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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

Column Editors, **Judy Webster** (University of Tennessee)
and **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

THE PERFECT SALES CALL

Surprise! We do not define the perfect sales call as one that results in a sale. We think a vendor/librarian meeting is more complex than simply buying and selling, and the results can be more profitable, in every sense of the word. A sales call, as we define it, involves a process of assessing each other's needs and capabilities. It involves communication, comprehension and cooperation. It is an ongoing attempt to fit services to problems, to negotiate prices and costs, and to evolve a working relationship that benefits both parties. Sometimes the very best sales calls result in the buyer buying less and the seller learning more.

As we have occasionally done in our past columns, we are approaching this subject with a split column. Both of us, from our own perspective as bookseller and librarian, will try to explain what we expect from the person with whom we are meeting, and what we hope will be accomplished by the visit.

From Barry:

Airplanes are crowded and late. Long drives are monotonous, and it's dangerous to try to read (I know, I've tried). After all these years of marriage, I would still rather eat dinner with my wife than chew on Chinese take-out in a Holiday inn room while watching Jeopardy and getting depressed because I can't remember the name of the largest lake in Asia. Yet I love making sales calls, and I especially relish those perfect visits. Here are my expectations for the perfect sales call.

It is easy to park, and it's not raining. The librarian is not in a meeting because I have made an appointment and arrived on time (you should phone if delayed). I receive a friendly wel-

come, and after a few minutes of pleasantries, we get down to business.

The librarian is prepared. He has reviewed the details of our relationship, and he has specific questions and comments. Complaints, problems, or commendations are backed up by facts. We use examples when we talk about issues. Included in our meeting at the appropriate time are members of the acquisitions staff. This is important because it enables me to communicate directly with the people who are dealing with us on a daily basis. Their comments and suggestions reach me unfiltered by the librarian's interpretations. And similarly, I am able to respond directly, without worrying that my words will be distorted (remember the game of telephone).

Our meeting is conducted with mutual respect. If, for instance, the meeting has been called to discuss price negotiations, the librarian has told me in advance that this is an agenda issue. This enables me to do some homework before I arrive. We can then talk about pricing on an equal footing.

Often the agenda includes a free-wheeling discussion of the book trade and the impact of publisher/bookseller policies on libraries. These spontaneous conversations that go beyond the immediate issues can be a good use of everyone's time. Part of the responsibility of the sales representative is to spot trends so that his company can anticipate them in the planning process. Librarians can use the "intelligence network" of representatives to learn about how other libraries are dealing with common problems or get a better understanding of the publishing world's approach to the library market.

By discussing specific needs that the library may have, librarians can motivate the creation of new products

or services. Booksellers and journal agents develop services because librarians tell them there is a need for them. When the discussion turns to these topics, it is helpful to bring the affected people into the meeting. Just as meeting with the acquisitions staff helps communication, the inclusion of technical services or cataloging people can be worthwhile when you are talking about services that may impact on them. The important principle here is to prepare for the meeting ahead of time, and, as much as is practical, make sure that everyone who will be affected is involved.

The best sales calls incorporate some specific goals and objectives, are characterized by an exchange of information that helps everyone work together more effectively, and in many cases result in a business transaction that benefits both the buyer and seller.

From Judy:

There are three major types of sales calls between vendors and librarians: (1) vendor representative introduces her company to the librarian and makes a case for the services that can be provided (no current business relationship exists), (2) vendor representative calls to check on the continuing service her company provides the library by reviewing problems and answering questions, (3) vendor representative calls to transact substantial business with the librarian such as an approval plan profile review or presentation. In my remarks, I will focus on the first two types of sales calls. In my experience,

the third type of sales call is usually more successful due to its significance to both parties and the content of the meeting having been agreed upon in advance.

The perfect introductory sales call begins with a telephone call from the vendor representative to the librarian at least a week in advance of the intended visit. (Are "drop-ins" still a problem? It's been a long time since I've had one from a vendor. Publisher representatives still tend to do this.) During the telephone conversations, the representative gives the librarian more than one option of day and/or time for the appointment. In this type of sales call, the librarian does not have as much preparatory work as the vendor representative.

After a few introductory pleasantries, the vendor representative begins by stating the purpose of the visit. The librarian's role is to ask pertinent questions about the company's history and its operation and focus. The sales representative also asks general questions about the library, its organization, its budget cycle and status, its acquisition policies and procedures,

who should be contacted for what, etc. The meeting concludes after approximately 30 minutes with the librarian giving some indication to the representative about the possibility of future orders being directed to her company. The vendor representative concludes by summarizing briefly the strengths of her company's service and departs without lingering to discuss pleasantries.

The purpose of the second type of sales call is to review an already established working relationship and to identify areas for improvement from the perspective of the library and the vendor. This type of meeting should also have been arranged well in advance. I expect the vendor representative to have reviewed notes of previous visits so that I do not need to repeat basic information about my library with every visit. I also expect vendors to have knowledge of the amount of current business I am doing with them. The vendor representative should have basic knowledge of the operations at the home office so that she can respond to concerns and questions about the way

library orders are handled.

I would like to know if the vendor representative has any concerns about the mix of orders we are currently sending. Some vendors now produce periodic management reports which are supplied to their representatives, showing the breakdown of recent orders by type. These reports are very helpful as a basis for a discussion of various service issues (i.e. average discount, average delivery time, etc.).

I appreciate knowing whether the orders coming from my library are causing any particular problems for the vendor. I know that this may be viewed as difficult territory for discussion, but if the vendor representative is a good communicator, I can respond positively to suggestions for improvement. The maximum time for this type of vendor-library visit is one hour.

I am pleased to say that the majority of the vendor-library visits in which I participate these days get fairly high marks when compared with my goals for the perfect sales call. There has been marked improvement on both sides in my twelve years' experience. ☼

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