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A Second Look at Partnership: When Does It Work... And When Not?

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Several years ago, fresh from a four-year stint as a bibliographer for Yankee Book Peddler, I wrote a piece for *Against the Grain* called "How to Make Your Book Vendor Love You."

It was based on my experience and on experiences shared with me by others in the vendor world, and it offered what I hoped were helpful tips that would help librarians become customers that vendors work hard to keep, as well as more attractive to potential vendors.

Why do libraries need to worry about such a thing? Don't vendors all vie for the opportunity to sell to a library, any library? The logical foundation on which my article was built was this: in a library-vendor relationship, both parties offer something that the other needs. The library needs discounts and efficiencies, and the vendor needs money. Thus, each party has to work to attract the other. Vendors work by offering quality service and discounts, while libraries work by offering greater portions of their budgets. I argued that a library can leverage its position in the marketplace by offering not just more money, but also the equivalent of better "service" – efficiency, pleasantness, understanding of vendor processes, etc.

Even when I wrote the original article, there was something nagging at the back of my mind. What bothered me was the intuitive understanding that really, libraries don't have to go begging for vendors the way vendors have to go begging for libraries. You don't see vendors putting out RFPs and librarians sweating their way through all-day presentations in the hope that the vendors they want to do business with will deign to sell books to them. You don't see librarians treating vendors to lavish dinners or sponsoring open-bar events at ALA. You can talk about "partnering" all you want, but it's intuitively obvious that the relationship between libraries and vendors is unequal.

None of this means that there's anything wrong with the basic idea of library-vendor partnership. I learned it at the feet of **John Secor**, for whom I have enormous respect and whom, I think, made a great contribution to the world of libraries and vendors with his thoughts on partnership (or, as we can all hear him saying in our minds, "partnering"). I still believe that it makes a great deal of sense for libraries

and vendors to look at each other not as adversaries, but as joint beneficiaries in a symbiotic relationship.

That said, there's simply no escaping the fact that in the library-vendor relationship, vendors are (and always will be) the supplicants. We all know this, as I said, intuitively. But given the clear fact that both libraries and vendors bring something to the table, I think it's worth asking why the power relationship between them isn't more balanced.

I'd like to suggest that power relationships in this particular context are not so much a function of how much each party has to offer the other, but rather a function of competing alternatives. What determines power in the relationship is the degree to which each party has a monopoly. If you think about it, it's simple: I may only have one thing to offer, and it may not be awfully big (like my materials budget), but if you want a piece of it and can't get it from anyone else, that monopoly power gives me a fair amount of leverage. Conversely, you may offer a huge array of very impressive services, but if others are offering the same (or similar) services, I can play you and those others off against each other. This scenario describes almost perfectly the relationship between a library and a jobber – the library has monopoly control over its money, but the jobber has no monopoly control over the products it sells. The **University of Nevada** can buy the new **Tom Wolfe** novel from any number of sources, but Jobber X can't get the **University of Nevada's** money from any other customer.¹

This fact places vendors at a double disadvantage, because they're dealing with monopolists on both sides – not only do libraries wield monopoly power, but publishers do as well. If a book is published by **Oxford University Press**, the vendor can't get it from anyone else.² And if the publisher is as powerful as **OUP**, it can probably decide to cut vendor discounts without too much fear that the vendor will stop selling its books – after all, many of the vendor's customers feel that they need **OUP** titles in their collections, and if Jobber X decides not to handle those titles they'll probably find another vendor who's

willing to bite the bullet in order to get more business. Libraries and publishers are monopolies. Middlemen, by definition, are not.

What does this mean? It means that true partnership – by which I mean an equal relationship – is probably not possible between libraries and vendors or vendors and publishers. Theoretically, it would be possible between a library and a publisher, since both offer something that the other can't get from any other source. But libraries don't pursue such partnerships that often (not with regard to books, anyway), in part because there are way too many publishers and far too few library staffers – hence the necessity of middlemen.

Monopoly control is obviously not the only factor that affects the balance of power in a relationship. A library with a huge budget can generally command better discounts from vendors than smaller libraries can, and libraries that collect heavily in higher-profit scientific materials will also find themselves courted more assiduously than those that focus on the arts and humanities. But monopoly power is enough to keep the balance lopsided. It's the reason you can get away with ignoring your sales rep's phone calls, but he'll always return yours. Yes, the world is unfair. And in some ways – though certainly not in all – libraries benefit from that.

Endnotes

1. It can, of course, get money from some other customer, but that wouldn't be an equivalent gain. **UNR** probably only needs one copy of the new **Tom Wolfe** novel and can get it from any individual jobber (or direct from the publisher, for that matter), whereas Jobber X needs to get money from **UNR** as well as from other libraries.
2. Interestingly, this is less true with reference publishers, who offer information that is not necessarily proprietary in and of itself and may be available in other formats elsewhere. Reference publishers are sometimes selling unique information, but more often are selling what they hope is a uniquely valuable service – better format, more accuracy, etc. Why do reference publishers wine and dine librarians more assiduously than publishers of scholarly monographs do? In part, because they need to convince librarians to buy their products rather than a competitor's. Because it is a monopolist, **Oxford UP** has less need to do so.