The Grass is Often Greener -- Settling In

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I

In July of 2010, after a period of unemployment occasioned by the corporate buyout of my former employer, I had the good fortune to be hired by a college library untroubled by my unconventional resume and imaginative enough to see the advantages of bringing a former sales rep into academia. After nearly thirty years as a commercial traveler for three different book vendors, I had learned a thing or two about the industry and the folks who inhabit it, and I was about to use that experience in the service of The College of New Jersey.

My plan in this series of articles is to reflect on my transition from an itinerant peddler to a stationary buyer, hoping to inform and even reassure others contemplating a move either to or from the commercial sector.

Settling In

My arrival at TCNJ was a bittersweet time for the acquisitions staff. My predecessor, Marilyn Apelian, fondly known to many readers of ATG as a regular attendant at the Charleston Conference, had been absent on a long medical leave. When Marilyn’s illness ultimately proved fatal, there followed the usual bureaucratic wait to determine if (would there be an exception to the hiring freeze?), then how (should the head of acquisitions be a faculty-staff librarian?), and then by whom (the extended search) the position should be filled. The upshot was a department in stasis for nearly two years, struggling mightily to keep up with their workload but without the time or experience to introduce newer technologies or workflows.

I took my place at TCNJ much to the relief of a harried staff who have been uniformly welcoming, helpful, and open to new ideas. I am particularly grateful to Ann Wittik, our acquisitions supervisor, for holding the department together under very difficult circumstances and for her patience and wisdom in my first few months.

The First Project

Coming from the world of monographs, I was interested early on in reviewing how TCNJ did book buying. The TCNJ library is a Voyager shop and had begun to take advantage of the features of its acquisitions module. The acquisitions department was importing OCLC records to pass on to cataloging and beginning to use EDI to transmit orders and receive invoices from some vendors. But they were still relying on 3x5 cards to track orders from the selectors. I saw what I thought would be an easy target: eliminate the 3x5 cards by taking advantage of systems offered by our vendors and streamline our workflow by shifting manual processes to automated ones. Thus began my first lesson in library land.

In a way, the fundamental work of a vendor rep or an acquisitions librarian is quite similar: we solve problems. In sales, though, the problems are sometimes hyped or even manufactured. We’ve all seen bloated or overly complicated solutions being marketed to remedy minor inconveniences. Incremental improvements in library processes are regularly heralded as revolutionary and indispensable. Sales often relies on the grand general- ity, the vague reassurance that all will work out fine once the deal is done. Details are relegated to customer support, those great, unsung heroes of any successful enterprise.

In acquisitions, it seems the opposite is true. We are blinded to potential advancements by entrenched habits and comfortable workflows. Problems may exist we barely recognize. Sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes. As a new acquisitions librarian, I saw that we really didn’t need to manually key in orders, that we could order from our book vendor’s web site, that the vendor could send us order confirmation records which we could load into our system. But it wasn’t enough to assert that I could help to make all of these things happen, and it wasn’t as easy as the sales folk would have you believe. The devil was, indeed, in the details.

My first challenge was getting the confirmation records to load correctly into Voyager. Note the operative word “correctly.” With the help of our extremely patient systems librarian who was the local Voyager administrator, we were able to get the records to load in fairly short order. Now, I had heard the term “bulk loader,” but had not entirely grasped its significance. Our systems librarian had not encountered the process before and, eager to gratify the brash new acquisitions librarian, assumed that all record loads are created equal. The problem was, we were loading order confirmation records into the cataloging module. This did not please the catalogers.

Bruised, but undaunted, I set about digging through manuals (not something a brash new acquisitions librarian had not encountered the process before), and eager to gratify the brash new acquisitions librarian, assumed that all record loads are created equal. The problem was, we were loading order confirmation records into the cataloging module. This did not please the catalogers.

Next time: the notification plan and thinking about eBooks. Stay tuned. ✹

Collecting to the Core

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the one which seems best suited to Brooks and Richards, is precisely that it is not crucial to current critical discourse. It is likely that a majority of contemporary works of criticism will be viewed as dated, no longer relevant, or passé within a few years. This in no way means libraries should avoid collecting such works, which remain crucial to scholarly work and more indirectly to undergraduate teaching, but librarians should have a clear view about the overtone of contemporary criticism. Works such as Principles of Literary Criticism or The Well Wrought Urn are important not merely because of the weight they bear within the history of modern literary study, nor because they serve as exceptional examples of how critics once worked, but despite those facts. Having survived the winnowing effects of relentless disciplinary change, they represent something of the distilled insight of the New Critics and thus can, and should, be retained in the college library collection on their own merits, rather than the degree to which they conform to current critical opinion. ✹

Endnotes


*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.