

November 1996

Back Talk

Tony Ferguson
Columbia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Tony (1996) "Back Talk," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 8: Iss. 5, Article 12.

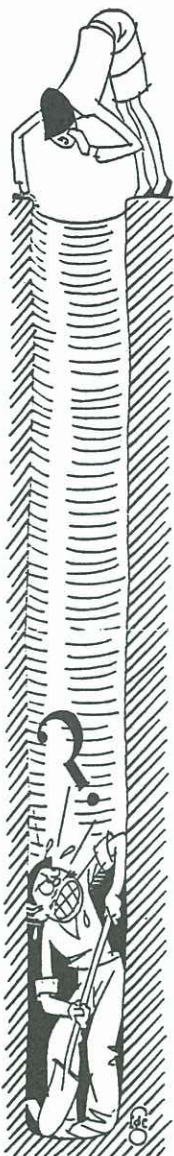
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1950>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Back Talk

Business Not as Usual

by **Tony Ferguson** (Associate University Librarian, Columbia University)
Phone: 212-854-2270; Fax: 212-222-0331; <ferguson@columbia.edu>



It's presidential election time and we are once again treated to the opportunity to vote for the candidate who will not conduct "business as usual." Insider politicians, since they are not businessmen, we are told, can't be trusted to understand the simple truth that you can't spend more than you collect in taxes. Outsider candidates, on the other hand, can be trusted.

Our current slate of "outsider" candidates will include an incumbent President who is really just an Arkansas governor intent on battling a beltway Congress made up of professional (read: deceitful) politicians; a crusty but lovable, if we could only get to know him, old soldier who has sacrificed his life in the Senate to battle the tax-and-spend liberals; and a billionaire businessman who because he is an engineer understands that all you have to do is define the problem, brainstorm solutions, and debug what you decide to implement. They all claim to have a monopoly on the ability to keep an eye on the bottom line and not lead us into debt and ruin. They all portray their job to be making choices between good and evil.

In libraries, we sometimes fall prey to the same simplistic thinking. We are information decision-makers who make choices between good and dumb (read: other points of view). We focus on the bottom line and, when needed, downsize, cut serials, sacrifice content continuity to meet current customer needs, sacrifice current and future needs to bask in the legitimacy of the digital library and technology's bleeding edge, etc. We make decisions. The buck stops here! Isn't life wonderful?

Scientific periodicals (fewer and fewer books published since they don't make money) publishers, whether they report to an owner, shareholder, or society of scholars, pull at the legs, wings, necks, etc., of the library geese who lay golden eggs, and deny any share of guilt for the bloodied and broken carcasses that remain on the battlefield.

Like librarians, their eyes are on the bottom line. Unlike librarians, they must not only balance the books, but make increased profits annually.

Book and serial vendors are different. They claim there is no right or wrong. They take money from customers and suppliers alike. Publishers are right. Customers are right. Both are consoled. Both pay.

Business is business we are told. It's not personal. So information professionals are free to downsize, cut serials, gut collections, charge outrageous prices, take money from publishers and customers alike, all in the name of nurturing the bottom line.

Is this any way to run a business?

Since "Back Talk" is the name for this column, I sometimes start out thinking what back talk do I want to dish out. After all, how often does anyone get a chance to lash out at the injustices of the world, to vent about what is "bugging" them? I have vented. I feel a little better. But there are other things that make me feel better about some of the issues discussed above.

First of all, apparently even in business there is recognition that by focusing solely on today's bottom line, tomorrow's success is imperiled. On page B1 of the September 27, 1996 *Wall Street Journal*, is an article entitled "Some Companies Try to Rebuild Loyalty" by Joseph B. White and Joann S. Lublin. They note: "Corporate attitudes are changing in part because employers realize that talented employees can easily jump ship in today's relatively tight job market. Although corporate layoffs haven't stopped, job creation is far outstripping jobs eliminated." They go on to describe a variety of job enrichment opportunities being given employees and job security guarantees.

Since libraries tend to mimic business on a time-lag basis, we will all probably experience some of these benefits as well. University librarians have always received free tuition and some have tenure, but these are the exception. Numerically, most librarians lack these benefits. One wonders if publishers and vendors will take steps to nurture company loyalty. If so, the gossip about who is switching to which competitor in *Against the Grain* will become much less interesting.

Treating employees as important factors in a business or library's long-term success is critical. For librarians who feel stretched between the public service, collection development, processing, learning about the Internet and how to become a Web-masters, and serving on countless committees, they need reassurance that their work is of value, that they are not just widgets that can be

added or deleted according to the whims of the people who pay the bills.

A second manifestation of the good things happening, relates to the development of policies in libraries to govern how we treat each other and our patrons. At Columbia, we developed a **Human Resources philosophy statement** that declares we are all committed to:

- * work together with skill, dedication, and creativity.
- * treat each person with dignity and respect.
- * encourage individual development of skills and knowledge.
- * articulate the expectations of the workplace.
- * value individual contributions and experience.
- * understand how functions of the library and academic computing contribute to the larger community.
- * have understanding and compassion for people experiencing exceptional personal crises.
- * practice fair and equitable treatment of all individuals throughout the University.
- * support the University statement on non-discriminatory policies.
- * maintain open and clear channels for communication.

We are not singular in the development of such statements. Many libraries preceded us. All such statements, when implemented, make information work more enjoyable and productive.

Finally, I was cheered (read: awestruck and shaken) this past week when I was told by a representative of the major European scientific periodicals publisher that they were offering digital and print journals (yes, I know this goes against one of the commandments laid down in my last column) for only 3% more than print alone and they threw in guaranteed annual increases of less than 10% in exchange for a no cancellation agreement (yes, I understand they are scared about the future but I don't reject Christmas presents just because it makes Santa feel good). While the suggested increase level is still above the percentage our budget will increase, the concept is definitely headed in the right direction. This comes on the heels of an offer from a major American medical sciences publisher to discuss guaranteed print journal price increases. November 5th will come and go. We will have a new/old President. Life will go on. We will continue to face challenges. Let's all try and remember that if we work together, we can all win. If not, there will be short term winners and losers, but we will all lose in the long run. 