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The Dilemma of Publisher Giveaways

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The holidays are over and I suspect most of us received many tangible gifts. We are most likely thankful for each gift and respect and understand the intentions of the giver. Some of the gifts we will cherish, some will be put to work immediately, some have already become a nuisance . . . and you name what else.

In my work life I am offered many gifts from vendors and publishers. These are directed to me as the holder of my professional position in the library. They come at the holiday season, throughout the year, and especially at professional meetings. They include all variety of drinking containers, office supplies, T-shirts and recently include beanie babies, jackets, gymbags and photoframes. I seem to receive more and more gifts as the years go by—I hope this is only a reflection of the booming economy rather than my increasing age. Gifts from publishers or vendors have become so prolific that they are no longer known as gifts, but as “giveaways.” This name change is somewhat indicative of aspects of the giving. I am often less thankful of giveaways than gifts and I am not always sure of the intentions of the giver of giveaways.

I suspect that publishers and vendors give giveaways for several reasons: they get our attention, hold our attention, help us use their products, oblige us to think seriously about their products, and foster good will. But lurking in the back of my mind is always the thought, “is this why the cost of this publisher’s titles is increasing so rapidly?”

The “Biz of Acq” column recently ran an article on how ethics and values inform the practice of acquisition librarians. **Rob Richards** found a large body of ethical literature regarding the business relationship between acquisitions librarians and their suppliers. The primary document of this literature is the **American Library Association**, Association for Library Collections & Technical Services, “Statement on Principles and Standards of Acquisitions Practice.” Number five of the twelve principles states, “In all acquisitions transactions, a librarian: declines personal gifts and gratuities.” It can, of course, be argued that accepting a giveaway from a vendor is not part of an actual acquisitions transaction. **Richards** also found three primary values that make relationships between librarians and vendors or publishers more effective: partnership, mutuality, and trust. It can be argued that partners give each other gifts and that mutuality (the well-being of the vendor and library are

interdependent) is fostered by giveaways.

Chris Graesser, Chair of the **American Association of Law Libraries**, Council on Relations with Vendors, wrote a provocative piece in the *AALL Newsletter* titled: “Are We Branded? Examining the Nature of Librarians’ Relationships with Publishers.” **Chris** asks, “How much influence do gifts have on a librarian?” She believes that the more experienced librarian is less likely to be swayed by marketing efforts of gifts, whereas, novice librarians “may be gratified by the little gifts and free lunches. Or, may be intimidated by the money expended by publishers.” Having worked as a librarian for over 25 years, I must consider myself a veteran but I admit that I feel more like a novice according to **Chris**. I often feel as uncomfortable declining a gift/giveaway from a vendor as I do receiving the same. If I decline a gift, the vendor or publisher may think I’m not interested in their products or in developing a good working relationship with their representatives. But when I accept the gift or giveaway, I can’t get the voice out of the back of my mind that these gifts are increasing the cost of the products to my library.

Another issue once I have accepted a giveaway is what I do with it. If I display the item am I “branded” as a recipient of the giver? **Chris Graesser** says, “After many years, I have concluded that it is unwise to display legal publisher brands at work. If we have a preference for one product over another, it is our job to make recommendations to our patrons, but we should not become tacit billboards. I take my mugs home and I do not wear publisher T-shirts on casual day.” I have a different take on this; it seems to me that the giveaways are meant to be used at work. Indeed, many of the items, such as office supplies, really help keep our supply budget from being exhausted in the first half of the fiscal year. Basically, I’ve become addicted to sticky notes and pens from publishers.

I learned my lesson to give equal display time to vendor giveaways the hard way. A salesperson for company X was in my office and complained bitterly that he didn’t see any giveaways from his company (Y) in my office. I pointed out that he just wasn’t observant enough, but I did rearrange my mouse pads after he left. Now I am very careful to always display products from major competing vendors. (I have an eagle beanie baby from **LEXIS** sitting on the left corner of my monitor and a frog beanie baby from **WESTLAW** on the right!)

There is another issue involved with these giveaways. It is the general issue of what creeping affluence and increasing amounts of “stuff” are doing to our environment. In short, it is creating more harm than most of us realize and makes us culpable in the crime of leaving the earth less healthy for our children and grandchildren.

For myself, the dilemma of how to handle vendor giveaways continues. I try to find the middle ground of being selective in what I accept by making sure the gift is useful and will get used. I try to accept gifts that are not especially harmful to the environment (such as disposable products). And most importantly, I make sure the larger question: are the gifts given with the intention that I place an order with the giving vendor or publisher, never enters my mind. This can become a fine line between accepting or sponsoring and restraint. Each librarian must find his or her own comfort zone on how best to handle giveaways from vendors. This is an issue which is not going away soon; it only seems to be increasing.

References

Robert.C. Richards, “Biz of Acq-Stewardship, Partnership, Self-Understanding: An Exploration of Values in Acquisitions Work,” *Against the Grain* June 2000, pp 87-90.
AALL Spectrum v.5, no.2, October 2000, p.22.

Rumors

from page 18

ington, Oregon. Idaho, Nevada, Utah, California, and Arizona. Educated at **Trinity College** in Sioux Falls South Dakota, Gray holds a degree in Business administration. Wonder if he has met **Rick Anderson** who is new at the University of Nevada?

Speaking of **Rick Anderson** (above) (Electronic Resources/Serials Coordinator, The University Libraries, University of Nevada, Reno <rickand@unr.edu>), Did you run into **Rick Anderson** in Washington? I know he said that coming to Charleston made him slightly homesick for the East.

Charles Germain (Rowecom) <cgermain@rowe.com> is always up to something. This time it’s grandfathering his fourth grandchild who lives in Brazil. He was showing us pictures from his laptop. Ain’t technology great?

Chuck Hamaker was impressed by **Serials Solutions** which is a way for patrons to determine if a full-text electronic version of a specific journal is available from database aggregator services to which your library subscribes. Check

continued on page 85