September 1997

On the Street-Are You Outsourcing-and, If So, What?

Eamon T. Fennessy
The Copyright Group

Linda Albright
Winthrop University

Kathy J. Miraglia
Catholic University of America

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

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

Recommended Citation

Fennessy, Eamon T.; Albright, Linda; and Miraglia, Kathy J. (1997) "On the Street-Are You Outsourcing-and, If So, What?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 9: Iss. 4, Article 28.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2230>

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.

On The Street

Are You Outsourcing ... and, If So, What?

Column Editor: **Eamon Fennessy**, <EFENNESSY@worldnet.att.net>

by **Eamon T. Fennessy**
(The Copyright Group)

Assisted by:

Linda Albright (Winthrop College) and
Kathy Miraglia (Catholic University)

So you think all libraries have to be creative in order to meet the challenges of operating with reduced staffs and lean budgets? Well ... you are absolutely correct! This issue's survey addressed "outsourcing" which I looked up in my old **Random House American College Dictionary** and found ... no definition. So...I made up my own and state it this way: "Outsourcing refers to the use of a third party to handle those responsibilities usually performed by a particular department or institution."

When we asked libraries about outsourcing we received comments from two non-academic libraries, one public and one a government technical library, plus twelve universities, seven state-operated, and five privately run. Right off the bat, three state and two private institutions said they didn't outsource anything, but when we probed further, all but one acknowl-

edged they did outsource at least their approval plans. Maybe it was a matter of defining "outsourcing." For example, **Dan Evans** of **Lafayette College**, stated there was no outsourcing at the moment, but he went on to report he had outsourced "some Russian and Japanese language titles as well as our AV collection." In short, nearly 100% of the participating libraries had experience with outsourcing for one service or another. The reasons for resorting to outsourcing followed much the same course, staff reductions and budget cuts were the common causes for this approach. What it comes down to is **ECONOMICS**, but to all librarians this is nothing new. If services are to be maintained, they have to be accomplished in the most cost-effective manner. **Elsie Pritchard** of **Morehead State** expressed it this way: "If we hadn't lost a position, we would probably have started outsourcing authority work anyway because it seems to be more economical."

But ... will the problems of finances go away? Not on your life, and outsourcing has proven to be an acceptable solution. Outsourcing, however, doesn't mean you can arrange with a vendor to do a certain job and then walk away from it knowing this is one worry you won't have any longer. Although overall librarians expressed satisfaction with outsourced services, they referred to the necessity of policing and monitoring the work being done by vendors. **Roberta Schenewerk**, a public librarian in a widespread system reported, "We have had two vendors who have lost contracts due to non-compliance." Two librarians also commented there are many vendors who can do the work and if one doesn't "pan out" there are others to call on. Vendors take heed.

Our participants were also asked whether the outsourcing at their institutions were considered permanent or temporary? The typical answer, from **Auburn University's Barbara Nelson**, was: "We have been doing this (outsourcing) since we began our approval plans in 1986 and expect it to continue." In some instances the original justification for outsourcing was for one reason and the continuation of outsourcing was based strictly on differ-

ent reasons. The key reason for either outsourcing or at least looking into it was the hope it would turn out to be less expensive than to do the work in house.

The messages from all of this seems to be:

1. Outsourcing can be another effective tool in providing services at lower cost and can allow staff to devote efforts to other priorities.

2. There were perhaps 10 or eleven different vendors and their services mentioned in this study. We simply asked which services were outsourced, but we didn't ask for specific functions. Librarians reported in their own terms and supplied the following names of vendors who performed the tasks; obviously, this list is not inclusive:

Approval plans — YBP, Blackwells, Baker & Taylor, Academic Book Center
Authority control — Blackwells
Copy cataloging — OCLC PromCat
Original cataloging — YBP, OCLC
Photocopying — Copico, UnCover
Serials — Faxon, EBSCO
Shelfready processing — YBP
Video Cataloging — OCLC TechPro, Professional Media Services

3. Vendors have to stay on their toes. Librarians do not always abide by the vendors' preferences. **Robin Lent** of **UNH** said it plainly: "We have an approval plan but we oversee that pretty carefully, that is, we don't just accept whatever they send." Another librarians put it this way: "They have to be policed constantly."

The institutions covered in this survey came from San Diego in the West, to New Hampshire in the East, and from Puerto Rico off shore, to Illinois in our heartland. If your experiences don't match those in the survey let me know. Or if you have a survey theme you would like us to explore, my e-mail address is: <efennessy@worldnet.att.net>. 🌿

The list of participants in this survey runs like this:

Diane S. Hollyfield, Virginia Commonwealth University
Deborah Broadwater, Vanderbilt University
Robin S. Lent, University of New Hampshire
Mary McLaren, University of Kentucky
Rebecca Breedlove, UMASS, Boston
Marcia Whipple, Navy Technical Library, San Diego
Elsie Pritchard, Morehead State University
Steve Harsin, Loyola University, Chicago
Helen P. Mack, Lehigh University
Dan Evans, Lafayette College
Noelia Rendon, Interamerican University of Puerto Rico
Roberta Schenewerk, Fort Worth Public Library
Barbara Nelson, Auburn University