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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

Column Editors, **Judy Webster** (University of Tennessee)
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LEADING AND/OR FOLLOWING: THE VENDOR'S ROLE

by **Judy Webster**

Recently, I've been pondering the question of the difference between *following* and *leading* in terms of library management issues. It seems to me that the difference between the two concepts is getting smaller as we have reorganized into management teams and have pushed decision making farther down the organizational hierarchy. Dictionary definitions of the two terms indicate that *following* assumes leading and *leading* involves guiding or directing. In one way of viewing my role as a manager, I've realized that I cannot lead my staff where they are not willing to go — at least with any long-term success. In a sense, they allow me to lead because I'm going in a direction that they want to follow.

Because I've been thinking about these concepts already, I've found it a natural consequence to apply the same thinking to the role of vendors in the library portion of the information industry. Should booksellers and subscription agents be leaders or followers in the library information market place? What would it mean if they were leaders? What would it mean if they were followers? What's the difference? Does it matter?

Booksellers and subscription agents came into the fore during the middle of this century when libraries had funds for collection building but not for staff to order and receive everything that collection money could buy. They offered expertise in location and delivering selected titles. By consolidating orders with a few vendors, libraries found that they could expend their acquisitions budgets in a more timely way. Libraries in effect "hired" vendors to do what they could not do for themselves. Vendors filled a void of both information and expertise

existing between publishers and libraries.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, vendors were definitely ahead of libraries in automating their inventories and accounts receivable and payable. Once the vendors converted their records to machine-readable form, they were able to customize invoicing and reporting to a variety of specifications. As a result, libraries gained additional information about their orders and expenditures. At the same time, academic libraries were at the beginning stage of their automation efforts which included reading, experimenting, and revising their manual procedures for inclusion in the online environment.

At the UTK Library, we began our automation efforts by bringing up a circulation system in 1982; the online catalog followed in 1987, and acquisitions came online in 1988. Now we have a mature system, and with it we have also matured as both users and implementors of a complex online system. We are looking forward with great anticipation to the new generation of integrated library system software products in the client-server environment. We've recently seen a demonstration at our library of a system that automatically updates current periodical issue holdings in the online catalog immediately as the paper issues are being checked in. It makes me wonder how we are going to get our periodical issues down to the Current Periodicals room fast enough, and they're located only one floor away. The new technologies indicate to me that our reorganization days are far from being over.

Booksellers and subscription agents are also planning for the future. Several of them have been organizing focus groups of librarians and publishers to serve as sounding boards for new ideas and developmental areas. We should all applaud and support these efforts. Taking the plunge into a new area of technology is risky business. Even the

use of focus groups is not fool-proof. If the new technology involves requiring libraries to follow with the purchase of new hardware and software, vendors may find themselves leading prematurely where libraries may not want or cannot follow. The reasons for this seeming lack of cooperation may be complex and have been overlooked in focus group sessions that may have taken place years before the actual product becomes available.

Now that booksellers and subscription agents are well established in the information industry, what should their role be in this middle environment between the buyer and the seller? In terms of new technology, specifically, do they have a leadership role?

In the current environment, enhanced MARC records with table of contents information that can be purchased from a vendor along with approval books and loaded into an online catalog holds attractive possibilities for libraries. It will probably be an idea that will come to successful fruition because it is leading where libraries want to follow and where they can follow without a complete system overhaul. It is offered as a choice. It is optional. Conversely, a vendor's requirement that libraries switch to EDI by a certain date or pay additional charges to receive their invoices in a compatible format is an example of leading prematurely. Many libraries are not in a position to implement EDI, and the status of EDI as a standard is still under debate.

The vendor's role can involve leading if the leadership is in service of the goals of their customers, the libraries. In my opinion, that means that they must also be followers.☞