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Marketing to Libraries

An Interview with **John Secor**, Chief Executive Officer, and
Gary Shirk, Chief Information Officer (**Yankee Book Peddler**)

by **Vikki Medaglia** (Bates College) (vmedagl@bates.edu)

Many of us who know John Secor from the Charleston Conference appreciate his informative, thought-provoking papers and his dry humor. Last fall,

I heard Gary Shirk address the Serials Interest Group of the New England Chapter of ACRL. Then, when so many of the concerns at the last Charleston Conference had to do with market position and the role of vendors, I knew I wanted to talk more with these two people. So, I asked them to speak with all of us in this forum. Here are some ideas that will, I hope, initiate more dialogue — in this column, in your offices, and at the next Charleston Conference.

V. Why don't you start by telling us a little about Yankee's history and its market niche.

JRS: **Yankee Book Peddler, Inc.** (YBP) was founded in 1971 as a specialized book vendor, to libraries, of university press books and university-affiliated departmental publications. In the late 1970s and early 1980s we evolved into a full-service book vendor; by "full-service" I mean that we increased the scope of publishers we work with. Today, we cover thousands of imprints, including trade, professional, scientific, scholarly, university press, museum and gallery, small press, and association publishers. We provide scholarly materials, plus related collection development and technical processing services, to all types of libraries, whether they be academic, special, public, or corporate libraries. As a practical matter, however, our primary focus is academic libraries.

V. What would you like us to know about yourselves and your goals for YBP?

JRS: Perhaps our vision statement best depicts who we are as an organization today and the future we seek to create (we continue to evolve and to learn): YBP is committed to being the world's leading supplier of scholarly materials and collection management services to academic and research markets by the end of this century. Our sales goal for fiscal year 1994/95 is \$50 million (our fiscal year extends from July 1 through June 30). To accomplish this, we have just under 200 truly excellent employees. The organization has a strong entrepreneurial spirit that enables us to focus on our mission (purpose), values, and vision; I say we are truly vision-led and I believe we are. Having said that, we have much work to do in terms of getting everyone involved — building shared vision — and helping our people to accept, embrace, and seek change (as opposed to reacting to events). As an organization, we are committed to continual renewal — individual and organizational. We continue to experiment, to take calculated risks, and to innovate.

V. What does the "library market" look like to you? Whom does it include and how does it operate?

GMS: For YBP, the library market is a very large, diverse group of organizations. It varies from very large academic libraries, like the University of Minnesota libraries, to small, specialized libraries like the one at Colonial Williamsburg. Needs and expectations can also vary widely, making it virtually impossible to serve all sectors well. We are convinced that to be excellent you must concentrate all your efforts in one area. That is why YBP focuses on providing scientific and other scholarly materials to academic, research, and professional markets.

V. How does YBP market to libraries?

JRS: Like most disciplines, marketing is a more complex subject today than it was yesterday. Yesterday, Marketing

101 courses focused on the 4 P's: Product, Price, Promotion, and Place. Teachers admonished their students "to define the product around benefits," and "to price the product competitively." They also advised both students and practitioners to employ a variety of promotional tools to position the product/brand in the customer's mind: trade shows, public relations, customer contact (sales presentations), advertising, etc. Lectures were also devoted to the topic of place: The need to determine how the product or service would be brought to the marketplace. And if time permitted, the lecturer would bring up the term "selling" (getting a signature on the dotted line). Fortunately, from my perspective, I never took Marketing 101. From the "get-go" we focused on building an excellent organization — believing that an excellent organization would create excellent services. Perhaps **James Collins** and **Jerry Porras**, in their insightful book *Built to Last*, best describe the marketing strategy we adopted in 1971 — precepts we adhere to today: "... we suggest that the continual stream of great products and services from highly visionary companies stems from them being outstanding organizations, not the other way around." Certainly we do "market our services." We attend trade shows; we have "fact sheets" that explain our services. We occasionally advertise a service. However, since people are what an organization is all about, we continue to invest in people who will keep the organization — and its services — continually changing and evolving. We focus on relationship building, and we love being told that building relationships is the foundation of today's Marketing 101 courses.

V. In your experience with academic libraries (or other types), who makes purchasing decisions?

GMS: When we started in the business over two decades ago, acquisitions librarians would make the decision pretty much on their own, except where government required a formal bid process. But

that has changed over the past 15 years. As approval plans became an increasingly important part of the business, heads of collection development became much more involved and shared the purchasing decisions with heads of acquisitions. As libraries began to concentrate their purchasing with fewer vendors to gain better terms, we began to see more participation from selection committees, involving a broader spectrum of library staff. Now, as more libraries are considering contract acquisitions and shelf-ready processing, the increasing complexities require additional participation from cataloging representatives, heads of technical services, systems librarians, and even finance office representatives. Of course, as the size of the purchase agreements increases (sometimes exceeding \$1,000,000 annual commitments), we have seen increasing interest from the library director.

V. Can you address some of the forces driving the library market in the current economic climate?

GMS: As a whole, the library market is extraordinarily competitive today. The rivalry among book vendors is intense, as each of us attempts to increase our share of the market while, at the same time, investing significant amounts of resources in the technology we will need for the future. This is something of a tightrope act. To gain market share, we have to gain ground not only against our obvious competitors — other booksellers — but also against new media, such as CD-ROM and subscription information services, which compete for the same book dollars. Our customers, fighting what seems to be an endless battle with budget cuts, have learned to drive hard bargains at the negotiating table, and publishers are always looking to squeeze a little more profit from their products, especially as they peer into a future clouded by the uncertainties of electronic publishing. All of this, com-

bined with the need to hone skills in library technical processing, has made bookselling far more interesting, challenging, and risky than it has ever been in the past.

V. As you have described the increasing involvement of library staff in selection processes, it sounds as though you are developing a closer partnership. Yet librarians are also negotiating for more service to make up for shrinking financial and personnel resources. And publishers have constraints at the other end. Do you ever feel crushed between uncontrollable

"But it's risky to live outside your time."

forces? How do you respond to the pressures of being in the middle?

GMS: You're right. We're often in the middle when library needs collide with publisher constraints. That's why book vendor profits are razor thin. But vendors who survive the collision year after year for decades become strong and flexible. Essentially, we make a virtue of adversity, taking every opportunity to provide value-added services to libraries and to educate publishers to ways that we can serve them as well. We've also invested an enormous amount of effort in becoming more productive. Our sales and the complexity of our work have increased fourfold in the past decade, but our staff have only doubled. We've been able to absorb smaller margins from publishers and still pass much of the savings along to libraries. This effort now seems to be reaching the point of diminishing returns, so we'll have to do a better job explaining the value of our work to both libraries and publishers in the years ahead. As libraries extend their dependence upon vendors to cataloging and technical processing, a healthy vendor becomes more important to everyone.

V. How might the market conditions we've discussed affect working relationships over the next several years?

GMS & JRS: To the developments we've already mentioned, we could add the increasing globalization of information production and distribution, the huge capital investments needed to keep pace with technological change, society's ambivalence toward education, and the public's impatience with government overall. These developments are beginning to erode the traditional foundations of both higher education and the infrastructure, including booksellers, that supports it. We are largely a product of the 19th century. A very successful product. So successful, in fact, that we are reluctant to change. But it's risky to

live outside your time. To survive and prosper in the years ahead, both libraries and those who serve them must evolve. There's evidence that this is now underway. The new cooperative efforts among publishers, book vendors, bibliographic utilities, system vendors, and libraries are shaking up the traditional relationships.

On Gary's office wall hangs a print depicting a freight shipment of 30 "Concord" coaches from the Abbot, Downing & Company of Concord, NH to Wells, Fargo Co., Omaha, Nebraska. The year was 1868 and Abbot, Downing had reached the pinnacle of success. Today, only a few coaches survive to provide testimony to Abbot, Downing's role in history. The print hangs in Gary's office as a reminder that 19th century solutions are not today's solutions. Today's solutions are not yet clear but the effort to find them has begun.

V. John, Gary, thank you very much for your thoughts. you've opened any number of avenues for further discussion.

If any of you readers out there care to venture down any of them, please let me know. ☺

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