Library-Vendor Relations

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Issues in Library-Vendor Relations
edited by Corrie Marsh (George Washington University) and Barry Fast (Scholarly Book Center)

Issues: Is access more important than ownership?  Do we need acquisitions librarians?

We are indeed living in very interesting times! We have recently received very mixed messages about the future of acquisitions work. The interesting news is that libraries are beginning to spend large amounts of their budgets on access to information services in recognition of the fact that we cannot continue to purchase collections. Leasing and licensing arrangements are playing an increasing role in the business of acquisitions. Yet, there is a conflicting message out there — major research libraries are continuing to dissolve acquisitions departments and distribute the traditional business functions of service contract negotiations into collection managers' responsibilities, while lessening the overall status of acquisitions within the library.

Acquisitions librarians had better wake up and re-examine where their libraries might be heading — possibly without them. It is now vital that we consider new knowledge and philosophies that will broaden, rather than reduce, the role acquisitions can perform within the organization.

An expanded model was recently presented by Irene B. Hoadley's and John Corbin's "Up the Beanstalk: An Evolutionary Organizational Structure for Libraries" (American Libraries, July/August 1990). Hoadley and Corbin base their model on the assumption "that access will equal acquisitions" and that "the emphasis moves to fulfilling the needs of users rather than simply building larger collections." Their acquisitions model combines buying, borrowing, and leasing of collections. This presents a broader, interactive role for acquisitions managers to expand their abilities at service contract negotiations. Ironically, at the same time this article appeared, another major research library dissolved its acquisitions department.

What are the necessary traits that acquisitions librarians need to reconsider? For one, they must become more sensitive to user needs and services. For another, they must develop keen skills at handling licensing agreements and contracting services. Acquisitions managers need to be involved in all levels of library operational planning; we can no longer simply concentrate on technical processing.

It is no wonder that vendors and publishers are confused about who to contact and to whom to propose business arrangements within libraries. We are obviously not sure ourselves and the clear lines of responsibility have not yet sorted themselves out.

It's going to be very interesting to see where things go throughout the 1990's... Send your comments to Corrie Marsh or Barry Fast or to your editor. We're waiting!!

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Issue: Reflections on Firm
Order Bidding: A Response

In the last issue of ATG, Christian Boissonnas reported on
Cornell’s recent firm order bidding
project. He describes the RFP
process and the criteria he used to
select two vendors. He also
described a weighted performance
analysis system which he will
utilize to evaluate these two
vendors in the future. This report
was very interesting, and it should
be considered as a valid method of
vendor selection. Christian has
added some useful information to
this issue.

In the section of his article called
“Afterthoughts”, he engages in
some speculation that, in our
opinion, is worth examining
further. He reflects on his selection
of two “relatively unknown
vendors” who offered the lowest
cost plus bid, and proposes some
reasons why these smallish library
suppliers were the winners. Among
his speculations, the winners do
not advertise or attend ALA, they
do not sell ancillary products like
notification forms, and they operate
in low-cost, non-metropolitan areas.

Christian was soliciting an “as
cheap as possible” book supply
service with “no support services.”
He assumes that the losers, the
nine vendors who bid higher than
the two winners, were unable to
offer a competitive bid because
“Providing libraries with as much
[services] as possible is so deeply
inflamed in their philosophies and
business plans...” that it was
impossible for them to offer a low
bid. It remains to be seen if the
two vendors can provide the service
that Cornell requires at the cost
plus price they promise.

Small local vendors can probably
operate cheaper than large
international library suppliers
(more on this later). We have
always believed that universities,
especially rural universities, have
an implicit mission to support and
enhance the local cultural scene,
and this certainly includes local
booksellers. By doing some buying
from local booksellers, the
university helps provide a richer
cultural environment for everyone
in the surrounding communities,
and, on a national scale, helps
promote diversity and competition
in the book industry.

But large international library
suppliers also deserve support from
universities, and for the same
reasons described above. There is,
if you will, a global community in
which we all live. It is composed
of rich nations and poor nations,
and, most recently, a whole new
community of nations emerging
from tyranny. In the richer
countries, like our own, the library
community is demanding a whole
array of services from vendors,
ranging from simple firm order
fulfillment (it’s not so simple),
through complex approval plans,
electronic communications,
technical services support, standing
orders services, and other kinds of
collection management co-
operation. Library suppliers are
recognized by librarians as their
ally in holding down personnel,
computer, and other operating costs.

Library suppliers are required to
be high tech companies by the
market, not because they want to
find new ways to spend money.
Without approval plans, standing
orders and other services, libraries
could not operate. Their material
funds would be gobbled up by
personnel and other costs which
vendors now bear, albeit much more
efficiently because they are spread
over the whole market.

In the poorer nations of the world,
book and journal funds are scarce.
When they are available, it is the
larger international library suppliers
who take the risk of supplying
materials to these countries. It is a
real risk: payments are slow,
shipments are lost and damaged,
and sometimes revolution or other
catastrophe prevents the vendor
ever getting paid. Only the largest,
most financially secure companies
can take these risks. But they are
risks that must be taken if these
poorer nations can educate their
people and develop self sustaining
economies. The newly democratic
countries of Eastern Europe need
a virtual rebuilding of library
collections. Only the larger library
suppliers can provide the services
these countries need to build
collections effectively and
efficiently.

We are not, emphatically,
suggesting that American libraries
do business with larger library
suppliers out of a sense of altruistic
social zeal. We are stating that
larger library suppliers are neither
inherently inefficient nor are they
wasting resources on advertising
and notifications slips. They offer
a wide array of high tech services
because libraries need them and
demand them. These services cost
something, and that cost is built
into every price negotiation with
every library. Whether that
negotiation takes place in a bid
format, or takes place over time as
the result of a healthy competitive
industry, libraries end up paying
the price for services that are
available but may not be useful to
them individually. Those services
are useful to enough libraries,
however, for vendors to find it
worthwhile to develop them. To
imply that their cost is wasteful
ignores the important role these
services play in more efficient
library operations and better
collection management.