2003

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Moving From Librarianship to Entrepreneurship: How Different Is It?

Peter McCracken
Serials Solutions

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg

Recommended Citation
McCracken, Peter (2003) "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Moving From Librarianship to Entrepreneurship: How Different Is It?," Against the Grain: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 36.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4270

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
For academic libraries, book selection is largely based on standard review sources, which would identify the scholarly biographies and filter out those with the inaccurate information. On the other hand, librarians in public libraries recognize that their patrons want libraries to purchase thoroughly researched biographies along with slasher biographies by such authors as Kitty Kelley because these titles are popular reading materials. If libraries refused to purchase the slasher biographies, based on the premise that these books contained unsubstantiated information, this practice would be considered censorship. Placing labels such as "unreliable" on the spine of the book designating these library materials would be a violation of the Library Bill of Rights.

Hopefully, reading book reviews and writing to the publishers about the lack of end notes, bibliographies, etc., are ways in which librarians can address this issue of combating unreliable biographies. In order to not censor materials in the library, the decision whether to read the trashy biography or the scholarly one ultimately rests with the patron. Librarians need to take a strong role in educating their patrons about biographies, either at the reference desk or with the reader's advisory service. Librarians teach patrons how to evaluate Internet resources, why not teach them how to evaluate biographies?

What can librarians do to educate their patrons about evaluating biographies? I do not have any definite solutions, but here are a few suggestions to ponder. Since readers must think about the issue of subjectivity, they should read several biographies of the same subject in order to gain multiple perspectives on the person's life. To encourage this, librarians could create bibliographies of biographies of a particular individual that the library owns. Signs stating that some books contain more reliable information than others could be placed in the biography section of the library. These signs could refer patrons to the reference desk or the reader's advisory desk where they could receive more information about the actual books. These are just a few suggestions that may assist in raising patrons' awareness that some biographies are better researched than others.

Perhaps, evaluating and reading biographies would be easier if all biographies would heed the advice of Catherine Drinker Bowen who said, "in writing biography, fact and fiction shouldn't be mixed. And if they are, the fiction parts should be printed in red, the fact parts in black ink."
The process of developing new products has been particularly demanding. We started with an idea that came from my experience at the reference desk, and that met with very positive response from the library community. We still sign up five to ten new clients per week for our A-to-Z title list service, and the feedback I receive from clients is incredibly meaningful to me: it's a great thrill to have people be so positive, and appreciative, of the product we've created to sell to them. If we don't move forward, we'll be falling behind. So we moved to what we believed was the next natural extension of our product, and combined our bibliographic data with CONSER MARC records, to create a completely new way to easily incorporate a library's electronic journal holdings into its catalog.

While we make sure that it's easy for the library, it was anything but easy for us as we developed the product. We spent more time, energy, and money putting together our MARC record service then I care to contemplate. It was a huge and complex problem, requiring the management of numerous sources of data and following rules that were designed to be done by humans, on a case-by-case basis, rather than programmati-cal by a computer. Trying to teach a computer when to put a period at the end of a subfield, for example — except when certain punctuation appears, or when it's followed by a different subfield, and only then on days that are cloudy, it seems — took a great deal of programming time and energy. And as cataloging rules change, so must our programming.

While the impetus for creating this particular product came from the original goals of the company, the need for other products has been pushed by clients and by new developments in the marketplace. The obvious next development for our product was further linking technologies, so we started by perfecting a journal-level linking service that takes patrons from many abstracting resources to all of a library's full-text resources. Because we already maintained much of the needed information, our primary challenges involved ensuring sufficient server support to manage hundreds of thousands more searches than we had been previously supporting.

The next clear project, then, was a complete article-level OpenURL link server. This tool on a life of its own; it forced us to reconsider which are the most important things we're currently doing, and identify what we could drop so that we could continue to develop the new OpenURL server. We had to figure out how to convince our current and prospective clients that our full-featured product is every bit as good as those that cost five to ten times more. We've been surprised how some feel that they need to buy the most expensive product on the market, regardless of how it compares to other products.

Being on both sides of the booth has been quite an eye-opener. I have learned, for example, that librarians tend to take vendors for granted. For many librarians, part of ALA is attending great parties. While we may complain about the way some vendors operate, or gripe about the deficiencies in their products, we're only too happy to drink their booze and eat their fancy desserts. Can you imagine what any ALA conference would be like if Gale weren't supporting the daily shuttle service? How many of us (all vendors included) actually thank them for providing that service? Some vendors have told me that conferences are not a site for any sales for them, but they need to go, just to be seen by librarians and other vendors.

As the idea for Serials Solutions was developing in our heads, I talked with one publisher representative, who was responsible for organizing and paying for everything associated with their booth at ALA. I couldn't believe the prices she was quoting me for their booth and the regular wine and cheese receptions they held in the conference hall. Now I believe: several weeks ago I paid $157 just for the chair I used for fifteen hours during a small conference in Chicago. I probably should have spent more time sitting in it, just to be sure I got my money's worth. At our first ALA conference, we were back in the table section, which only a few of the attendees managed to find. This winter, we'll have a double booth and Internet access for the first time. Despite the incredible cost, this will allow us to solve customer problems on the spot and demonstrate our products more effectively. So even though the skinflint in me cringes at the cost of flying eight people across the country, putting them in hotels and paying per diem for several days, spending a small fortune on carpeting, electricity, tables, chairs, signage, and Internet access, the librarian in me knows that our current and potential clients are going to appreciate the improved service.

Though we are glad to be out of the tables section, I encourage all conference attendees to go back there and see what vendors have to share. As librarians, we love the free espresso, and the free bags, and the impressive megaboos, but the cutting-edge stuff is often in the tables, where people are spending all their time and money on their ideas, not on marketing gimmicks. Vendor-to-vendor relations has been a completely new experience for me. Sometimes we're competing with a company that's quietly (but not secretly) we have ways of learning these things! working with a third company that's also competing and working with us. It gets confusing. As a young company, one of our most exciting experiences came when we learned one large conglomerate was interested in acquiring us. Initially, dreams of the return of Seattle's dot-com...
boom of just a few years before came flooding back to us. We weren’t sure how it might work, but visions of quick wealth — less than two years after starting the company — danced in our heads. Three of us went to the corporate headquarters, where they put us up in the nicest hotel in town, took us out for a fancy dinner, and we met with representatives from all parts of the company. They gave us the grand tour, and showed us server rooms and computer resources we could only dream about. It was a heady and valuable experience for us, but in the end, we decided that acquisition wasn’t our best interest or those of our clients, at least not at that time. We aim high: we have goals that seem unreasonable to a reasonable businessman, so no reasonable businessperson would pay us what we think we’re worth. Since we plan to meet the goals we set, and don’t know any better, we’re not sufficiently scared of our unreasonable goals, and we know we’re worth an unreasonable amount of money.

We like to say that we’re a company founded by a librarian, for librarians. Of course, a librarian does not a company make. I didn’t do this by myself: without the technology department, led by my youngest brother, Mike, we’d have nothing to sell. Without the fantastic and dedicated sales force, led by our high school friend, Chris, we wouldn’t have the money to invest in research and development. Without the critical customer support that Tim and his staff provide — and they are the true face of the company for all of our clients — we wouldn’t know if we were doing things right or not, and we couldn’t be sure that libraries were implementing our products in the most effective way. Without business guidance from my other brother, Steve, we wouldn’t have office space (literally: for the first year, we worked out of his basement), we’d probably be in trouble with the IRS, and we’d have a much harder time defining what our goals are and how we’re going to achieve them.

But there are aspects that are influenced by my background in libraries. I was always frustrated, for example, when I’d call to ask about the price of a product — even a standard print resource — and the representative would say he’d get back to me in a few days. I knew they went back to figure out how much money they could get out of us; I could almost hear them saying, “Oh, that’s an ARL library — bump up the price a bit more.” And my frustration with airline pricing, as much as anything, made it clear to me that everybody would prefer that we use simple, straightforward pricing, based on the work we would do for a client, not the size of their budget, the size of their student body, or any other irrelevant measure.

We also try to put as much information as possible on our Web pages. While we know that it tells competitors more than we would like — it is a competitive marketplace — we also know that librarians want to start with as much information as they can. They want to do research, and they’re not afraid to read a lot of text. We think it is important to present information the way librarians want to receive it, and I think we know that better than our competitors.

One thing that I’ve learned as a vendor, and that I’ll pass on to librarians, is the importance of knowing and working with vendors. It is not all about the price, regardless of what the state purchasing guidelines might suggest. What is the cost of working with an unresponsive vendor? Librarians need to demand better customer service from their vendors, and I think there’s a tendency to accept mediocrity. When you have a choice of vendors, you need to use it: if you don’t, you very well may lose it. When we must, we pay more for better customer service, because we know what poor service and poor products cost us. That’s why we now only buy Dell computers, and no longer buy much cheaper eMachines.

I don’t quite know where my experience with Serials Solutions will lead me. Perhaps, at some point, I’ll return to working in a library. I certainly know the pleasure it brings, and I feel like I can make a difference there. But at the same time, I feel like our entire company is making a difference in libraries, and perhaps working on the entrepreneurial side of the equation allows me to make a bigger difference in librarianship than if I were in a library all day long. Either way, it’s about experiences, and the experience from this side of the exhibit floor is pretty interesting.

---

**ATG Annual Survey Report**

**by Michael Litchfield** (College of Charleston) <libconf@cofc.edu>

It’s time once again for the ATG Annual Survey Report. The surveys are all tallied up, and with considerably more returns than last year, the results certainly indicate some strong patterns. First, librarians were asked to express some concerns, and the answers are pretty similar to concerns over the past few years. Major concerns are the rampant merging going on among publishers and vendors, with more than one respondent specifically worried about the divine/Faxon mess. This time around, however, no one mentioned a certain publisher with a penchant for acquisitions (at least not by name). Other concerns included budgets in free-fall while prices soar, the increasing need to keep the same information in multiple formats, and the struggle to keep up with rapidly evolving technologies. Other fairly ubiquitous concerns were increasingly restrictive copyright laws and license agreements. Respondents were also concerned about archiving: how to archive electronic resources, where to find the space to archive, and how to adapt electronic archives to new technologies.

Then there was the age factor: most respondents were concerned about the decline in numbers of librarians, the decline in positions for librarians, and increasing age of the profession. The last concern is certainly a valid one: when asked how long they had been librarians, the average response was 19 years, 4 months; however, only 10 respondents had been librarians for 10 years or less. A further 10 had between 10 and 19 years experience, while 29 had 19 years experience or more, with several respondents having over 30 years in librarianship, indicating that not only is the profession aging, it is rapidly aging.

**eBooks**

One of the first questions we always ask in the survey is whether or not the respondents have ever purchased eBooks, and if so, what kind of budget they had for this resource. Nearly three quarters of our respondents have purchased eBooks (36 had, 13 had not), but most reported that they did not have a budget breakdown; most purchased eBooks through NetLibrary and consortia. Of the respondents who did report spending on eBooks, the figures went to one extreme or the other: two respondents reported $50,000 budgets, while two others reported $5,000 budgets.

**Outsourcing**

Everybody’s doing it. Most outsourced: approval plans (which I suppose is redundant) and cataloging. Respondents also reported outsourcing binding, processing, and databases. Only four respondents, or 8%, reported outsourcing their acquisitions.

**Downsizing**

Not quite everybody’s doing it. About one quarter of our respondents, 13 out of 49, said that they have been downsized in the past year. This percentage has held firm over the past three years, and while not enough for a quantum, it is still a fairly high number. The extent of downsizing has occurred, not surprisingly, among the ranks of professional librarians, with paraprofessionals coming in a close second.

continued on page 54