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Library/Vendor Relationships — Focusing on the University Presses' Need to Collaborate with Librarians and Their Vendors

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"I sense that we now stand at the top of the pass. Spread out below is a vast expanse, with no roads through it. We can, I suppose, each take our own individual buggies and drive off alone into the night, for good or ill. Worse, we can jump with some friends into a tank and forge together through the future, and damnation to the rest. Better it would be, I am now sure, to build roads that all can travel, but that means giving up some personal gain so that all may benefit more in the end." — Charles Handy

The Importance of Alliances, Collaboration, and Dialog

The preliminary draft of this paper carried the title: "You Publish and Leave the Distribution to Us!" This idea, I feared, might not be terribly attractive to some and might seem irrelevant to others. So, while this thought is woven into this paper, its primary focus is on collaboration, which Rosabeth Moss Kanter defines as "creating new value together" (*Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1994) and on what I have observed over the year as "trends" that I think we should be aware of as publishers, vendors, and librarians as we enter the next century.

Alliances, collaboration and dialog have become key words that require our attention. I believe that scholarly publishers in general and university presses in particular, have not joined this dialog as completely as they might have. Picture a circle. In the middle are libraries. Around the edges are those organizations that develop, produce, and deliver the products and services libraries buy: book and periodical vendors; bibliographic utilities; integrated library system vendors. The library is closest to its customers and sees the services being used. It also has a sense of evolving customer expectations. The organizations around the edges are closer to the horizon and clearly see innovative ways to deliver information. Clearly missing from this value circle are publishers. While this image depicts a perfect circle, in practice, it continually fragments. The fashion for working more closely together is driven, in great part, by a shared interest in making the delivery of information more efficient, and by individual and unique organizational goals. The circle will always be imperfect because the tens of thousands of individuals and organizations involved in scholarly communication will always be more independent than interdependent.

Charles A. Schwartz, writing in *College & Research Libraries* (March 1994) says, "The analysis presented here ... suggests that scholarly communication is not an interdependent system in any meaningful sense, even theoretically. Rather it is a loosely coupled system, comprised of largely autonomous components with little communication, coordination, or even direct cause and effect relationships." While I agree with Mr. Schwartz — that the diverse interests of those involved in this enterprise — scholars, researchers, publishers, librarians, vendors — probably preclude reinventing of the industry — I remain optimistic that through new thinking and dialog we can break down some of the orthodoxy that keeps us at arm's length. I believe that this will stand us in good stead as we enter the end of this century.

Alliances between and among for-profit and not-for-profit organizations are commonplace in business today. Some are short-lived,

lasting only as long as it takes the partners to accomplish a goal: establish new markets or link technologies. Other alliances are entered into with the intent to merge. I am not talking about either of these objectives. Rather, I am talking about continuous collaboration. Coming to understand each other's work — developing the ability to continually view the environment through a variety of lenses — so that a spirit of entrepreneurship pervades our "loosely coupled systems."

As I look out at the horizon, I see many opportunities for those organizations that work together to create new value. And it is all right for the circle to continually fragment. After all, a half-moon is better than no moon.

It is my hope that we can have dialog and not just discussion. When the Greeks entered into a *dialogos*, they were seeking an exchange of ideas. A discussion, however, is more a debate — someone wins and someone loses. These confusing times require that we move away from arm's length discussions that promote competition and toward a sense of community that will enable us to

build close working relationships. We share common dilemmas and, if our respective organizations are to remain vital, we must work together to frame our confusions. Until we do, we will continue to "drive off alone into the night."

Obviously, I am exercising a bit of poetic license in my approach to our topic: library-vendor relationships. My objective is to make the case that scholarly publishers, in general — university presses, in particular — need to

become part of the value circle, although publishers may well be the most independent of the circle's constituencies. Perhaps I digress when focusing on ideas as to how university presses can change certain practices to bring them in line with rapidly increasing customer expectations, but I feel that this is paramount.

This paper is made up of five musings on the publisher/vendor relationship on the part of a vendor. While these points are not made to insult AAUP members or publishers in general, I do hope that they rile you enough to make you think. While the world of moving scholarly information from its origin to public access more quickly is still unfolding, libraries, book and periodical vendors, system providers, and bibliographic utilities — sensing that collaboration is key to the process — have begun to come to circle. Publishers, with few exceptions, have been slow to recognize that creating value together will bring to the horizon new opportunities. Scholarly publishers, when meeting with librarians, focus, I sense, more on how they can increase market share questions than on how the library environment has changed questions. When meeting with vendors, the discussion is more exchange-oriented: we will do this if you will do that. (One can also make the case that this exchange model is the way many organizations approach relationships today.) Publishers can, I believe, help to make scholarly communication a more interdependent system by changing thinking habits — by collaborating with librarians and vendors.

The Library/Vendor Environment Has Changed

1. Publishers need to become more inclusive. A workshop bill-

continued on page 39

Library/Vendor Relationships from page 38

ing of "Marketing (Selling) to Libraries" is, I sense, counterproductive to an exchange of ideas. The problem is the focus. It is exclusive when it should be inclusive. The sooner scholarly publishers stop focusing on how they can sell more books to libraries and begin to focus on how they can collaborate, the better off we shall be. While I understand concern over defending/growing sales to libraries — recent figures show that the library market accounts for approximately 9% of total book revenues (all publishing segments) and a disproportionate 27% of university press sales — I suggest that publishers' concerns can best be addressed by focusing future workshops more on shared issues than on how libraries buy books and other materials. What publishers need to do is to spend more time coming to understand how the library/vendor environment has changed, and then change the way you do business to fit the new realities of this environment. If a university press truly wants to accelerate its understanding of the library market, it should consider co-hosting with its university library yearly dialogs, bringing to the table press and library staffs and the library's major book and periodical vendors. (Invitations should also be extended to the library's bibliographic utility and system provider.)

The Rise of the Approval Plan

2. Publishers should not look to approval plans as a panacea for sagging sales to libraries. I am frequently asked: "How can I sell more books through your approval plan?" My answer is straightforward: Approval plans do not exist for publishers. They exist to bring books to libraries that fit their complex collecting interests. There are some 500 academic and research libraries operating approval plans in the U.S. today. These plans range from small, subject-specific plans, e.g., law and education, that produce, on average, 500 to 1,000 books a year to large, comprehensive plans that bring 10,000 to 20,000+ books per annum into the library. Yearly approval expenditures range from \$15,000 (subject-specific plans) to \$1,000,000 (comprehensive plans). The latter figure is somewhat inflated as the lines between books on approval and firm orders are blurring as more and more libraries slide their firm orders — new and retrospective books — into the approval process in order to gain the more favorable approval discount. I should also note that the continuing decline in book budgets, coupled with aggressive downsizing, has increased the number of approval start-ups in small and medium-sized college and university libraries. Yearly expenditures range from \$50,000 to \$300,000.

There are many reasons why vendors must be wary of favoring this publisher over that publisher. High on this list is the fact that approval plans have always been political. In *College & Research Libraries* (September 1993), Robert Nardini notes: "... approval plans remain controversial within some libraries because they are inherently political in nature. Approval plans challenge library boundaries, requiring consensus on collection development and acquisitions priorities, cooperation among library departments, cooperation between the library and teaching faculty, and a close partnership with the vendor." Politics notwithstanding, approval plans continue to flourish in libraries because their vendor's selection methodology is viewed, across boundaries, as credible. Imagine how you would feel if key review media became the quasi-house organs of a few publishers. Not very happy, I would guess. Impartiality is key to credibility in both cases.

Publishers need to take responsibility for learning more about the approval plan as an acquisitions device. Consider the growing popularity of both YBP's and BNAm's paperback option plans (paper preferred when dual editions are published simultaneously). In 1996, 25% of YBP's approval libraries chose to receive paper versus cloth editions. We expect this percentage to increase to 50% by the end of the century. This shift will become a factor in planning cloth print runs. Consider the trend of moving monographic series from standing order status to approval plans. Series on standing

orders are usually nonreturnable. They can, however, be rejected and returned under the approval rubric. This trend will challenge the prevailing "series are guaranteed sales" mindset of most publishers.

As approval plans evolve, they present opportunities to be explored by libraries, vendors, and publishers. I recommend another article by Robert Nardini, "The Approval Plan Profiling Session," in *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory* (Vol. 18, No. 3).

While publishers should not look to the approval plan as a vehicle to sell more books — there are already enough politics inherent in the process without creating the slightest hint of publisher preference — they can "add value" to approval services by participating in CIP, by supplying accurate book information, including Tables of Contents, in advance of publication, and by making accurate status information available electronically.

Competition is Not the Name of the Game

3. It is time for publishers to stop competing with vendors. I still remember these words, twenty years later: "Library jobbers (this is what we were called in the 1970s) are unnecessary middlemen; my press would sell as many books to libraries without you and we would make more money." The speaker was an old-time bookman, the sales manager of a large university press. And it seemed to me that he saved his best growler for his calls on YBP. Through the 1970s, YBP specialized in the supply of university press books and this specialty seemed to irritate him. While the once adversarial relationship between publisher and vendor has mellowed, publishers continue to compete by promoting direct ordering; many (most?) continue to accord discounts to libraries — particularly on new books — that are close to those accorded library vendors.

Publishing is good work, but it is time, I think, for publishers — particularly scholarly publishers — to rethink their competencies. I am talking specifically about their role in selling direct to libraries. The work of publishers is to secure manuscripts, edit those manuscripts, and produce books. They also have an important role in promoting their books. Publishers, by and large, do a fine job in all these areas. Most, however, fumble the ball when it comes to the efficient distribution of their product.

Several years ago, I presented a paper to a gathering of AAUP member presses in which I proposed that university presses outsource distribution to creditworthy vendors. As I looked out at my audience, I saw only stoic faces. When I ended the paper, I received muted applause. I do not want to repeat that humbling experience years later. So let me make clear that I am not talking about total outsourcing — closing down your warehouses. Years ago, I used to think that this made sense. Books would go to vendors direct from the printer/bindery on consignment. Inventory would be determined by the vendor's sales history. Though I have no bold change plan to offer several years later, I suggest only that we need to think about how we can better serve the customer. Try this metaphor. Picture a long chain stretched out on the ground. At one end is the publisher. Further along the chain is the vendor. Still further, the library. At the other end of the chain is the end user. Vendors are publishers' customers. Libraries are vendors' customers. Students, faculty, etc., are the libraries' customers. The challenge facing us is to find innovative ways to move new scholarly information from its origin to public access more quickly.

Library book vendors can ship in-stock books, complete with value-added services, to libraries within days. Books special ordered from publishers add 2-6 weeks to the fulfillment process. Publishers and vendors need to plan and strategize together. We need to focus on the end user. Publishers need to challenge their direct-selling policy by asking questions, such as, what business are we in? If we were not selling direct to libraries already, would we start now? Vendors need to ask questions such as, how can we help frame a viable consignment program (new titles and/or retrospective titles)? How can publishers and vendors link technological development so that individual and shared objectives are attained?

continued on page 66

Book Reviews

from page 64

rather than contribute the same amount in tax dollars to the library for purchasing digital information for home use. Moreover, men were less enthusiastic than women on almost all aspects of the library."

Part of the problem with surveys is that they provide very little context and have to ask simple questions if they hope to get a set of answers that can be tabulated. Of course the 18 to 24 year olds don't want to give their \$20 to anyone. This is not a mature, family-responsible, mortgage paying group. And they don't realize that a lot of \$20 contributions can pay for an expensive reference service (CD-ROM, if you will), while \$20 of their own money won't even buy half of the popular new game for Sego, Nintendo, or your PC. In fact, \$20 doesn't go very far in the software business. The question is posed and answered simplistically, and the answer, while probably quite accurate for the age group, needs to be qualified when looking at the results.

As for women and libraries, regular visits to your public library will tell you that there are more mothers with children there than fathers and more women than men poring over the new book shelf. Why is this so and does it matter?

There is much food for thought in this study and we in the greater library community ought to be grateful to the Benton Foundation for undertaking this study. They properly identify the super bookstores as competitors to libraries and also as allies. Some of those surveyed and interviewed complained that their public library didn't have as many new books as **Barnes & Noble** or **Borders** and that they had to line up for the latest fiction. What can libraries do about that? The superstores are quite liberal about people reading on the premises, even while sipping a cappuccino and listening to a string quartet and the story hours they sponsor are wonderful things, but if you or your children want to take that book home, someone must pay for it, whereas in a library, you can take the book home by charging it out. If the bestseller you want is not in, you will have to wait to

get it and if you can't wait, you can always buy a copy. I wish more people would buy more books and they seem to be more inclined than ever in that regard, but those who buy the books regularly also visit their libraries several times a year. The study also found that "home computer use and library use are highly correlated."

This study does seem to be the start of a trend to look more closely at public perception about libraries in the digital age. "COMING SOON: A joint publication of the Benton Foundation and Libraries for the Future ... A special report will offer case studies of pioneering libraries that are expanding services and forging new alliances in the digital age. Community and national organizations, government agencies, and private corporations are supporting efforts to enhance the digital capabilities of libraries and to help libraries serve individual patrons and their communities. At the same time, librarians and library advocates are assuming an important role in policy debates on issues such as universal service, censorship, and the structure of the telecommunications system. To reserve a copy, call the Benton Foundation at 202-638-5770 or send email to benton@benton.org."

A close reading of these two books suggests that librarians have not been good advocates for their traditional services, choosing instead to shoot themselves in their collective foot by pushing the digital and the electronic to the extent that budget-wary administrators thought they could begin mothballing libraries complete with the books and people inside them. These two works further suggest that this is not a realistic view and not one supported by the public, at least not as far as public libraries are concerned. We probably need a Carnegie study similar to the Benton study to gauge the true feelings of faculty, students, and administrators about the importance of books, bricks, and bytes. But in the meantime, we should all begin honest dialogs about finding the proper mix because all the evidence points to a long coexistence, one long enough to see me through retirement and the beyond at which point my reading days will be over. 🐼

Library/Vendor Relationships

from page 39

Value-Added Services and Outsourcing

4. Is all this vendor talk about value-added services just prattle or have library service expectations really changed? Back in the 1970s and early 1980s when libraries had budgets that kept ahead of inflation and adequate staffing, they used multiple vendors and also went direct to major publishers. Service expectations were straightforward: the right book in a timely manner at a fair price. Both the publisher and the vendor had no trouble meeting these expectations. Today, facing shrinking budgets and downsizing, libraries are consolidating their buying, often opting to buy US-published books and UK-distributed books from a single vendor. As a consequence of downsizing and other efficiency initiatives, libraries are focusing on "core competencies": processes and services they feel they can do better than anyone else, and "outsourcing" other things.

What are some of these things that are being outsourced to vendors? Certainly selection (approval plans) must be mentioned. More recently (1995/1996), YBP and other vendors, responding to client requests (expectations), developed bibliographic, processing, and cataloging services in support of their acquisitions services for libraries. These developments have led to collaborations with bibliographic utilities and system providers that have opened doors to the creation of other value-added services. Most of this innovation has been directed at getting the book to the end user faster. Libraries can now take the books out of the shipping box, wand barcodes (enter records into the system), and put the books on the shelf.

Other new vendor services requested by librarians include:

- Web-based searching, ordering and reporting.
- Access to account-specific files of books supplied over the past several years, and current approval allocations.
- Duplication control between approval books, firm orders and standing orders.

In support of these and other technical services, vendors have had to redesign their computer support systems and processes. Investments in state-of-the-art client/server platforms will enable vendors to react more quickly to customer expectations. While some libraries still maintain publisher new book standing order plans and continue to firm order from publishers, this activity will, I sense, soon wither. Vendors (booksellers to libraries) have evolved into "service providers," adding value to the book. These services go far beyond a publisher's reason for being.

Conclusion

This brings me to my final "musing." 5. The trouble with building deep business relationships is the trouble with this paper. There is never enough time to go beyond the superficial.

If 1996 was the year of library/vendor/utility collaboration, then we should strive to make 1997 the year that publishers and system providers also join the value circle. System providers need to become more proactive in the pursuit of collaborative opportunities. 🐼

Parts of this paper were presented at the AAUP Marketing to Libraries Workshop, November 6, 1996, Charleston, South Carolina.