculiar to the world of geographical information or national mapping agencies.

To summarise our relationship, Landmark now comprises two enterprises, both founded in 1994 when Ordnance Survey was opening the door an inch or two to value-added resellers. Landmark itself proposed to build an integrated national Geographical Information System (something Ordnance Survey lacked at the time) to provide site-specific reports on environmental risk to landowners and their professional advisors (surveyors, lawyers, engineers, environmental consultants). Prodat Systems proposed to offer desktop access to Ordnance Survey's large-scale mapping, compressing the map data to fit on 12 CD-ROM, and charging the customer through metered usage.

Both companies were start-ups and it is a tribute to Ordnance Survey that the management of the time took the chance that we would be successful. The two companies merged in 1999, and have been so successful that they are, by a very considerable margin, the largest single contributor to Ordnance Survey's income from commercial partners. Royalties from Landmark to Ordnance Survey will probably exceed ten million euros over the coming year. It is interesting to understand both why we succeeded and why no other company has come even close to emulating our success.

Subsequently, Landmark has entered two successful joint ventures with Ordnance Survey. The first involved the creation and exploitation of a definitive archive of historical mapping dating back to 1850, over one million sheets in all. This mapping is widely used to track historical land-use; to map the evolution of the coast line; in archaeological and planning; and for genealogical research. You can consult this archive on-line through [www.old-maps.co.uk](http://www.old-maps.co.uk). The second joint venture was set up in 2001 to build a points-of-interest database covering the whole of mainland Britain. You can learn more about this on [www.pointx.co.uk](http://www.pointx.co.uk).

In the remainder of this short paper, I will examine some of the problems that have faced the partnership, the success factors that enabled the parties to overcome the difficulties, and the lessons that can be learned for the future.

## The Problems

Although successive governments, since the mid-1980s have encouraged Ordnance Survey to act like a commercial enterprise, until the wholesale renewal of the board in 2001–02, there was hardly anyone at Ordnance Survey who really understood what this involved. In commercial negotiations, it was often necessary to play their hand, on their behalf, as well as your own.

Dealing with another commercial organisation, businesspeople are accustomed to first do a deal, generally at director level, that can be written down in plain words in one or two paragraphs, and then to leave lawyers and executives to work out the details, returning to the negotiating table only when contentious points arise. Ordnance Survey was accustomed to leave relatively junior managers to negotiate with their partners, and then to either repudiate any agreement or to leave it to wither and die in committees staffed by bureaucrats, who were either ignorant of the circumstances of the relationship or actively hostile to its progress.

Ordnance Survey has traditionally started from the standpoint that it knew best, and that, because it is in the public sector, it would always hold the moral high ground in any dealings with money-grubbing businessmen, who should only enter the temple through the tradesmen's entrance, along a subterranean corridor lined with uplifting graffiti. Negotiations could always be blocked by mute appeal to higher authority, which precluded any serious or sensible discussion. Take-it-or-leave-it was all too often the only dish on the menu.

Entering by the tradesmen's entrance also meant that access to senior management, even if one's business involved millions of pounds, was strictly limited. Ordnance Survey always sought to control the scope of any discussion with its partners, with high-minded talk of a level playing field, which partners generally felt to slope steeply down, towards their goal mouth.

It is true to say that Ordnance Survey, under Vanessa Lawrence's leadership, has made strenuous efforts to change the prevailing culture. I am sure these efforts will bear fruit in the years to come. A glimpse of where Ordnance Survey has come from is provided by O.G.S.Crawford, a pioneer of aerial photography, who joined Ordnance Survey in 1920, in his excellent autobiography, 'Said and Done' (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London 1955):

*"The real root of the trouble lay in the facts that not only was I civilian when all but two of the others were soldiers, but that archaeology was a minor and relatively unimportant branch of the work of Ordnance Survey. Thus I had to contend both with the official hostility which my advent aroused and with the normal difficulties of building up an organisation. For many years I did make some progress, though it was uphill work all the time and the difficulties increased rather than diminished. At the outset I had nothing but an empty room and a table. There was not even a chair, and I had to steal one from the library opposite."*

Not so very much had changed by the time I first encountered Ordnance Survey, seventy years later, in 1994. The soldiers had gone, but the overwhelming majority of the staff were surveyors, who had spent their working lives under quasi military discipline. It really shouldn't surprise us that so few partnerships proved as productive as the one we have established. The real surprise is the sustained growth of Landmark and Prodat, and it is instructive to consider the success factors.

## Success Factors

Both Landmark and Prodat were new kids on the block. We didn't know the rules or the precedents, so we proceeded as if there weren't any. We were confident and persistent, and believed (genuinely and correctly) we could make a great deal of money both for ourselves and for Ordnance Survey. This was a novel approach in the world of digital mapping, which was more focused at that time on spending money than making it.

We offered to open new revenue streams that didn't seem to threaten Ordnance Survey's existing businesses, and were willing to risk our own money in developing that business. The fact that we were start-up businesses, albeit with genuinely novel ideas, probably made us seem even less threatening than we would have done if the approach had come from a major corporation.

We refused to be confined to the tradesmen's entrance and constantly opened lines of communication into Ordnance Survey at many different levels. Ordnance Survey didn't like this, and still doesn't, but it has probably been the single most important factor in enabling the survival, growth and success of the relationship. There are important lessons here for other National Mapping Organisations wishing to establish commercial partnerships with the private sector.

We haven't let our differences be aired in public. This is probably the rudest I have ever been about Ordnance Survey, and I am only being as frank as I am because I was asked by Vanessa to give a warts and all picture of how the partnership developed and to provide some pointers to other NMOs travelling the same road. We are frank with one another, and occasionally angry, but that is the secret of many successful families. There is an over-arching framework of goodwill that has enabled us to overcome the rocky patches.

We have delivered. The relationship would not have survived if the Landmark-Produt duo had failed to prosper.

## Looking to the Future

Ordnance Survey, like all NMOs, remains subject to over-riding political constraints that are essentially unpredictable. At one point, in the early 1990s the then Conservative Government was keen on privatisation of Ordnance Survey. A half-way house to privatisation was again on the agenda two years ago. The National Audit Office, responsible to Parliament rather than to the Government of the day (a subtle but significant distinction) has its own ideas about the management of the Agency.

Ordnance Survey is also likely to be affected by national and European legislation that will constrain the way it engages with commercial partners, and will also affect commercial decisions made by those same partners. I am confident we will overcome the difficulties I see arising in the future, but it would be idle to pretend that they will not challenge our collective ingenuity and patience.

Four years ago. Ordnance Survey's annual turnover was twenty times Landmark's; it is now less than five times. Within three to four years it may be less than twice the size of Landmark, and we may be competing in some areas for the same customers. No one can be sure how this is going to play out in the marketplace. We will all need to keep our heads.

Ordnance Survey has never shirked the challenge from government to earn its keep in the marketplace. From where we sit, we believe this means that it will be forced to move into downstream markets, adding value to its data, and thereby entering into markets that its commercial partners have hitherto regarded as their own.

The European dimension is crowding in on our national pretensions, and I do not believe the European NMOs have been playing a particularly positive role, defending their own quite narrow interests against the clear need for a Europe-wide spatial data infrastructure. We are certainly looking for an affordable, maintained European dataset and if this came from the private sector and not the NMOs, we would be sorry, but not deflected from working with a commercial transnational data provider.

The interface between public sector data providers and private sector publishers will undoubtedly continue to generate innovation and conflict in almost equal measure. Neither side will get everything it wants, or have things all its own way.

I was recently asked to make a presentation to the Advisory Panel on Crown Copyright, a body recently set up in the UK to help ministers and regulators think about the issues raised in the previous paragraph. I suggested the first priority was for governments to think about their objectives with respect to Public Sector Information. All the following could be justified, but some conflict with others:

1. Promote the growth of the information economy;
2. Improve the efficiency of public services;
3. Improve the quality of information available to policy makers;
4. Increase the sharing of information across the economy;
5. Reduce the cost of information collection & dissemination;
6. Increase the revenue base of executive agencies;
7. Promote Europe-wide datasets to further EU integration;
8. Enrich the quality of political debate among citizens;
9. Strengthen UK information service companies; and

National Mapping Organisations, for better or worse, find themselves right at the heart of this complicated but vital debate. I don't think this paper is the right place to give my own opinions on the best way forward, but in general I am happy to see the emergence of a mixed economy in the provision of spatial data, and the trend towards greater openness.