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## Issues in Vendor/Library Relations / Better Beta

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# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations

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

## Better Beta by Barry Fast

I was a recent guest at a dinner party in England. My friends had invited their friends, so there were several people new to me at the table. The woman sitting across from me asked what I did for a living, and I briefly explained. I always cringe a little when people ask me this, because inevitably they confuse me at first with a publisher and begin telling me about the children's book they have been working on for years and maybe I can help them get it published. When I explain that I'm not a publisher but rather a library supplier, a book seller to libraries, a provider of book-buying services to librarians, it almost makes no difference. Oh that's OK, they usually say, so you must know people in publishing who would be interested in my children's book.

This time, however, I got a completely different reaction. When I told the woman I supply books to libraries she looked at me kind of funny and said: "That must be awfully boring." I was taken aback, at a loss for words (yes, really, imagine me at a loss for words). "Boring," I exclaimed, "why in the world would you think it boring?" She went on to speculate that I spent my days in musty libraries, wandering around in the stacks and talking in a near whisper to that classic mythical librarian with blue hair and sensible shoes (well the shoe part is true, and nothing wrong with it either) while she, definitely she, pasted those funny little pockets in the backs of books and deposited overdue fines in the cigar box next to her squeaky wooden chair. I'm exaggerating a bit this woman's speculations about how I spend my professional life, but only a bit. You are getting the main theme of this conversation.

When she was done explaining to me why my professional life was so empty and meaningless, I said a little prayer to myself, something along the lines of thank God I volunteered to be the designated driver tonight and therefore had limited myself to just two glasses of wine during dinner. I needed all the self

control I could muster; after all I was a guest, and I did represent the full glory and policy of the entire United States of America (any of you who have been the only American at a foreign dinner table will know exactly what I mean, and you think just the Somalis hate us). So I said to this lady, politely and quietly, "Your description of libraries is about as accurate as saying NASA is a fireworks manufacturer because they both deal with rockets."

Which brings me to beta testing. The world of libraries and the vendors who serve that world are developing new services at a dizzying rate. Libraries are offering patrons a multitude of new technologies through which they can get more and better information than ever before. Database searching, which no one dreamed of little more than a decade ago, is now routine. Networked CDs with enormous amounts of information available through powerful PCs are begin-

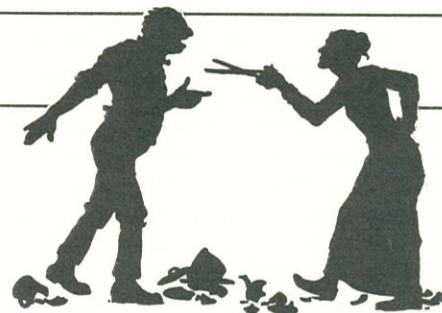
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***"It was the most recent past that a VAN was used to transport people instead of information, and LAN was the airline of Chile."***

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ning to look like an old and not quite good enough technology. Wasn't it just a couple of years ago that CDs were going to solve the "cost of information" problem? Now we are worrying about copyright protection for electronic publishing. It was the most recent past that a VAN was used to transport people instead of information, and LAN was the airline of Chile.

When your friendly vendor calls and asks you to be a beta test site for that company's latest gizmo, you should be nothing but complimented. Well, not quite. You should also be a little wary. The fact is that vendors ask librarians to be a beta only if they have a lot of respect for the way that library is run. No one wants to have a sensitive live test of a new technology affected by library politics, incompetence, or mismanagement (if you are not asked to be a beta it doesn't follow that your library is char-



acterized by any of these negative attributes). When you are asked you are being told that the vendor believes your library is among the best, that the vendor trusts you with her most sensitive new secrets, that your vendor believes he can rely on you for accurate and worthwhile feedback. Feel complimented. But. . .

To kind of quote the only good poem Ms Stein wrote, test is a test is a test. Things go wrong. Expect the worst, prepare for disruption and realize that you are being used, in the best sense, but used nonetheless. You have responsibilities in this, and it will take time from you, your staff and colleagues. It may be so disruptive that, had you known beforehand, you would not have agreed.

I don't want to overstate the obvious. The fact is that being a beta test can be fun, fascinating and help your career. A case can be made, I think, that there is an obligation to the profession to work with a vendor on a new technology that you believe will benefit libraries. But build in some safeguards, for yourself and in fairness to the vendor.

For instance, ask the hard questions. Try to get a worst case scenario and discuss with the vendor and your colleagues how you will handle that. Be certain that your administration knows what you are doing and why, and that you have full permission and the resources you need. Make sure you have a direct line to your vendor, that you feel comfortable working with the company, that you trust the people with whom you will be testing. Be prepared for this to be an exciting experience. Librarianship these days is high tech, while at the same time it is still helping people get the information they want. Beta testing new ways of getting or handling information is very much in the mainstream of most librarians' job descriptions. Every time I think of that lady in England I just have to laugh. Boring? I'm just grateful we have a nine day week. ☹