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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

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

Turnabout is fair play. So — this column is by The Fast himself!

Value Added Services and the Technology Dilemma

by **Barry Fast**

A whole new set of buzz words is being used in our profession to define, explain, or conceptualize a very complex problem. Value Added Services is the buzz phrase of the 90s in vendor/library relations. We know what services are, but value and added sometimes just don't add up. Valuable to whom? Added to what?

Some things are obvious. If booksellers could order from publishers electronically, computer to computer, there would be real value for both parties. Pubnet accommodates this kind of ordering, but with a limited group of publishers and with some of the important ordering elements missing (such as rapid verification and reporting). Pubnet, to its credit, is expanding both the extent of its EDI capability and the number of publishers participating. But therein lies the problem: As long as most publishers, or even many publishers, remain outside the Pubnet universe, we booksellers are required to have at least two different ordering methods.

In fact, there are publishers who offer electronic ordering outside Pubnet, who in all probability will remain outside Pubnet, and from whom we will be required to order with their proprietary protocols. Whatever advantages — call them value added — ordering through Pubnet offers us, they may be squandered by the requirement to maintain a number of different ordering systems for non-participating publishers. Today there is no efficient electronic ordering method for booksellers, and it is unlikely there will be for many years. So between booksellers and publishers, value added services do not exist.

What about between booksellers and libraries? Here the problem seems just as complicated. Some libraries are continuing to develop their own in-house automation systems and will

undoubtedly include EDI with vendors as part of the package. Will the X12 standard be incorporated? Let us hope so; no, let us pray fervently. If X12 is not universally adopted by libraries and booksellers, the advantages — call them value added — of computer to computer communication slip away.

Some systems vendors have announced that they will not move ahead on EDI until a year or two or more from now. Other systems vendors say that they can install EDI now, or are Beta testing. This disparity of EDI availability between the library community (with the systems vendors as gatekeepers) and the bookselling community means that several methods of library/vendor communication have to be maintained. How long this maintenance must continue is anyone's guess; ask your friendly systems vendor for a guesstimate on when EDI will be functioning in your library's automated acquisition system.

The library gets to remove the trash cans from the acquisitions department because there is no more paper (the great goddess of efficiency is the elimination of paper — beware goddesses made of plaster that look almost like marble). But the vendor must maintain the old systems, the new systems, and accommodate the transitional systems. No savings; no value added for the vendor. And no problem either because that is what we vendors do. We accommodate a dazzling array of different needs and systems and protocols. This is all in a day's work for us, and were we not willing and able to do this, libraries would have no money — I mean zero — to spend on books. It would all be used up in dealing with 14,000 publishers, most of whom would cost more to buy from than the value of the book(s) bought. That is real value added.

Value added implies that there is measurable, demonstrable value attached to a particular service. If that is true, if there is value, then someone ought to pay for it. Either the publishers or the libraries, or both, ought to pay for the value that booksellers add by making book purchasing more efficient. The problem is that no one has yet figured out the value in real dollar

and cents terms. We have a hunch, a good strong hunch, that booksellers save libraries enormous amounts of staff time. Any acquisitions librarian would tell you that, and would probably go further by stating that the acquisitions functions would collapse without the efficiencies delivered by booksellers. Publishers generally agree that library booksellers afford them efficiencies, and they would claim that they pay for these efficiencies: the discount. One could argue that the discount is not enough (in fact, I would argue that), but at least there is a recognition in monetary form.

The dilemma facing booksellers in this period of technological transition is how far and how fast to move ahead on development. Part of the problem stems from an inability to quantify the value of electronic value added services. Perhaps that cannot be quantified in advance; we have to wait until EDI is implemented widely before we can see what it is worth, and therefore what libraries will pay for its efficiencies. But if history is any kind of predictor, I doubt that we will agree on the value. After all, in our present world of saving libraries the costs of dealing with thousands of publishers, there does not seem to be an agreement as reflected by market forces on the value of the savings.

One could argue that the difference between the cost of a book and the price it is sold at reflects that value. Maybe, but I think that everything from the state of the economy, the sad state of library budgets, the continued rise in serials pricing, the internal accounting methods and a lot of other factors is distorting the value of existing bookseller services. This serves to bring more uncertainty to the development of technology that booksellers will offer libraries in the future. Until the time when EDI becomes an official standard or when all libraries have adopted it, the added value accrues mostly to the library. ☛