Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-That's Entertainment

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like tax returns, wills, and insurance applications, expense reports are a nuisance, easy to put off, painful to write, potentially embarrassing, one of those tasks instantly dismissed from mind once finished and filed at last.

But they’re a fact of life, a fact of business life anyway. Who knows how many thousands, tens of thousands more likely, are generated every year as by-product of our sales trips, presentations, conferences, workshops, and the rest of it in this library business? Like the amount of time that someone or other calculates each of us spends in a year waiting at red lights, or brushing our teeth, the annual hours poured into the authorship of presentable expense reports is one of those numbers we don’t really want to know.

The only time you read anything about expense reports is of course when someone digs up something scandalous on a public official or employee — on occasion a librarian — and one or another Freedom of Information Act has made it possible for a reporter or blogger to pry loose expense reports detailing the kind of high living that’s best kept under wraps. Or when a bailout company like the American International Group gets caught spending a ton of money on a luxe “retreat,” giving rise to what the New York Times, in a recent story about higher scrutiny of expense reports, referred to as “the so-called A.I.G. effect.”

These are always fun reads, but to be honest, for those of us who have anything to do with the sales side of this business, it’s impossible not to feel a little sympathy for these hapless individuals — although more difficult in the case of A.I.G. — and perhaps to reflect on the highlight reel moments on our own expense report ledger.

Most of this is due to what’s known as the “T & E” or “M & E” part of our budgets. The T being “Travel,” which you have to do no matter what, and the E, which is “Entertainment.”

For “Entertainment,” there were three or four of us from my company, plus six or seven librarians, all from the same library, a relatively new customer. So, a decent crowd. Everything worked that night. The restaurant was slightly off the beaten convention path. We were at the far end of a bright, lively room, in a space that seemed to belong to us. I remember a long rectangular table and its crisp white tablecloth. I remember wait staff in white coats who took good care of us and seemed to enjoy it. I remember plates of appetizers passed around this way and that, oysters, shrimp, and several other dishes. The entrees I don’t remember, other than being able to say with certainty all these years later that someone in that kitchen knew how to cook. There was wine, of course, as much as anyone wanted, and under severe peer pressure, everyone ordered dessert. Whether we talked very much in the way of business, that I can barely remember — although I do vaguely recall promising to look after some detail of technical services — but I am clear to this day that there were lots of laughs around the table, and by the end of the meal we all felt like friends.

When the tab arrived, conversation was still alive around the table. So the company colleague to my right was able to quietly ask me, as I opened the wallet our waiter had delivered, “Did you break four figures?”

I had, for the first time. As I figured the tip and signed the check, I wondered if someone back home would call me in for a talk about it.

Nobody did. Years later I still think of that night as one of the best ever on the road. I hope others at that table still do too.

I’ve done business with that library for most of the years since. There’s a chance I learned a fact or two about cataloging processes that night, an area I can always stand to know more about. I must have learned something about the library’s politics, how things ran there. I might have heard some new jargon for the first time, or finally understood some acronym. And maybe during the evening I was able to put across some point about our company.

So there was value to the dinner beyond the buzz. Because I learned a few things and made a few friends, I was a slightly better rep and so the company was a slightly stronger company. I am sure no one felt they had been a party to a bribe. I’ll bet, instead, that in the years that followed our guests felt they could talk more frankly to me, when the situation called for that, than if we had not enjoyed this issue.
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ourselves together that night. Could I have
gotten all this with a tab that came in under
d sections? No doubt. I think the company
gets its money’s worth anyway. This library
was a big customer for a long time, which
helped to get more customers. Maybe a good
thing we didn’t stop the entertainment.

So while I’m sure there are abuses and
excesses out there, those of us who send in
entertainment expense reports have no reason
for that guilt. It’s part of the job, and not so
easy as it sounds. Not everyone one could
do it. Putting together a dinner takes work.
Some librarians don’t want to be entertained
by their vendors. Some expect it. Others are
surprised when you ask. Pick an early time,
and there’s no buzz in the room when you
get there. Pick a later time, and everyone’s
yawning over their coffees and thinking about
morning. Choosing the restaurant can be a
dice roll. Take an easy one that’s popular or
close by, and risk a place that’s too crowded.
Take one that’s offbeat or at some distance,
and risk a disaster.

Disasters are rare. Dinners normally turn
out well, if not always as well as that one
those years ago. They can soften the harder
moments. Maybe some people wish that en-
tertainment had no place in business, but I’d
hate to imagine this work if business really
were all business. ☑

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sumer Annual Review: U.S. Demographics
& Buying Behaviors, edited by Jim Milliot,
Bowker, 2010, hopefully to cheer us up!

When you run into the urbane John Cox
at the Conference, be sure and ask him about
the Frankfurt Book Fair and the two-week
vacation John and his wife Di just took! But
no column this time!

Publicity abounds for the Charleston
Conference! See Don Hawkins of Information
com/2010/10/11/showdown-in-charleston-ebse-
and-serials-solutions-face-off/. And Josh Hadro,
lj/technologytechnews/886940294/infotech_.
competition_heats_up_discovery.html.csp.

Gotta go! Can’t tell you how many
Rumors I have left out! But they will be in
the upcoming Dec-Jan issue of ATG! Coming
soon! See y’all in Charleston! ☑