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Publishing Partnerships: Why, When, and How Collaboration Sometimes Trumps Competition, the User Perspective

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Executive Summary:

RCL as a case study of the impact and consequences of a publishing partnership on academic library users and customers, e.g. impact on the purchasing decision, the product design and fit, the user experience, customer support, etc.

I work at Mt. San Antonio College Library, a small library with six full-time librarians and eight adjunct librarians, serving a huge student body (some counts say 35,000 FTE). As Collection Development Librarian I coordinate the Liaison program with academic departments, oversee the selection and acquisition of print materials, as well as managing electronic resources. So, in addition to using RCL as a the lead Collection Development Librarian, as a selector, and using BBAS for evaluating the collection in my liaison areas, I have also coordinated a project to analyze the full collection using BBAS, arranged and attended trainings with a Bowker trainer, and I have worked with other Librarians to show them how to use RCL and BBAS for our campus (local training).

Impact on Purchasing and Renewal Decisions

The simple answer to how does a publishing partnership impact the purchasing decision by librarians is that it doesn't. In my library we base the purchasing decisions of electronic resources on three criteria: content, interface, and cost. If the content is valuable, the interface works to make the content accessible, and we can afford to purchase it, then it really does not matter who created it. (That is, whether it is produced by a large commercial entity or a non-profit publisher).

The more complicated answer is that such a partnership does impact the purchasing decision in that the partnership impacts our three criteria: content, interface, and cost.

In general I have had mixed experiences with products from both non-profit publishers and commercial publishers (as I am sure all of you have as well). Some non-profit publishers produce resources that

are excellent- with strong interfaces, content, and customer service, and others have strong content with either weak interfaces or weak customer service. In this current budget climate we have to justify every dollar, and products that are not as strong in interface or customer service are the ones not getting renewed at my institution.

Other databases from non-profit publishers that I immediately think of include JSTOR, HLAS, Project Muse, Choice Online, and ARTstor. All of these have outstanding content, but for the majority of these resources further development of their interface would benefit the user.

At my institution, when we started our subscription to *RCL* we were doing so particularly with an interest in utilizing BBAS, so our decision to purchase *RCL* was based on both the technological capabilities of BBAS (Bowker side) AND confidence in the independent subject editors (*Choice* side).

Content

In my opinion *RCL's* greatest strength—and the most important component—is the content. *RCL* is a valued and authoritative resource for a number of reasons, including the importance that *Books for College Libraries* held in print, the cachet that *Choice* has in the world of academic libraries, and the expertise of the subject editors and bibliographers who curate the content. That the subject editors are not affiliated with the for-profit side of the partnership does give the content credibility. In fact, a user responded in the 2009 user survey by commenting that what they like about *RCL* was in part that it is an “authoritative/non-commercial source.”

So, for content development “non-profit” or “commercial” does matter. For example, I have access to, and use, booklists from our major jobber, as well as other vendors and publishers. These lists are often created by librarians on their staff, and they are useful. But we use them knowing that at the end of the day they are trying to get us to buy the books (the lists only include books that they stock). In contrast, inclusion of a title into *RCL* is decided by an independent volunteer subject editor, and not someone employed at Bowker. Therefore, from the user perspective, the list is more authoritative.

Without the connection to Choice, that is if *RCL* was just Bowker’s project, I don’t know that Bowker would be able to put together the team of editors (without paying them). Although the editors do get a small honorarium, I think that they do the work because it is challenging, interesting, and because *RCL* is in the Choice family—and of course, it doesn’t hurt that it looks good for tenure. If Bowker had to pay the editors, I believe that it would greatly impact the cost, and would degrade the authority.

For *RCL* the decision regarding *what* content is included comes from the Choice side, but the actual bibliographic content for each book comes from Bowker, specifically from *Books in Print (BIP)*. While there are instances of typos or misspellings, this data is very strong. And the user is clearly benefiting from the accuracy of the bibliographic content. Bowker also adds additional information, including author bios, tables of contents, and excerpts when available. The benefit of the *BIP* data is apparent when one compares *RCL* book entries to web entries; *BIP* does not include websites, the web entries are created by the subject editors, and do not include the same degree of detail. (Choice does also supply a *Choice* review when one has been written for a title).

Additionally, it is important to add that Bowker is not just any new-fangled commercial publisher; they are a known and trusted publisher with strong ties to the library world. Librarians know and have used their products in a variety of formats, which certainly contributes to the credibility of *RCL*.

Interface and Product Design

Clearly the interface, particularly in *RCL 2.0*, is built

with the metadata, technology, and user interface knowledge that Bowker brings to the collaboration, and in turn, the Librarian user benefits. So the investments Bowker has made in developing other products impact the *RCL* user experience when the know-how and technology are applied. For example, improved search relevancy in other Bowker products will lead to better search relevancy in *RCL*.

As a member of the *RCL* Editorial Board, I am aware of the seriousness with which Choice staff (and the Editorial Board) take user suggestions for product changes, and users will notice that many of their suggestions made in the 2009 survey have been realized in *RCL 2.0*. I believe that these changes were made possible because of Choice’s responsiveness to user needs and Bowker’s ability to implement these enhancements. Examples include the inclusion of more e-book information and the capability to tag entries. I have been involved in some beta testing and I think that the power of the technology will be much more noticeable in *RCL 2.0*.

Cost

While cost is a very important aspect from the user perspective, I found it challenging to evaluate the impact that this type of collaboration would have on the cost. To have the same level of interface from scratch a non-profit publisher would have to charge more to defray the cost of the technological development needed, expertise that was already available at Bowker. (As mentioned earlier) if Bowker had to pay subject editors that would increase the cost as well. If these suppositions are correct then the cost is another area in which we see the benefit of collaboration over competition.

For me *RCL* is well worth the cost. This is particularly true for where we are in our collection development at my college. I was hired as the first Collection Development Librarian at my library. So the collection was ripe for analysis and we acknowledge that there is still a good bit of work to do to develop the collection we want to have. I like to think of *RCL* as having a whole team of subject bibliographers working for me—so with that in mind, I believe it is well worth the cost. However, this position is not held by all the librarians at my institution. In today’s budget climate, even a good product from a respected publisher (or publisher collaboration) may

not get renewed if the price does not fit in the budget. Luckily for me *RCL* has so far made the cut and remains one of our electronic resources.

Customer Support

Customer service for the product is provided by Bowker. Thankfully, we have not had problems, and so I have not had more than a couple of interactions with technical service. The few calls I have made have gone well—the issue was resolved promptly.

As the Librarian responsible for electronic resource management it is my job to work with the sales reps on purchasing and renewing our subscriptions. I have worked with three different reps in as many years, making it difficult to develop a relationship with them. This was noticeable when a rep (who was new to our account) sent me a renewal that did not seem to have any connection to the pricing from the previous year. We worked it out and it has been fine ever since. I cannot say if this would have been different with a different configuration of partners, or if it is more or less likely to happen with a commercial publisher.

As for training and customer support in utilizing the resource, I have been pleased with what Bowker has provided. Bowker has provided free webinar trainings for us on both BBAS and *RCL/RCL CR*. These training sessions have been customized to our needs, taught at our pace, and scheduled at our convenience. Particularly because this is a resource that we were asking all of the liaison librarians to use in their work, this was much more useful than attending an open general webinar on the product.

Conclusion

Overall, I think that the user clearly benefits from the *RCL* partnership between Choice and Bowker. Like all good collaborations each party contributes their own strengths towards a shared goal. And the best part for the user is that we are mostly unaware of the behind-the-scene work that is being done by the two parties.