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Media Minder

Outsourcing

Column Editor: **Linda F. Crismond** (Vice President for Public Relations, Professional Media Service Corp.)

There must be something to all the talk about outsourcing. From the frequency it was mentioned at the last ALA Midwinter meeting in Los Angeles and given the extensive discussions on the Internet recently, it looks like a new, and somewhat controversial, idea that a few pioneers have instituted in their technical services departments.

Outsourcing is the new word for what we used to describe as contracting. It extends beyond technical services to other library operations including building and grounds maintenance, reference back up services, and computer support. We have always relied on the Library of Congress as a source of cataloging information. When OCLC went national in the early 70's, libraries began to accept shared cataloging from their colleagues. President Reagan made contracting famous when he suggested that the entire operation of federal libraries should be contracted to the private sector.

It seems, therefore, that outsourcing has been around for a long time. Managers have always looked for better ways to provide service. Their charge is to see that a service is provided, whether they perform the service with their own staff or through the staff of others. A good measure for outsourcing is to require that the service be provided at the same quality or at a higher level than is presently provided and at the same or a lower cost.

The pros and cons for outsourcing have been discussed at length by others. To summarize, concerns cluster around

fears of losing jobs, giving professional work to the private sector, losing the commitment to public service, and the inability of a contractor to replicate local specialized practices. It is my opinion that these perceived concerns can be alleviated through a partnership with the contractor where the library is clear in its requirements at the very beginning and insists that the contractor use professional, knowledgeable, and well-trained staff to manage and accomplish the project. Ongoing communication is the key to success both between library managers and their staff and between the library and contractor.

The advantages are many, especially in technical services. Staff can be freed to perform other priorities, costs are reduced, backlogs are eliminated, the quality of services can be enhanced, a systematic and comprehensive approach is applied to the operation, and theft of unprocessed materials is reduced.

The outsourcing of technical services functions for audio and video materials involves four areas: selection, acquisitions, cataloging, and processing. For selection, approval plans and standing orders have been around a long time for books, but not as long for AV. To be aware of all that is being published which is relevant to the library's collection development policy, standing orders and profile-developed selection lists for AV materials can be established through vendors who also supply the materials. Because of the vendor's knowledge of these more specialized materials, the library gains expertise that it would take many years to learn. The material can be supplied automatically within the definitions set by the library for publishers, subject depth, and budget limitations. The library may choose to receive selection lists first. It is reasonable to expect that

the vendor will include review references, brief annotations, and current price.

Many libraries have established AV collections relatively recently and want to enrich their collection with a retrospective purchase. Also, public libraries continue to build new branches and are looking for a basic AV collection. The vendor will be able to provide these retrospective and core lists and is eager to work with the library since it represents a major sale to them.

When one tries to anticipate what will be a top hit for audio or video, the sources for advance information on new releases are different from the old standbys of *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus*. AV bestseller lists are not printed in the local newspaper or in the library reviewing media but rather in the comprehensive trade magazine for the industry, *Billboard*. A vendor can supply all top hits automatically as a standing order plan and/or selection lists can be created of new releases, prerelease information, and top hits as defined by the library. For example, a cinema library may want all features and documentaries; a language learning center can request English-as-a-second-language materials and audio books; and a music library might want all the CD's produced by selected publishers.

For acquisitions librarians, AV materials are more challenging to buy (see Media Minder column, *Against the Grain*, February, 1994). Until recently, the acquisitions of AV, especially videos, required the ordering of all material directly from the publishers. Even now, most reviewing sources give the name and address for video publishers within each review, a practice not done for any other type of material. Using the services of a vendor specializing in AV

allows the library to consolidate its orders, thereby saving time and money. Online ordering systems allow the library to search by title, keywords, performer, composer, and orchestra. A unique requirement for music is the record label number. Consider classical music where everything is a "symphony" and there are hundreds of versions of, for example, Mozart's work. To be able to search by publisher and/or label number is essential in finding current music materials.

Perhaps the most discussion of outsourcing is contract cataloging. Libraries have used contract cataloging for books for many years through LC, OCLC, WLN and others. LC does not catalog videos, however, and they catalog only a small portion of the sound recordings currently published. Therefore, the library needs to either catalog the material originally or look for copy elsewhere.

AV cataloging is complex (see Me-

dia Minder, *Against the Grain*, April, 1994). A basic MARC record does not satisfy many of an academic library's needs for enhanced cataloging including added entries for every selection on a music CD or added tracings for producer, director, narrators, and cast of a video production. Searching a database such as OCLC's for AV records is tedious since the material does not have an ISBN or LCCN to distinguish it. The advantage of using a contractor is that you will get cataloging for every title you request, and you can specify that the record be modified or enhanced to meet local requirements. It is reasonable to request sample records from the contractor and to review the professional experience and credentials of their cataloging staff.

Finally, the physical processing necessary to place AV materials on the shelves is more laborious than for books. Consider these requirements: protective cases for single and multi-unit audio and videos with outside sleeves to preserve the original box, property labels (you

cannot stamp on their spines), bar code labels, theft detection strips, circulation pockets and slips, call number labels, and special labels like "keep out of the sun" and "please rewind." The material is small and does not have a place for everything. Its multi-part nature requires duplication of processes. You cannot often hide a theft detection strip on AV materials so, therefore, a nonremoveable sealer must be placed over it. Working with a contractor, all these options can be accommodated.

The decisions to rely on an approval plan, to use a vendor for ordering, to accept cataloging from others, and to turn over the processing section to outsiders are all major. They require a clear understanding of expectations and requirements, a monitoring system, excellent communications, and periodic evaluation. Once the partnership is established with an outside contractor, the library should receive the benefits of cost effective, expert, and timely service. ☞

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