

February 2009

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations: Out of Office

Bob Nardini

Coutts Information Services, bnardini@couttsinfo.com

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



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

Recommended Citation

Nardini, Bob (2009) "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations: Out of Office," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 49.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2532>

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.

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Out of Office

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services)
<bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

A few times each year working past the hour we'd hoped to be gone, many of us squeeze in one or two more emails before logging off, but not before deploying what has to be **Microsoft Outlook's** most beloved feature. We click the "I am currently Out of the Office" radio button, then compose a short message about how accessible we're liable to be for the next couple of days, several days, week-and-a-half, or whatever time it is we'll be out.

Hope to see you there, we might say in **Outlook**, at **ALA**, **ACRL**, or **NASIG**, to name a few of the acronym-based conferences we could be traveling to; or maybe at a place-named meeting like **Frankfurt**, **London**, **Timberline**, or **Charleston**. At some point as we head to the airport we're liable to complain about having to go to yet another conference, about not being prepared, about how much work we've left undone back at work, and while taking off our shoes for the **TSA**, about how irritating travel has become.

So why do we do it, leave home, leave work, leave town, to subject ourselves to the latest innovations in airline redefinition of minimum service?

For fans of library-vendor relations, for one thing, it's the only time, a conference, when you can actually *see* library-vendor relations as they transpire — and transpire sometimes on a grand scale, as in the sweep of hotel lobbies, in acres of commotion on an exhibit floor, in ballrooms fitted out in rows of hundreds of chairs facing a dais, or in the alcoves of restaurants across the city.

Aside from taking in the spectacle, we catch up with friends. We network. We talk, we eavesdrop, we gossip. We eat and drink. We hear what's going on. We learn buzzwords. We do business. And over and over again for days straight, we simply show up, at the program, the meeting, or the booth, and as we do, somehow find our own place within the library world while proclaiming, on behalf of our library or our company, that "We Are Here."

And because, just like other kinds of travel, we're thrown out of our routines. We like being "Out of Office." We hope, wherever it is we're going, that the light will be different. We hope to enjoy a little randomness.

Last year I attended a conference in Hyde Park, New York at the **Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library**. The meeting was held in the fall, mid-October, and began on a morning when the Hudson Valley was the ideal place on earth. The sky was perfect blue, the temperature slightly cool. The leaves falling from the trees were like drops of fresh paint. Cinematography couldn't have done better for reds, yellows, oranges, and browns.

Inside, hanging high against the wall in view of everyone for two days were four large silk-screened banners of **FDR**, as **Andy War-**

hol might have had him. **Roosevelt's** famous smiling image, cigarette in its holder turned up at a jaunty angle, presided in bright colors over a room which often filled with light from the windows that made up most of one wall. The windows framed a view of the grounds whose walkways connected the library, museum, home and other buildings of the original **Roosevelt** estate.

In June 1941, **FDR** himself presided over the dedication of the museum. Not ten days before, **Hitler** had invaded Russia after overrunning most of Europe. Pearl Harbor came in December. By then the country had begun to pull out of the Great Depression of the 1930s, but thanks only to spending to build up the military. Dedications, as the **FDR Library's** director said in her welcoming remarks, are always acts of faith.

So is a conference, a small act of faith. Faith that if you take a hundred or a thousand or ten thousand people out of their normal workdays and send them off somewhere pleasant to talk to one another in confined spaces for a few days, something good will come of it. At Hyde Park the idea had been for librarians from liberal arts colleges to talk about collection development in their libraries, how it's done now, how it might be done differently. And so they talked, librarians from **Wellesley**, **Bates**, **Kenyon**, **Oberlin**, and dozens of other schools, about digitization projects, about repositories, about consortia, electronic journals, books, and other things.

They talked a lot about users, specifically, how to be sure that collection development, however practiced, was serving library users and not other purposes. In fact the conference opened with a panel of users, a mixed group, professors from nearby **Vassar** and undergraduates from several of the colleges. Each talked about their own use of their own library.

They were power users. They knew how to find things their libraries owned. They knew how to find things their libraries didn't own. They knew about **WorldCat**. They knew about special collections. They knew about government documents. They all looked smart. One of the undergraduates, from **Bard**, was writing her senior thesis on Native American souvenir art from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She used **JSTOR** and **Connect NY**. A **St. Lawrence** senior used inter-library loan to get books for her project about knives used by **Berber** nomads. The panelists all liked their libraries. They wished they had more time to spend in them. When they did have time, several of the panelists told the librarians, they liked to spend some of it in the stacks.

"If I'm not on **Scopus** ten times a day I feel I'm not on top of things," said one of them,

a neuroscientist who studies environmental risk factors for breast cancer. She said that online databases had transformed her work. Even so, she was disappointed in the low use of books she saw among many of her students. So she sends classes into the stacks on scavenger hunts. They have to bring back facts, but to prove they'd set foot in the stacks, also to report on, say, the binding color of a certain volume.

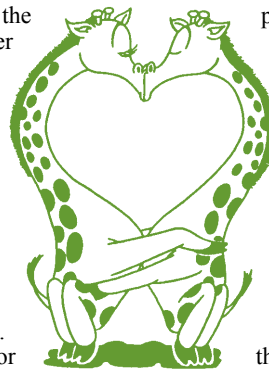
Another of the **Vassar** professors was a Classicist, a specialist in **Sophocles**. As an undergraduate she'd been assigned a carrel and "had lived in the library". Today she still values the "spatial representation of my intellectual world" that a library provides, even though the **Library of Congress** classification system doesn't coincide in any way with how the Greeks organized knowledge. She finds that tension stimulating, in fact, and a contrast to online resources where "there's no spatial organization at all," where a search result "just comes at you."

Most of the user panelists said they valued browsing, even an anthropologist who considered the library secondary to his work. He studies the anthropology of sound. He thought four or five scholars in the country might be active in the area. Most of his research was field work. But every few years when on sabbatical, he browses the stacks.

The name of this conference included the phrase "New Models and Active Strategies" in collection development. For users, browsing is an old strategy, still an active one apparently, and not one that relies on the digital projects that preoccupied most librarians at the conference. For librarians, browsing as a conference topic was by and large a detour. Browsing means putting volumes on the shelves and turning users loose. Not much strategy there. But some librarians empathized with browsers. "We've all made choices that limit browsability," said one. Another suggested a formal study of browsing behavior. Others dismissed that idea, claiming we already know what goes on in the stacks. Someone else called browsing the "most touted, least practiced" library activity.

"It's not about collections," said one library director from the floor during the final hour of the conference, "it's about service." By then the meeting was given over to an attempt to define common themes, and that was as close as anyone came to summing up the librarians' conference at Hyde Park. Would the users have agreed? Most of those panelists had returned to their campus at that point. Had she been there, **Vassar's** Classicist might have stood up to repeat one of her remarks, a contrary

continued on page 78



one, that in her view, the greatest challenge for libraries today was to figure out “how to slow people down.”

In those moments when attention drifted at the conference, diversion had always been at hand in a view of the Hyde Park grounds through the high windows of the room. Tourists were often in sight, coming from the **Visitor Center** where they’d bought tickets for the museum and **Roosevelt** home, both a short walk through the falling leaves. Many of the tourists were elderly, some traveling in groups. A few used walkers or were pushed in wheelchairs, the weaker vessels escorted by the stronger, as if moving in a World War II convoy. Some, as they approached the museum’s exhibits, must have called to mind their own exhibits, from memory, of the one president of their childhood, **FDR**.

For conference-goers too, once the meeting had ended it was a natural thing, before returning to the parking lot and then home, to take the same short walk to the museum. With a presidential election only weeks away and the next president sure to face financial crisis at home and war abroad, as **Franklin Roosevelt** had when he was inaugurated in 1933, it was a natural thing too to walk through the museum’s special exhibit on the famous First 100 Days of the **FDR** presidency.

One section of the exhibit covered the banking crisis of 1933, when in his earliest days as president, **Roosevelt** had declared a bank holiday and put emergency banking legislation through **Congress**. **President Bush**, the day before the library conference opened, had announced government investment of billions of dollars in the banking industry, which was threatening to collapse in 2008 as it had in 1933, and as the mortgage industry had collapsed a month ago. Small talk at the conference, as for the whole country, had usually included conversation about this. Most visitors to the **First 100 Days Exhibit** lingered extra moments at the museum’s banking display, watching the film clips and reading the captions of photographs and charts which showed what **FDR** had done with the banks.

It’s doubtful that any visitors to the exhibit found answers to their questions about America’s collapsing economy. It’s doubtful that anyone had expected answers. Instead they were browsing, browsing through a visual, physical representation of economic forces that most citizens don’t understand. Maybe their browsing wasn’t very different from the unmethodical, unordered searching in the stacks the conference panelists described. And maybe not different from the librarians’ hope that in leaving their campuses they might learn something new about libraries. Everyone had left home to visit a place where they joined others in the kind of searching where answers aren’t always expected, and even the questions rarely are clear. 🌱



Editor’s Note: *Celia Wagner was most recently Vice President of Operations, West, at Blackwell. She is pondering her next job, and working on a book. She sent in this “On the Road” column because she is now ready to share it. — KS*

I was headed from Portland to our Oxford office, and I was happy because I had scheduled an extra day on the front end of the trip. As luck would have it, a childhood friend would be passing through London just as I was arriving. We had arranged to stay at a hotel together, and see a play.

So I flew to London, excited to see my friend **Bonnie**, but the plane was diverted as a freak blizzard closed Heathrow. We landed in Birmingham, and the airline put us on a bus back to London. The trip took hours, as the bus crept along icy roads. Night fell, the driver turned off all the interior lights, and made sure the heat was on high, and I took off my glasses and fell asleep. It had been a long time since I’d left Portland.

The airline wasn’t obligated to take us all to our homes or hotels, so I woke up just as the bus stopped at Piccadilly Circus, in central London. Time for all of us to get off, grab our bags, and make our way from there. I was sleepily wheeling my bag through the snowy night to the nearest taxi stand, wondering how much cash I had in sterling (I’d meant to get some at Heathrow), when I realized I was missing my purse. I had left it on the bus. I turned and ran back to where the bus had been, but it was already gone.

I did a quick inventory.

I had my suitcase. But I didn’t have the key, which was in my purse. I had one of those passport-holding things you wear around your neck. But it was also in my purse. (Don’t ask.) I had four American pennies in my pocket. I had a decent coat. And that was it. I had no passport, no ID, no cell phone, no money, no breath mints, nothing.

If you have ever had a life-altering adrenaline rush, you’ll understand my next few minutes. The lizard brain jolted into gear in the first three milliseconds, proffering a suggestion followed by a hasty retraction. I didn’t think of calling the police or the American embassy. I thought, “Sell my body in an alley! NO! Won’t work! Too old, plus it’s cold out.”

Really. That was Plan A.

And then the emotional wave hit. And the emotion was overwhelming shame. I wasn’t ashamed of the lizard brain’s idea, but of being the sort of bone-head who leaves things on a bus, in a blizzard. The

only thing that mattered to me at that moment was that no one EVER learn of this. If they knew, my colleagues would write me off. My family would disown me, and as for my friends, well, at that moment I forgot I had any. I would be unemployed and alone forever, because I was frankly too dumb to live. In fact, it would be good to die in a ditch then and there. YES! DEATH was a plan! It would work! I had no ID, so with luck my headstone would say “Unknown Woman, Died in Blizzard,” rather than, “Here lies **Celia**, who did something so dumb, we couldn’t believe it.”

If you have not had one of those massive adrenaline reactions, you probably think I’m kidding.

Then the mist cleared, and plan C bobbed up: Find the hotel where **Bonnie** and I were staying. I had torn a teeny map of London out of the in-flight magazine, and it was in my pocket along with the four cents. I could use it to find my way to the hotel, which — I remembered! — was called the **Marriott Regent’s Park** and must be near *Regent’s Park*!

It was at this point that I realized I had no glasses. I’d put them safely in my purse when I took my bus snooze. I couldn’t read the little map to see where Regent’s Park was. Nor — in the snow, in the night — could I read the street signs to figure out where I was. London was depopulated; there was no one to ask. I decided to wheel the suitcase up to the next streetlight, and see if that helped. There were several green splotches on the map, probably parks, so if got my bearings, I could trudge off in the right direction.

The first streetlights were no help, and I was afraid to go too far in the wrong direction. I was standing under streetlight number three, peering at the teeny map, trying this trick I’d heard about on Car Talk for when you get up in the middle of the night and need to read something but you haven’t got your glasses: you make an itsy-bitsy aperture with one curled finger and peep through it, and it does something to focus light on one spot on your retina.

And then a woman walked up to me and said, “Yes?”

(Later, one of my friends said, “Oh. She was a godsend.” I had never thought about that word before. It’s a great word.)

The whole story poured out (I’d never see her again). She said, “I’m afraid you’ve been rather deceived, dear, since that **Marriott** isn’t very near Regent’s Park. But I am walking in that direction myself. The underground isn’t running [there had been an accident where one line came above ground to cross a bridge, and all lines were closed down], nor are the busses running, so most of London is walking home tonight.”

She had her teenage son with her, and we set off. He even wheeled my suitcase for part of the journey, and we chatted. (She was in

continued on page 79