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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations/ Communications

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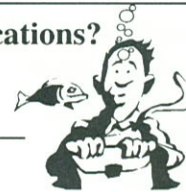
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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

The Rock Meets the Hard Place — A Proposal To Improve Communications?

by **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)
and **Judy Webster** (University of Tennessee)



Confrontational relations between librarians and publishers have increased during the serial crisis of the past several years. Librarians are caught between the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” On one side of the vice grip is the user who wants information regardless of the source and wants it yesterday. On the other side are shrinking budgets and higher prices for materials.

Something very strange is happening. Fundamental to the economic theory of capitalism is the fact that as buying power decreases prices fall accordingly. We see this in many sectors of our economy. Inflation in the US is about 4%, which in broad economic terms is minimal. Many costs are falling. Housing (in some areas of the U.S.), travel, entertainment, gasoline, clothing and many commodities are selling at prices below their levels in the late 1980's. Nations with small economic bases, where exports are confined to a few commodities like coffee, copper or fish, are being ravaged by the decline in demand and prices. Yet in our little corner of the economic world the prices of the materials we buy, books and journals, continue to rise every year beyond what may be reasonably expected due to inflation and the fluctuation of currency.

Why is published information different? One of the factors is that books and journals are not commodities, at least in the strict economic sense. Each publication is unique and only available from one ultimate source, the publisher. Distribution, however, is often available from several sources and costs can vary, complicating the issue.

Much frustration results as librarians attempt to serve current users and build collections with budgets that are either less in terms of dollars or are significantly less in terms of actual buying power if the dollars remain constant. Price increases and budget constraints combine to make our goals difficult or impossible to achieve. It is not remark-

able that under these circumstances frustrations are often expressed by angry and resentful statements that do nothing to advance our common knowledge.

We have here two groups of people who are in large measure dependent upon each other for the attainment of their own goals. Librarians need books and journals in order to build collections, and they need them at prices that are affordable and predictable. Publishers need libraries as customers in order to make a living, and they need a relationship with those customers that is defined by trust and realism. While their goals are dissimilar, their need for each other is absolute; yet the two groups do not communicate well.

Librarians have done a miraculous job of staying sane, productive, professional and, dare we say it, even optimistic in the face of a very depressing work environment. Publishers, especially those who sell primarily to libraries, have also accomplished something they can be proud of. Most remain profitable, some even thriving, in a marketplace that is, at the very best assessment, not growing significantly. They are disseminating vast amounts of information in a variety of packages and formats to a complex and difficult market in a less than favorable economic situation.

What can we actually do to improve communications? (in addition to the Charleston Conference?) We would like to propose that something different be done soon to open new lines of communication. Good companies regularly meet with key suppliers and work with them to improve their business practices. Publishers probably meet regularly with their suppliers of the commodities that are used in the publishing process. Many publishers of scholarly books and journals have made statements in recent years about renewing their efforts to gain more knowledge of their library market. Are the contacts they make at professional association meetings really working? Are direct marketing

efforts providing useful information? Are librarians being heard? We, librarians, booksellers, and subscription agencies, need to figure out a way to solve our mutual problems together. Here is our suggestion:

Let's organize a delegation of librarians to represent the library community. (How about it, subscription agents and booksellers? Do you want to be included as customers also?) This delegation will meet with a number of publishers in their offices. They will share with those publishers, including their sales, marketing, distribution and editorial people, the concerns of the library community. They will talk one on one with the people in publishing, explaining why certain practices are disruptive, why certain pricing policies are destructive, why certain marketing strategies are wasteful, and why some editorial decisions are wrong. They will discuss suggested solutions to these problems, and explore ideas that may work better than present procedures. In other words, they will have a “meaningful dialogue.”

As the delegation moves from publisher to publisher it will learn about publishers' problems and limitations, and so the delegation will refine its agenda. At some point in this process, if the dialogue is reasonable and open, there may be a point where the agenda and the responses to it come together. The delegation would then report its findings at the Charleston Conference and other national association meetings whose organizations sponsored the delegation. Process is the operative word here, because this will take time, patience, and (oops, almost forgot) money.

Who pays for this? How about a cooperative effort of the American Library Association, the Association of American Publishers, the Association of American University Presses, individual libraries and publishers? Who organizes this? Let us hear from you. Send in those letters to the editor. ☛