sotto voc—Some Thoughts on Change

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two questions keep coming my way: 1) what is the state of going on, and 2) what does it all mean. The first one is easier to answer than the second.

What's going on is that library supply, like virtually every other industry in America, is undergoing shrinkage and consolidation. The battle for market share is so fierce, and the economies of supply are so tight, that the only way some companies can survive is either by buying another company's customer base, or selling out to those with the financial resources to take advantage of opportunity. One of the harsh realities of today's world is that service comes at a price, and, seemingly, fewer and fewer companies can afford to pay that price.

Whether these changes are positive or negative depends on your sensibilities and the particular experiences you may have. Big is no guarantee of great service, nor is it necessarily a recipe for disaster. We've all had experiences, good and bad, with big companies: My father-in-law was driven out of business trying to compete with Nordstrom. While that was traumatic, both he and his customers are now better off for it. He's a successful salesman in men's clothing at a Nordstrom in Portland, free of the worries that plagued him as a small businessman, and his customers now have a wider array of choices in clothing than he ever could have offered them. Win/win.

On the other hand — On the way to setting up my new office, I went shopping for a laptop computer. Thinking that I'd get my best deal at a computer superstore, I waited twenty minutes to get the attention of one of the few salespeople in the place. When I finally got him to stop is whether enough libraries will return those companies' commitments by giving them enough business to survive.

On the one hand, it is not the librarian's job to guarantee the survival of any particular company. Lord knows, you all have plenty of other things to worry about among your professional responsibilities without having to add "guarantee survival of good companies" to the list. Still, you cannot separate wanting to have vendor choices with the actions that will make those choices available to you in the long run.

Why is it important to have choice in the marketplace? There are several reasons: First, supplier diversity spurs competition, and that promotes innovation; big dogs give smaller dogs something to chase, and smaller dogs force big dogs to run faster. Second, market options provide libraries with a fallback position in times of adversity. It's the all the eggs in one basket thing. When tough times, or the inevitable buyout, affects a large service provider, having other ongoing vendor relationships helps spread the negative impact. Just as few investors purchase only one stock, no library these days can afford to do all its business with just one vendor. Being able to spread business around, though, requires a market where numerous companies can survive.

I think of business as a model of democracy. On the one hand, customers, like average voters, want the best deal possible for their own interests, so are inclined to vote for those who promise the biggest tax cuts. Yet, we also want things like quality education for our kids, which may suffer when tax revenues are reduced, so we sometimes exercise options that end up being for the greater good of the community. Even if one decides in favor of tax cuts over education, it is still important to have the opportunity to make those choices, and that requires the presentation of more than one option. In business, we are fast losing our options in more industries than just library supply. Convenience, and the allure of state-of-the-art technology, make large players in any marketplace attractive to consumers. Yet, it is hard to find companies in any industry that do such a good job at everything that they can serve all of their customers' needs. To often, though, the ease of transacting all one's business with one enterprise wins out. Whether we realize it at the time or not, we vote with our dollars and sometimes have no other choice but to ourselves to blame when we end with fewer choices about where we can spend those dollars. (At other times, even fully supported companies fall victim to buyouts, and there's little anyone can do about that.)

Is this a world where smaller businesses can survive? If quality is more than just a concept to admire, the answer is "yes." If, on the other hand, doing business with high-quality, specialty companies is just more effort than consumers can dredge up, fewer such companies will survive, and along with them, the benefits that they bring to the marketplace. My hope is that libraries will freely choose to keep their future choices open by making sure that worthy smaller companies get a piece of their business. In a democracy, there are distinct benefits to all when a loyal opposition is encouraged to thrive.