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Guest Editorial

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Guest Editorial

by Wesley Lawton (CRC Press)

The "Controversy is the Spice of Life" section of the past issue of *Against the Grain* elicited strong feelings in me. On one hand the articles by Mr. Schrift and Mr. Schatz on publishers marketing to libraries brought out a feeling of dismay. Their overall thesis that publishers have not paid sufficient attention to the needs of libraries, while hardly original, is essentially correct. My sense of dismay comes from the hard work that lies ahead for publishers. Had publishers been more attentive all along to the needs of their customers (both librarians and wholesalers), they could have avoided some of the now required fence mending. Gaining the trust of librarians and vendors will take an effective dialogue over time between publishers and these clients.

However, I felt angry, too. Both articles contained an underlying theme of publisher bashing. Not only did they resort to the usual name calling and sarcasm, they talked trash. To equate publishers' efforts to become knowledgeable about the library marketplace with infecting endemic populations with smallpox and venereal diseases is publisher bashing at its worst. Enough is enough. If vendors truly want a "library community" and an effective dialogue, then they should conduct themselves with class and professionalism.

As my feelings of dismay and anger dissipated, I simply felt frustrated. How can a sense of community be fostered when there is little interest in understanding each other? The vendors fear being cut out of the library cycle of book purchasing. They repeatedly claim that publishers must recognize their "role" in the bookselling process. To insure this happens they align themselves with the libraries as the "good guys" against the publisher "bad guys". But seldom are things simply this black and white.

Let's consider the following elements:

1) Many libraries like using a library wholesaler. They receive good service, discounts, and value-added benefits. Publishers do not "have to" recognize these

facts, but they would be foolish not to acknowledge them. The library wholesalers are a good avenue for getting the publishers' books into libraries.

2) How many of the major publishers do not recognize the role of the library vendor? I have personally visited 14 vendors over the past 9 months, and all of them are doing business with the majority of major publishers at some sort of discount. Even though there are a few publishers who choose not to cooperate with them, that hardly means publishers as a group are guilty of failing to acknowledge the library wholesalers.

3) Still, if a publisher decides not to cooperate with the vendors, that decision is their right. The publisher has invested in, developed, and produced the product. They have every right to promote and distribute their materials as they see fit. If they make poor decisions, the library marketplace will tell them loud and clear by not buying their products. However, vendors have no right to dictate how a publisher approaches the marketplace. That decision is exclusively the right of the publisher, just as it is the vendors' right to market their services the best way they can.

Would publishers be better off to leave marketing to libraries in the hands of the vendors as Mr. Schrift and Schatz contend? The answer is no. Publishers cannot afford to use only a single avenue to promote their books. No matter how effective a particular vendor might be distributing information to their accounts, they cannot be complete in their information about all the books put out by a publisher. They may make available all the titles, but they do not have the resources to advertise every title published. Publishers must be responsible for the promotion of their books to the marketplace.

In fact, vendors benefit greatly from the avenues publisher employ to market their books. Vendors receive firm orders generated by publishers' direct mail advertising, special price offerings, telemarketing,

and personal sales calls. Also, many of the vendors' mailers to libraries are publisher printed materials.

4) When vendors claim lack of recognition by publishers, they often mean they want a larger share of the profits. They tell the "community" they deserve more for their part in the process.

The discount allotted vendors is another example of the marketplace at work. Publishers and vendors enter freely into buying and selling agreements at specific terms. To set discounts publishers determine the margins they need to meet their profit goals and consider the value of the library vendors' efforts on their behalf.

Vendors decide if it is profitable and beneficial to handle a publisher's products at the offered discount. That vendors are "owed" a guaranteed return or higher profits is not part of the equation. Vendors are responsible for determining and reaching their own profit objectives by making good business decisions. If they fail to make sound decisions, they cannot expect to be bailed out by the publishers.

What is "owed" vendors is an equal competitive opportunity to purchase a given publisher's books at the same discount and prices as every other library wholesaler. They have the right to expect open communication, proper information, good service, and courteous, professional treatment. In short, to be treated as a valued customer.

The concept of a library "community" has great appeal. Perhaps it should be viewed as a community of traders, exchanging value for value. Publishers sign the best authors, develop and produce the right books, and offer them to the market at the most reasonable price possible. In exchange for their dollars, vendors perform their function as order takers and middle men buying and reselling a quality product from publishers at a reasonable discount. For their money librarians deserve quality service and products from both the publishers and the vendors. A relationship of this nature would be a win-win situation for all the members of the "community". ☛