1998

Full Page Ads

Editor

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How to Make Your Book Vendor Love You

Rick Anderson

You'll never get them to admit it, but you're on either a Good List or a Bad List with your book vendors. You might be surprised to learn, however, that the Good List is not made up of librarians who are pushy or just plain big spenders. You can be a tough negotiator from a tiny library with a small budget and still be the apple of your bookseller's eye. You can also represent a huge library with a monster budget, all of which you've committed to a single bookseller, and still be the benevolent vendor. It's not that they don't care about money; it's just that they want more than your business. They also want you to be efficient, realistic, and pleasant.

But what if you aren't? Maybe you think it doesn't matter if your vendor hates you. After all, you're the customer, right? Not exactly. In a very real way, you're both customers. The wholesaler wants something that you have (namely, your budget money). You, on the other hand, want something the wholesaler has (efficient access to books at a discount), and you're selling access to your budget just as surely as the vendor is selling labor efficiency and discount. You may respond cynically when you hear talk about "partnership" between vendors and libraries, but the relationship really is symbiotic. And just as a smart librarian takes more than discount into consideration when choosing a vendor, booksellers think about more than raw budget figures when deciding whom to pursue — vendors will bow out of contention when they deem the potential business not to be worth the trouble. If you issue an RFP and the vendor who declines is the one that would have best helped you stretch your budget and ease the pressure on your staff, then your library — not the vendor — is the loser. And the principle of selling yourself as a customer remains important after a relationship is established; the more attractive you make your library, the more leverage you'll have when it comes time to negotiate discount or request the implementation of new services. Offering a bigger slice of the pie is certainly one good way of making yourself more valued as a customer, but it's also the most expensive one.

In thinking about some cheaper ways that a library could enhance its status as a customer, I drew on my experiences working in customer service for a book vendor, during which I worked with many staffs and librarians on a daily basis and also occasionally accompanied the sales staff on library visits. But most importantly, I asked sales reps for several major vendors what they wished librarians would do differently, or what some of their customers do especially well. I promised not to name names or quote anyone directly so that all could contribute without inhibition, so I want to make it clear at the outset that many of the ideas presented in this article came from others. Special thanks are due to them.

When Issuing an RFP

Make sure that your list of requirements is realistic. By all means, solicit the input of all library staff. But once a wish list is compiled, examine it with a judicial eye. Is the library actually ready (or will it soon be ready) to implement all of the services you've listed as "required"? Can they be ranked in importance? Remember: you don't want to scare off the right vendor by asking for more than anyone can reasonably provide. You may find that some vendors who say they can give you the world will turn out to be the least reliable in the long run.

Make sure you give enough lead time. If you want good, careful responses to your RFP, allow at least a month between the time it's issued and the due date.

Allow for negotiation of key points, especially discount. Recognize that a vendor will cite a discount in its response if required, but that face-to-face negotiations can sometimes result in adjustments. Don't ever reject a proposal because of one point — if you're sticking on one issue, make a phone call and see if it's negotiable.

When Hosting Vendor Presentations

After the proposals have been analyzed, you'll see several vendors to come and give presentations in person. When you invite vendors to come to your library and sell their services, you're embarking on what amounts to a fairly elaborate mating ritual. The vendors come to present themselves, but also to get a sense of who you are and how your library works. It's true that you have an advantage; if the vendor agrees to present, you can assume that you're already considered a desirable customer. But that doesn't mean you can't blow it by being unprofessional. Here are a few tips:

- Make the presentation comfortable. If the vendor out of politeness. It does the vendor no good to go to the significant expense of a library presentation if there's no real chance of winning the business. You might be required to invite a certain number of vendors, meaning that you have to bring in some who are less interesting, but insofar as it's possible, limit your presentations to those being considered seriously.

- Make sure that all of the library's decision-makers are present. This is obvious. You can't compare the candidates if you don't attend all the presentations.

- Allow some flexibility in presentation format and time allotted. You'll need to impose some limits, of course, but make sure they're reasonable and be willing to work with the people presenting. If they have special equipment needs they should let you know ahead of time, likewise if they want to take more time than you've indicated. But it wouldn't hurt for you to call beforehand and make sure everyone's expectations are still in sync, either.

- Make sure there is adequate technical support on hand. Establish the presenters' technical needs ahead of time. If you can't meet those needs, make sure they know in advance so that they can make other arrangements. Once the technical parameters of the presentation have been established, make sure someone will be available to take care of the inevitable problems. No one — not you, not the vendor — wants to sit around in a conference room for half an hour while someone goes looking for help with the overhead projector.

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In the last issue of Against the Grain I discussed the effects of economies of scale on pricing book supply services to consortia. I contended that consortia, if they buy in the traditional way, will not produce significant economies of scale, despite their much larger book buying budgets. Since labor is such a large component of the booksellers’ cost structure, the economies don’t occur when booksellers have multiple library customers, whether within or outside a consortium. The labor costs per library remain largely the same, and labor (and other variable human costs) rise almost in tandem with increased volume. However, fear of losing substantial revenue through the loss of a consortium-wide purchasing agreement, may, in the short term, result in higher discounts. These discounts will not hold over time, because vendors who cut their profits too much will fail. Eventually discounts to consortia will cluster around the levels we are seeing today, or even fall, because these prevailing discounts seem to enable booksellers to remain profitable while discounts are at an historic high point.

What does the future hold for discount levels? Discounts are set by the market over time, as vendors use discounts as one enticement for increased revenue. The important point here is “one enticement.” If products or services are viewed by the market as commodities, the price of those products has a very high influence on purchasing. An example of such commodity products is the airline industry, where the basic services, serviceable to produce a profit, which itself will be as low as the service supplier can bear. When frequent flyer programs differentiate these service suppliers, they exert enormous influence over both price and product loyalty because they provide a single, and valuable, buying focus to the service users.

Historically booksellers have offered relatively undifferentiated services to libraries. Service quality centered on fast delivery and low error rates. Once a bookseller achieved this quality, it joined the ranks of other high quality vendors and became indistinguishable. So price became the only measurable distinguishing characteristic, and price discount exerted a powerful influence because it was easily measured and easily justified as the determining factor in vendor choice. Discounts rose over time as vendors became more efficient, because price continued to be the most significant enticement for increased revenue. We have now reached a point where discounts are probably as high as they can go. Further significant increases can occur if efficiency makes another leap, but that seems unlikely. In fact, two factors may cause discounts to fall. These two factors are in a cause/effect relationship, so they seem to be fairly certain. The cause factor is an increasing demand by libraries for vendors to supply a variety of new, non-traditional and valuable services, such as more sophisticated approval plans, more sophisticated standing order programs, more technical services and book processing options, a desire for more centralized supply sources (meaning more books from foreign countries), technology support both in the form of Websites and seamless integration with library systems, EDI, and the ability to support cooperative collection management within library consortia or among other variations of cooperating libraries. Any and all of these new services have the effect of reducing vendor efficiency. They require research and development by highly paid people, both professional librarians and systems development gurus. Some of the services, like book processing, have fixed per book labor costs. Others, like ILS integration and EDI, have high development costs. So it seems unlikely that vendors will be spending less on a per book basis over the next few years, which implies that the rise in discounts will end.

The effect factor is that the development of these new services will differentiate vendors, changing the perception among buyers of these services that all high quality vendors are essentially the same. This signals the end of book supply services as commodities. Now vendor services will be judged by a variety of measurable qualitative factors, all of which have real intrinsic value and will, therefore, result in different pricing. The supply of cataloging records will be judged and valued by catalogers; the integration of vendor-supplied data with the ILS will be judged and valued by systems librarians; the interactive usefulness of vendor databases mounted on Websites will be judged and valued by book selectors; the elegance of EDI will be judged and valued by acquisitions librarians; the ability to support cooperative collection management among collaborating libraries, inside and outside consortia, will be judged and valued by library administrators. Different value judgments, placed on different services, will result in different pricing. Librarians will pay more for certain new services that have real value to them, or that save them more than the cost of providing these services themselves. So the need for vendors to develop and supply new services for libraries will raise vendor costs, and the differentiated value of those services will either cost something themselves, or be sold to libraries in the form of lower discounts.

continued on page 93
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