1990

Library-Vendor Relations

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Recommended Citation
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2285

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Issues in Library-Vendor Relations

edited by Corrie Marsh (George Washington University) and Barry Fast (Scholarly Book Center)

Issues: Is access more important than ownership??
Do we need acquisitions librarians??

We are indeed living in very interesting times! We have recently received very mixed messages about the future of acquisitions work. The interesting news is that libraries are beginning to spend large amounts of their budgets on access to information services in recognition of the fact that we cannot continue to purchase collections. Leasing and licensing arrangements are playing an increasing role in the business of acquisitions. Yet, there is a conflicting message out there — major research libraries are continuing to dissolve acquisitions departments and distribute the traditional business functions of service contract negotiations into collection managers’ responsibilities, while lessening the overall status of acquisitions within the library.

Acquisitions librarians had better wake up and re-examine where their libraries might be heading—possibly without them. It is now vital that we consider new knowledge and philosophies that will broaden, rather than reduce, the role acquisitions can perform within the organization.

An expanded model was recently presented by Irene B. Hoadley’s and John Corbin’s “Up the Beanstalk: An Evolutionary Organizational Structure for Libraries” (American Libraries, July/August 1990). Hoadley and Corbin base their model on the assumption that access will equal acquisitions and that the emphasis moves to fulfilling the needs of users rather than simply building larger collections.” Their acquisitions model combines buying, borrowing, and leasing of collections. This presents a broader, interactive role for acquisitions managers to expand their abilities at service contract negotiations.

Ironically, at the same time this article appeared, another major research library dissolved its acquisitions department.

What are the necessary traits that acquisitions librarians need to reconsider? For one, they must become more sensitive to user needs and services. For another, they must develop keen skills at handling licensing agreements and contracting services. Acquisitions managers need to be involved in all levels of library operational planning; we can no longer simply concentrate on technical processing.

It is no wonder that vendors and publishers are confused about who to contact and to whom to propose business arrangements within libraries. We are obviously not sure ourselves and the clear lines of responsibility have not yet sorted themselves out.

It’s going to be very interesting to see where things go throughout the 1990’s… Send your comments to Corrie Marsh or Barry Fast or to your editor. We’re waiting!!

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Issue: Reflections on Firm  
Order Bidding: A Response

In the last issue of ATG  
Christian Boissonnas reported on  
Cornell's recent firm order bidding  
project. He describes the RFP  
process and the criteria he used to  
select two vendors. He also  
described a weighted performance  
analysis system which he will  
utilize to evaluate these two  
vendors in the future. This report  
was very interesting, and it should  
be considered as a valid method of  
vendor selection. Christian has  
added some useful information to  
this issue.

In the section of his article called  
"Afterthoughts", he engages in  
some speculation that, in our  
opinion, is worth examining  
further. He reflects on his selection  
of two "relatively unknown  
vendors" who offered the lowest  
cost plus bid, and proposes some  
reasons why these smallish library  
suppliers were the winners. Among  
his speculations" the winners do  
not advertise or attend ALA, they  
do not sell ancillary products like  
notification forms, and they operate  
in low cost, non-metropolitan areas.  
Christian was soliciting an "as  
cheap as possible" book supply  
service with "no support services."  
He assumes that the losers, the  
nine vendors who bid higher than  
the two winners, were unable to  
offer a competitive bid because  
"Providing libraries with as much  
[services] as possible is so deeply  
ingrained in their philosophies and  
business plans..." that it was  
impossible for them to offer a low  
bid. It remains to be seen if the  
two vendors can provide the service  
that Cornell requires at the cost  
plus price they promise.

Small local vendors can probably  
operate cheaper than large  
international library suppliers  
(more on this later). We have  
always believed that universities,  
especially rural universities, have  
an implicit mission to support and  
have the local cultural scene,  
and this certainly includes local  
booksellers. By doing some buying  
from local booksellers, the  
university helps provide a richer  
cultural environment for everyone  
in the surrounding communities,  
and, on a national scale, helps  
promote diversity and competition  
in the book industry.

But large international library  
suppliers also deserve support from  
universities, and for the same  
reasons described above. There is,  
if you will, a global community in  
which we all live. It is composed  
of rich nations and poor nations,  
and, most recently, a whole new  
community of nations emerging  
from tyranny. In the richer  
countries, like our own, the library  
community is demanding a whole  
array of services from vendors,  
ranging from simple firm order  
fulfillment (it's not so simple),  
through complex approval plans,  
electronic communications,  
technical services support, standing  
order services, and other kinds of  
collection management  
cooperation. Library suppliers are  
recognized by librarians as their  
ally in holding down personnel,  
computer, and other operating costs.  
Library suppliers are required to  
be high tech companies by the  
market, not because they want to  
find new ways to spend money.  
Without approval plans, standing  
orders and other services, libraries  
could not operate. Their material  
funds would be gobbled up by  
personnel and other costs which  
vendors now bear, albeit much more  
efficiently because they are spread  
over the whole market.

In the poorer nations of the world,  
book and journal funds are scarce.  
When they are available, it is the  
larger international library suppliers  
who take the risk of supplying  
materials to these countries. It is a  
real risk: payments are slow,  
shipments are lost and damaged,  
and sometimes are revolution or other  
catastrophe prevents the vendor  
ever getting paid. Only the largest,  
most financially secure companies  
can take these risks. But they are  
risks that must be taken if these  
poorer nations can educate their  
people and develop self-sustaining  
economies. The newly democratic  
countries of Eastern Europe need  
a virtual rebuilding of library  
collections. Only the larger library  
suppliers can provide the services  
these countries need to build  
collections effectively and  
efficiently.

We are not, emphatically,  
suggesting that American libraries  
do business with larger library  
suppliers out of a sense of altruistic  
social zeal. We are stating that  
larger library suppliers are neither  
intrinsically inefficient nor are they  
committing resources on advertising  
and notifications slips. They offer  
a wide array of high tech services  
because libraries need them and  
demand them. These services cost  
something, and that cost is built  
into every price negotiation with  
every library. Whether that  
negotiation takes place in a bid  
format, or takes place over time as  
the result of a healthy competitive  
industry, libraries end up paying  
the price for services that are  
available but may not be useful to  
them individually. Those services  
are useful to enough libraries,  
however, for vendors to find it  
worthwhile to develop them. To  
imply that their cost is wasteful  
ignores the important role these  
services play in more efficient  
library operations and better  
collection management.