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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-Hamburgers, Minivans, and Databases: A Case Study

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Success can be quite a problem. While overall it beats the alternative for a business, a new product or service that catches on and grows can make failure seem a really agreeable experience. With failure, the way is clear. Defect attention while closing things down. Move on to whatever's next.

Not so simple with a winner on hand, and especially not with success beyond expectations. Capacity needs to go up, meaning, depending upon the business, that new warehouses have to be found or built in a hurry, networks extended, production lines doubled and tripled, servers upgraded, trucks located, staff hired, jobs realigned, marketing plans scrapped and drawn up again to re-arm salespeople with fresh words and visuals. And why in the world, sales will daily ask, can’t operations keep up with us?

All of that’s mainly fun, in the beginning, when exhilaration will carry the day. Some at the company will discover genius in themselves, others will feel lucky, but everyone will be happy. When shortages occur customers may complain, but they’ll forgive as soon as the company delivers and they too become part of the success story. It’s become a December ritual of journalism to cover parents searching for some scarce new Christmas toy, features always reported with a heartwarming conclusion. If lines extend into Krispy Kreme parking lots in a wait for hot doughnuts, or if bikers stay on a list until a Harley-Davidson finally is earmarked in Milwaukee for them, it’s done without complaint, in fact with anticipation that heightens pleasure at first taste of glaze, or chrome.

Competitors will soon grasp with a sense of alarm, or even dread, that there is a Big New Thing and that it does not belong to them. New competitors instead will be energized, may even organize themselves around their own version. In time, old competitors will emerge from shock and join the new in trying to slow down the lucky company. Their only weapon at this point may be a sales and marketing spin, but they’ll be doing all they can at the same time to learn, and so eventually imitate. In this they might enjoy some success of their own, but maybe only enough to be clearly second tier. The top company, thanks to this early wave of competition, might even grow stronger, by imitating the imitators and borrowing their best ideas.

More ideas will come from customers who feel a sense of ownership, plenty of whom will offer suggestions, often contradictory ones. These customers, because they know and like the new product so well, will believe they have special insights into how to make things even better. Others, because they know and like the new product so well, will wonder what possible good could come from changing it.

The company’s own staff will divide similarly. One group, because they are intimate with the Big Success, perhaps even created it, assumes that of course they will know how to create another. These staff may grow bored, and look on with envy as competitors, in their bid to catch up, work furiously to develop new things. When are we going to do something again around here? they will want to know.

Another group, because they are intimate with the Big Success, perhaps even created it, will wonder why anyone would want to mess with the best thing around.

So the company will feel pressure from inside and out to do something, and to do nothing. The result may be to do both, basically to leave things alone, always the less expensive option—and why not, don’t the customers love us?—while creating the appearance of change. A succession of new marketing messages might be all that’s needed. Maybe rearrange the surroundings, tinker around the edges a little.

One day, meanwhile, the world changes. This was new, so some customers may be the first to notice, or the company may be, but sooner or later it’s clear to all that the Big New Thing isn’t new anymore. The no-longer-new success may still be a success, in fact may be more successful than ever, in number of customers. This is when things turn difficult. If librarians have become merely the central commodity in a stagnant fast food industry, they’re not going to go away, and if millions of families now find it sporty to stow groceries in the back of an SUV, other millions still prefer to load up a minivan.

Burgers and fries have anchored the fast food world for two generations, no change there; but the eye can barely find them on the menu today, surrounded as they are by an always-changing cast of support—featuring bacon, or chicken, or ranch dressing, or anything that will work for a while to create a sense of something new going on. Hard to sustain a minivan, another aging success, but easier to change the details, like the number of doors, the configuration of seats, or shape of the windows.

Any real change, however, and those customers who like things the way they are might revolt. The classic example was of course the New Coke fiasco of 1985, when Coca-Cola, bent on stopping Pepsi’s growth, introduced a new formula that bombarded in spectacular fashion. A company’s new product is always an implicit criticism of the old, no matter how craftily the marketing department may work to divert attention from that. Coca-Cola learned the hard way that their soft drink was community property.

In some ways the library marketplace is no different from the larger consumer marketplace. New products and services come out. Many fail, others catch on. Those that catch on, age. This cycle is especially pitless in the library world, thanks to its peculiar combination of rapid technological change, steadfast traditions, and professional obligation to innovate and preserve at the same time. In fact, the library marketplace resembles a yard sale, with goods from yesterday and today spread out across the front lawn, the latest technological marvel next to quaint microforms and microform readers, CD-ROMs, index tables, stamps, cards, pockets, tape, paper forms and slips of all types, the Readers Guide to Periodical Literature, Library of Congress Subject Headings. Over beside the garage is the library software that fades away, but never quite goes away.

We think about all this at YBP because in 1996 we introduced GOBI, then the first database an academic book vendor had offered on the Web. Use took off beyond anything we had planned for, and we struggled to keep up. We did, though, to the point that in 2011 GOBI is used by nearly all of our customers and in one way or another supports most of our business. But today that interface looks old to us.

Now GOBI has competitors. Some do some things better than GOBI does them. Because it was first, GOBI’s underlying architecture is outdated. If we want GOBI to continue to thrive, that needs to change. What to do?

It would be easy enough to do little or nothing. Librarians like GOBI. It still performs well. We could jazz up the interface, add capacity now and then, tinker with the functionality, run some advertising. That would carry us for a long time.

But would it carry us one day into irrelevance? What if the competitors got a little better, and GOBI stayed the same? What if the competitors got a lot better? Direct competitors are not necessarily the real threat to marginalize you. The Readers Guide doesn’t collect dust because somebody printed a better index. When the world changes, best for those who have taken note.

Best 200, on the other hand, not to surprise customers with change for change’s sake, as New Coke did. Like Coca-Cola, we have decided to change the recipe. Early on, in fact, “NewGobi” was the way we referred to our redesign project. Then a member of the development team coolly pointed out that NewGobi, one day, wouldn’t be new. Or so we hope, and NewGobi was re-christened “GOBI Edition 2,” a name with a longer future.

Unlike Coke, we are not working in secret on a new confection. We’ve told customers of our plans from the start, and have asked advice. Of that we’ve received plenty, some we can use, some we can’t, but every scrap a reminder that customers have a stake in this. Most have incorporated GOBI into their workflows. It’s become something like a public utility. Without GOBI, the lights go out. We can change GOBI, so long as we preserve it too.

So we answer questions and fix problems for current GOBI users, train new ones and our own new staff, maintain the servers, the data, continued on page 91
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reviews (also mostly negative). Find what you will from these pages. I assure you if you take the time to read the book, you will ask yourself some surprising questions. If you are a regular reader of Against the Grain (and especially if you write for it) you owe yourself this task. Tony Ferguson took the time to read it, and his comments in the June issue of this journal were well considered and thoughtful.

It is extremely important in this time of electronic content, that we focus on what it means to be saved for posterity. What posterity will be in the future could be something altogether different than what we have thought it was in the past. If we care about saving anything we mount as a web site, digital content, or otherwise create in a format that requires a machine to access, we need to think about how this will be assured. Let’s face it, if Baker’s book inspired me to write this column, it just might be worth your time to read it. Trust me on that.

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the network: now the work doubles, as we develop GE2 and think about today’s users, and tomorrow’s; and keep our eye on the competitors too. Much of YBP revolves around GOBI. Other companies have imitated it. Hundreds of libraries depend upon it. GOBI is a big success. GE2 will make it new again. But some days we wonder, when did GOBI begin to own us?

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