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Sense and Sensibility-The Big Deal

Margaret Landesmann
University of Utah, mlandesm@library.utah.edu

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Science and Technology Policy Institute, “Our Future—Our Environment” considers how environmental policy over the next 10-15 years might be shaped by everything from genomics to whether we should mine methane locked within permafrost. Video interviews with experts are sprinkled through, and a wealth of related links provide continuity. http://www.rand.org/scitech/spi/ourfuture/

Fluid Mechanics

Everyday items like milk and syrup offer a wonderful opportunity to study the physics and beauty of fluid behavior. Virginia Polytechnic Institute Professor Mark Crammer’s Gallery Of Fluid Dynamics is a work in progress, but already sports some impressive images of tornadoes to illustrate vortices and a wonderful collage of tinted milk resisting a sudden change in motion. Interesting links include a few of the credited photographers’ home pages for more wonderful photos, the Virginia Tech Fluids Page which has many more links to related newsgroups and publications, and an “ear witness” account of sounds accompanying an aurora borealis. http://www.eng.vt.edu/fluids/msc/gallery/gall.htm.

Geophysics

A section of the Seaborg Center for Teaching and Learning Science and Mathematics (named for Nobel laureate Glenn T. Seaborg, co-discoverer of Plutonium and 10 other elements), Hot Pages offers links to various physical and other topics including: Clouds; Earth History Resources which offers Life through Geologic Time: a Pictorial History of Life on Earth where users can download pictures of mammoth bones or museum diorama graphics; Groundwater Issues; Its About Now, where you can tap into the U.S. Naval Observatory master clock or view the current world population figures; Virtual Field Trips; Water on the Internet; Websites for Girls and young Women; Websites for Seniors; and Wolves in the Upper Great Lakes. http://seaborg.nmu.edu/hot/.

Librarianship

New Breed Librarian is a bimonthly publication intended to foster a sense of community for those new to librarianship, whether in school or just out. The site features articles, columns, interviews, TechTalk, jobs, advice and resume samples, and more. The brainchild of Juanita Benedicto and Colleen Bell, librarians at the University of Oregon, the funky layout and upfront news links make this site a bit challenging, but worthwhile. http://www.newbreedlibrarian.org/.

Microscopy

Although Nikon provides this forum and favors its own optical microscopes, this site offers information for a much broader audience. Maintained by microscopists at Molecular Expressions (Florida State U), the site was designed to provide an educational forum for all aspects of optical microscopy, digital imaging, and photomicrography. Take a Java tutorial and tweak a virtual microscope, or search for an obscure term in the microscopy dictionary. There are competitions, a museum and a digital movie gallery with stunning images, screen savers, and a searchable knowledge database. http://www.microscopyu.com/.

Occupational Health and Safety

OshNet: Gateway for Safety & Health Information Resources is an Internet gateway site for occupational safety and health information and resources. Geared to the safety and health professional, OshNet has over 1,300 annotated links to relevant interesting Internet sites. Owned and published on a for-profit basis by WorkCare(m); an occupational health consulting and outsourcing firm which also uses a volunteer editorial/articles advisory committee. The site offers not only discipline information organized by over 100 major categories and subcategories, but also includes job listings, paid advertising, a bulletin board, and a newsletter. http://oshnet/index.htm.

Reference

When you’ve finished with Websworthy, turn your interest to a neat metasite that offers a great current week plus 6 month archive of Maryline Blake’s forays on the Net. Neat New Stuff I Found This Week is a wonderful potpourri of interesting sites intelligently chosen and annotated by the “librarian without walls.” Her selection algorithm is clearly defined (basically she skims for interest, comparing the process to collection development) and you can subscribe to the weekly picks via email. You can also visit links to her Ex Libris (a weekly e-zine for librarians) and BookBytes sites, as well as Best Information on the Net, a site she built for O’Keefe Library at St. Ambrose University. http://maryline.com/newnew.html.

Sense and Sensibility — The Big Deal

by Margaret Landesman (Head, Collection Development, Marriott Library, Univ. of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112; Phone: 801-581-7741; Fax: 801-585-3464) <mlandesm@library.utah.edu>

What’s worrisome about “the Big Deal?” Why do online journal packages from high-priced publishers make me so nervous?

It’s not so much the dollar total. “Big deals” look manageable for at least a few years. In addition to providing online access to print subscriptions, they add access to all or a larger selection of titles at a price per hit which lowers per use cost—though not necessarily to within the reasonable range. And we all know now—if we didn’t know before—that we are not good at predicting what titles will be used. A larger selection of titles is simply better from our user’s point of view.

Just as there are millions of books our patrons wish we owned, there are thousands of journals to which we don’t subscribe. Most are not part of large packages, nor do their publishers send us salesmen or even advertisements. It is slower and much more work to find, evaluate, and negotiate for the good ones. But large packages aren’t the only–or best–places to start. Their long range implications are serious. Large packages could do with the materials budget, print and electronic, just what print journals did to the book budget.

Packages are easier to subscribe to than to cancel. They have an addictive quality for our users. They build brand loyalty. They create audiences for journals which had no audience and protect titles which might naturally die. One might also note that they house competitive instincts in librarians counting titles and turn their customers into advocates for other libraries—a natural turn of things, but one with some danger for a harmonious and united library community.

The problem with packages is that, by their nature, they are not easily contained. You can’t prune a bit here and a bit there. You lose the ability to realize significant savings by canceling paper. And when the cost of a package grows faster than does the budget, the percentage of funding devoted to a particular package or publisher grows.

When economists recommend spending no more than 30% of income on housing, the reason doesn’t have to do with the cost and/or value of the house. It has to do with being able to pay other bills and have the income to do other things. Foregoing a spare bedroom when buying a house is an option. But having signed the mortgage, getting rid of a room to meet your budget is no longer an easily available choice. Libraries are signing mortgages—and mortgages in which they have agreed not only to pay rising prices, but to pay prices which rise by an amount capped not in dollars, but in percentages.

We know what happens when income goes up by a fixed percentage—the gap between pay for law/business/science faculty and English/fine arts professors gets wider. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

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The gap in dollars will keep getting bigger so long as increases are calculated in percentages. An inexpensive journal and an expensive one, if they inflate at the same percentage rate, will show the same effect, as will the package price for an online journal aggregation.

Will libraries have the dollars to pay these costs? If they do have the dollars, is this how they should spend them? Or are there, among the thousands of titles users would appreciate, other better and more reasonably priced titles? And which might prove better long term investments for the scholarly community?

I have tried to work out an analogy. This analogy I think works whether considering journal packages as bundles of titles or as huge aggregations of individual articles. It’s strained - to say the least - but perhaps will make sense to some.

Suppose you buy a 10 gallon aquarium. Into it you put a bunch of partly inflated balloons. Some of the balloons are very small - only a couple inches across. A few are large - one alone might take up a quarter of the tank. Every Christmas Eve, though, a bit like the tree in the Nutcracker, they all grow larger. You have a compelling desire to add balloons from time to time and you do that. Occasionally, a balloon, all on its own, will pop. Occasionally, you take one out and discard it.

Over the years, empty space in the tank decreases. Pretty soon, there is no more space. You stop adding balloons. Even so, balloons overflow. You could buy a 15 gallon tank. And in a few years, a 20. But maybe you can’t afford a bigger tank. Or maybe you’re just fed up with the aquarium business and don’t want to put more money into aquariums. So you buy a 12 gallon tank. And it gets full.

Every New Year’s, you’ve got to pick a few balloons and pop them.

Now these balloons appeal to different members of your household. Some are absolutely beloved by your children. Others are essential to the welfare of your sisters and your cousins and your aunts. There are a few everyone agrees are top quality balloons, but it’s Aunt Minnie who loves them and Aunt Minnie doesn’t live at your house. You pop those. But the really big balloons are a problem. Though no one loves them best of all, there’s a part which every single person really likes.

It’s New Year’s. What will you pop?

In my mind, this analogy makes two points:

1) You’re going to have to pop balloons every year no matter what. So pop early and save your book budget.

2) Big balloons are harder to pop.

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The worry is, of course, that you will have to one day pop small balloons which aren’t growing much in dollars and whose contents may be of higher quality than that of the big balloons. And even if you don’t have to pop little balloons, as new ones come on the market, there is no room to add them to the tank.

Big balloons have always been harder to pop. But some of the big balloons in which libraries invest can be deflated - it’s painful but possible. Print subscription lists can be cut without giving up the whole list. Approval plan profiles can be scaled back. Standing orders can be culled.

Big balloons appeal because they offer more return for labor invested. They have much the same appeal to libraries as approval plan. And many of the same virtues for a library as those displayed by book and serial vendors. If there is anything in shorter supply in libraries than money, it is staff time. A package takes work to negotiate and set up - whatever its size. One license agreement, one invoice, one check. - these appeal as always to short-staffed libraries. It is just not practical to fuss with single titles or small packages more often than you have to. And if you plan to work on one package today and tackle another tomorrow, big tends to be today. Small tends to be tomorrow.

For a consortium, the appeal of packages is even greater. They don’t want to deal with individual titles or very small packages. They leave this to individual libraries, who, swamped with their own workload, may settle for what is in the packages. Smaller libraries lack staff to catalog journal packages, and, for the most part, don’t. Purchasing individual titles is even more work. What’s more, from a consensual point of view, any big package is likely to be of interest as a whole, since it will have something for everybody, and even less desirable titles will probably interest a member or two.

It’s not - and never has been — a question of what titles libraries buy. It will always be a question of what we don’t buy. What makes the titles in packages appealing is not that they are of higher quality or more useful. What makes them appealing is that they are easy to identify and add. We don’t even have to go looking — sales people find us.

Does all this prove that the real problem is that libraries need and should have more money? Of course. And we must do everything we can to find that funding.

But, as new money comes to the library, there may be needs so pressing that they trumps even collections. The technology infrastructure to make collections accessible and a burgeoning instruction program to teach users to use them may often have to be the highest priority.

Higher education itself is entering a period of intense competition. Now is a time when libraries need to devote energy to the larger goals of their institutions. Now is the...
Issues in Vendor/Library Relations —
The Sales Call

by Denise Novak (Head of Acquisitions, Carnegie Mellon University Libraries)

Column Editor: Bob Nardini (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 800-258-3774x3251; Fax: 603-746-5628) <mardini@ybp.com>

BN: All of us who sell goods and services to libraries, or who buy them for libraries, like to think that that the business we're engaged in is different from other types of businesses. And in some ways we may be right. But in other ways I'm sure we're wrong, since a few universals bind all types of business situations.

We could start with the sales call itself, the encounter upon which everything to follow will hinge—if, that is, anything does follow. Exhilarating, tedious, terrifying, calming, hostile, sociable, vacuous, vital—on both sides of the desk a sales call will be all of these at one time or another. Ritual, ceremony, performance, charade, seminar, skirmish—the sales call will resemble these too.

What makes a good call? I asked Denise Novak, who at three different libraries has hosted her share of sales calls, to help answer that question.

DN: Here's a good story about a vendor rep who came to see me when I worked at another institution about ten years ago. This college was small and we didn't have a very large budget. When the rep came to see me, he was always condescending and pretty supercilious. His visits were strictly duty calls. Now move ten years into the future—I'm at Carnegie Mellon, which does hold a certain cachet. This same rep comes to see me and I know he's trying to make the connection. I have a different last name and there have been a few other cosmetic changes. Finally I took pity on the guy and asked him if he remembered me. He said he thought he knew me so I told him who I used to be and you never saw anybody get so flushed in such a short time.

The moral to this story is never assume you won't see a vendor or a librarian in another position or working for a different company.

BN: I'll bet that rep has been a lot kinder to the acquisitions librarians he's met since. That's one plus for the vendor, anyway, maybe you learn something from a bad call. Sometimes that's the only way, or the best way, to learn your lessons. It's not as if you can enroll in vendor school to learn them.

I remember once, in front of a roomful of librarians at a university that was a major customer of ours, when a bibliographer told me how naive I was to think that they selected books in a certain way. She was right, I hadn't thought hard enough ahead of time about how this particular library probably operated. One lesson learned, the hard way: librarians care about their work, and blithe vendor assumptions about how they do their work will land you in trouble.

Another lesson might be, from your story, Denise, sometimes the best call is no call. If this rep truly thought he was doing you a big favor by talking to you, he'd have done better if he just crossed you off his list until you got to Carnegie Mellon.

Now that you're there and every rep wants to call, and will exhibit best behavior, what advice do you have?

DN: First of all, make an appointment. There is nothing worse for either the vendor or the librarian than a "cold call." We're all busy people and if you don't make an appointment chances are very good that you won't see you. If fact, if you're not scheduled on my calendar, I won't see you. Please don't put me in that position. Call, send me email, or even a letter—just make sure I know you're coming.

If I know that we have an appointment, it allows me time to gather information for you. Good or bad, feedback is what you want and what I want you to have. Advance notice gives me a chance to talk to my staff about your company's performance. Are orders arriving on time? Were they entered correctly? Are invoices accurate? What kind of service do we receive when we call with a problem? I would also want to know about any problems your company might have with my staff.

Let me know about new services your company is adding, or services that are being dropped. I'd like to know about staff who are new to your company or staff who are leaving with whom my department might have had regular contact.

If you are a new vendor and coming to introduce yourself and your company, you might bring brochures with you that explain what your company's focus is. Make sure you have some references that I can contact. Business cards are important. It gives your phone number and email address and fits nicely in my rolodex for future reference.

For both the vendor and the librarian it's important to be pleasant. I consider many vendor reps to be personal friends, so how the meeting goes after business is taken care of is up to those two people. I've also known many of these people for years so there is a bond and a certain comfort level. Lunch and/or dinner with these folk is a treat but I would never presume that feeding me is a requirement of a visit by a vendor rep. Try to end the meeting on a positive note. After all, we're working toward the same goal.

What do you think makes a good call, Bob, from the vendor's perspective?

BN: Well, why mince words? For a vendor a good call is one where you come away with some new business, or get yourself closer to new business. No matter how charming or entertaining or professional or whatever you've been in a call, or in a series of calls even more so, if there's nothing to show for it, you didn't do well. (Another story, of course, if the vendor already has the bulk of a library's business; then the call has different aims.)

That may seem self-evident and crass, but I think it can be too easy for everyone to mistake cordiality for a good call. That's not to say that we shouldn't be cordial to one another, but that isn't the reason for a call. It's the rep's business to ask for business. I think the first step toward a good call is for the vendor rep to stay focused on that essential, and for the librarian to respect it.

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really the time—not that there ever really was a good time—for whining that libraries don’t get a fair share.

If public higher education is to compete against the growing commercial forces, every dollar needs to be deployed with intelligence and frugality. The question isn't whether there is greater value than there used to be, or whether prices are contained so they don't go from outrageous to astronomical. The question is whether we are paying more than absolutely necessary. If we are, then even if the library can afford the package, the institution can't.

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