I, User -- Au Contraire, Robert!

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I, User — Au Contraire, Robert!

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In the April issue of ATG, Robert Behra (University of Utah) lobbed his “heated response” onto the fire we set with our December-January column entitled “Just Say No: Eliminating Low-Value Tasks.” In his indictment, he describes our fire-making as a succès de scandale, and levels these accusations: “Many of the two dozen suggestions they make seem likely to further erode […] the quality of service provided to our patrons. […] The future towards which the authors want us to move sounds like one that will be controlled not by librarians but by corporations, one in which the patrons will have no say, and one in which all decisions will be made based solely on the short-term bottom line, with no consideration for long-term consequences.”

Zut alors!! These are pretty heavy charges for a list that included “stop using free text fields,” “stop manual tullies,” and “stop storing publisher catalogs!” Next we’ll find Michael Moore hurling outside R2 Worldquarters, with the LC RollerBall Team in tow. Others share Mr. Behra’s position, including the splendid-fun, fantastical Katina Strauch, auteur of this very publication. She writes: “When I read many of the suggestions, I can say that we would not/will not implement them. Maybe we are old and cranky, but there’s something to be said for experience and tradition.”

Well, one thing to be said for them is that, if unchecked, experience and tradition devolve, respectively, into outdated routine and unquestioned habit, crowding out their restless counterparts: innovation and change. This viewpoint is represented by another reader, who wishes to remain anonymous in order to 1) keep his job; and 2) attend the Charleston Conference without bodyguards.

“I am compelled by your just-say-no diatribe in the latest issue to chim in with my $0.02: a goad sketel, home/home slice/home skilet. [We take this to mean he supports our position…] Truly we — as a society, I’m talkin’ — need way fewer colored flags sticking out of books, and way more library atriums, library coffee shops, wi-fi. Here’s hoping your peeps will be reaching for what you’re preachin.’ (Just glad, for your sake, that you didn’t tell ‘em to, like, stop using those inter-campus mailers with the little buttons and strings, else there might’ve been backlash.)” [For the record, R2 supports inter-campus mailers, but only for the purpose of transporting all the library’s hard-copy invoices to the Controller’s office for a brisk re-keying and introduction of random errors.]

OK, enough fun. Mr. Behra raises some valid points, and these are serious issues. Our exhortations to stop signing printed purchase orders, writing call numbers in pencil, applying custom bookplates, and even ceasing check-in of print periodicals, are intended to speak to a reality that every library faces: there’s a lot to do. Patrons, conditioned by Google, Amazon, and the forward-looking work of librarians themselves, speak clearly about what they want: convenient and reliable remote access to more-more-more online resources, 24-hour turnaround on ILL, direct links from citations to full text, and simple, effective keyword searching across heterogeneous resources.

Patrons, of course, have no idea what is required to deliver these, but that’s our job, not theirs. The continuing growth of electronic resources has created many new and complex tasks: license negotiation and tracking; maintenance of bibliographic and holdings records; creation and maintenance of A-Z and subject lists of e-resources; maintenance of article-level links in OpenURL servers; configuration of proxy servers, troubleshooting access problems; and worrying about whether all of this is good for us. These are at best partially integrated into most library workflows and systems, and often create “invisible” backlogs: print online packages not yet in the OPAC; holdings statements that are not up-to-date; server/provider changes with outdated URLs.

Meanwhile, print availability is not diminishing at the same rate that electronic is growing. In the short term, the existence of both formats creates more work, whether as print cancellations, adding online with print when available, or binding back issues while updating e-holdings because the moving wall has moved again. It’s a rare day that new positions are added in technical services to absorb the extra load. The result: there’s more work to do in most libraries than can be done. Something has to give.

We believe that decisions about what to prioritize and what to forgo should be made deliberately rather than by default. This means that library managers must make hard choices about what to stop doing. They must ask: Who is affected? How often? What does it cost? What else could we be doing instead? Which benefits the most patrons most often? In our view, now is the time to focus staff hours on electronic resources, and to reduce the effort expended on print.

Despite patron preference for electronic resources, most library workflows are still geared to print. Most library stuff gravitates to handling print, often over-working it, because routines are well-established, and they feel competent with it. This is just human nature. But managers are meant to redirect human nature to serve the organization. This avoidance of confusing but higher-priority tasks constitutes a misuse of library resources. Library managers must deliberately shift in-house priorities towards electronic workflows, and begin to apply a more standardized approach to print. Mainstream print monographs and serials are well-suited to batch processing, automation and third-party support from vendors, agents, and cataloging utilities. Libraries need to avail themselves of this support, with staff hours reserved for exceptions and higher priority tasks.

We don’t argue that print-related tasks have no value; in fact, they have been primary throughout the history of libraries. But patron demands and scholarly publishing are changing. Each print-related task must be re-evaluated for current relevance and opportunity cost — the value those hours might generate if they were turned to higher-yield, higher-value tasks. Is it more important to keep checking in and binding print periodicals than to update all holdings and linking up information for e-journals? Of course, you want to do both — but what if you can’t? Which matters more to your patrons? Which matters more to your staff? Whose opinion matters more? Clearly, libraries can answer these questions differently, but they merit serious consideration.

Finally, to address the “more alarming of our suggestions:”

1. “Stop item by item book selection:” In most libraries, selection is one of many duties: reference, instruction, liaison work, e-resource trials and other tasks lay claim to the time of selectors. Our suggestion is merely to apply leverage to the problem, by spending selection time on profiles (i.e., strategies for gathering batches of relevant titles) — especially for English and European-language monographs, where vendor services are highly evolved and effective. Item-by-item selection should be reserved for a minority of more specialized publishers, languages and formats.

2. “Stop putting new books out for review:” We admit to mixed feelings about this, but New Books shelves typically require multiple manual location changes for every item. A list of such titles posted on the library Website (with links to extended metadata) is a much better solution — especially if it can be generated automatically from the ILS. The underlying questions are always the same: Does the value of the service justify the cost of item-by-item handling? Is there a more efficient way to achieve the same objective?

3. “Stop periodical check-in, at least for some categories of material:” We love this idea, but it wasn’t ours! See the superb article “Implementing the unthinkable: the demise of periodical check-in at the University of [continued on page 91]
Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Google

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No self-respecting librarian would be caught dead today, of course, only using the Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature. But, if you can find a set in your local Reference Department and if you can carry off a few volumes to a secluded corner of the room, it’s easy to conduct an interesting little piece of research. Try to find the earliest entry for “Google.” Which volume to choose? While by now it’s become all but impossible to imagine life without everyone’s favorite search engine, it’s also hard as much as to remember the world prior to Google. How did we look things up in those days? Well, back to the question, which days? How about ten years ago, 1995? No, way too early. That was the year Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin met one another, as graduate students at Stanford. 1997? Warm, but still no sign of Google, which didn’t launch until the year after.

Not until 1999, a mere six years ago, did the Readers’ Guide need to create the subject heading, “GOOGLE (INTERNET SEARCH ENGINE).” That 1999 volume indexed all of two articles, one in Forbes, one in Fortune. The Forbes article, entitled “1k@58%,com,” asked if there were “any more exasperating experience than trying to search for something on the Web?” It indicted the all-too-literal AltaVista and a few of the other extant search engines. But “promising new software offers a bit of hope,” said Forbes, whose reporter described three new search engines. Two of them, “Direct Hit” and “Clever,” in the end proved not enough of either.

The third was Google. The 2000 Readers’ Guide volume indexed ten articles—a quintupled literature—featured a new subject heading, “GOOGLE, INC.” and unveiled even a Google subheading, “Securities.” By 2004, the year of Google’s IPO, which brought in $1.7 billion—a good thing, that “Securities” subheading—the monthly paperbound volumes listed more articles than any annual cumulative edition had indexed to that point. Tracing the trajectory of Google: that’s a job for the Readers’ Guide. Don’t try it in Google (where, in case you’re interested, a search under “Google” returns over 243,000,000 results).

It took no time to put some of that new capital to work. The most audacious Google ideas, it turned out, had to do with libraries. In November was the announcement of “Google Scholar,” a super-index to scholarly literature. When, one month later, in an expansion of the “Google Print” program began earlier—where Google results display excerpts from certain in-print books—the company announced a library digitization project on a scale that in pre-Google times, meaning just a little while ago, would have been unimaginable. Five of the world’s leading research libraries—Stanford, Michigan, Harvard, Oxford’s Bodleian, and New York Public Library—announced plans to work with Google to digitize their collections; for Stanford and Michigan, their entire collections, in- and out-of-print, about 15 million volumes between them. Digitization was nothing new to these libraries, but the Google scale was new. Michigan, for example, a pioneer, had on its own been digitizing fewer than 10,000 volumes per year. Google planned to digitize everything the library had, in just seven years.

The national press took up the story. Reporters interviewed librarians. The library press worked overtime. The news was manna to listerservs and blogs, which carried all sorts of speculation on what Google would mean for the future of books and their publishers, of libraries and their users and non-users, of vendors and their customers, of just about everyone.

In January, when the American Library Association met in Boston, each of the U.S. libraries working with Google gave a brief report about their own site at a long-standing...