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Back Talk-Libraries in the New Information Economy

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Medicinal Plants

When you sip a cup of echinacea tea, you may not worry about the purple cone flower becoming an endangered species, but that in fact is what is happening to many wild medicinal herb plants (many of which were once considered common weeds) as demand continues to grow. United Plant Savers was founded in an effort to prevent extinction. Its mission is native North American medicinal plant conservation and cultivation, and activities include: Identifying at risk native medicinal plants; Raising public awareness; Creating and managing botanical sanctuaries; Providing seed and rootstock; Replanting; Consulting regarding sustainable land practices; Sponsoring programs for school systems and communities; and Carrying out focused research.

<http://www.plantsavers.org/> [reported in *TipWorld* from Topica.com (<http://www.topica.com/>)]

Neuroimaging

There's no such thing as an average brain. The degree of variability in human brain structure makes it difficult to determine abnormality in a single individual just on examination. The Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at UCLA collaborates nationally and internationally to develop brain models that track and analyze complex patterns of dynamically changing brain structure in development and disease. The LONI Web site offers incredible images, for example a recently completed multi-modality atlas of the brain in Alzheimer's disease which combined thousands of annotated structure models with MRI, PET cryosections, histologic and bio-

chemical data in a common coordinate space. Researchers can also access the LONI Resource and its software for using a database of MRI scans from more than 7000 subjects. You'll also find a complete description of LONI's facilities and personnel, as well as available jobs!

<http://www.loni.ucla.edu/>

Oceanography

Tropical Ecosystems: Coral Reefs, Rainforests & A Potpourri of Weather, Earth Science & Other Good Things. Now that's a mouthful! R. Hays Cummins personal page reflects his eclectic interests and his department: Interdisciplinary Studies. The opening page is extensive, with drop down menus to weather sites, tropical ecosystem courses and images, and field presentations. There's a "Treat of the Day," which was spectacular volcano and earthquake imagery on January 12, 2001. Drop in on one of the Discovery

Labs, or check out the course discussion sites. Look at the weather and earth science resources while enjoying the colorful tropical cyclone activity map image. Or just enjoy the randomly selected images the author provides.

<http://jrscience.wcp.muohio.edu/html/index.html>

Physics

From the fizz-ics of champagne to why your electric toothbrush recharges without metal-to-metal contact can be found at Physics Central. This educational site from the American Physical Society is aimed at high school and up, offering articles, brief reviews, miniprofiles of scientists, the latest physics news, links to other physics sites, and a "how things work" column where questions are answered by physicist Lou Bloomfield.

<http://www.physicscentral.com>

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- We already outsource much of what is selected to standing order and approval plan vendors and we outsource much of our cataloging to bibliographic utilities because these steps reduce our legacy costs – look for more opportunities at every turn.
- Most of us have made the transition from individually selected journals to publisher and aggregator e-journal packages. Get mentally ready for pay-per-use because it will be the next logical step toward buying what is read, not what might be read. I say mentally ready, because for many of us volume counts are the means that we use to establish worth. We need to look at how non-incumbents define worth.

- Focus on buying digital materials which link to other digital materials. Knowledge output results from the interaction between time, intelligence, and content. Our users have time and intelligence. The faster we can deliver the right content to them, the more successful they will be in producing knowledge. Giving them access to digital materials that are linked to other materials at the bibliographic reference level, is the most valuable thing we can do for our users.

Unless we can take advantage of the new advances in information technology, and rethink what legacy assets are really needed (e.g., cannibalize some and discard others), we will not be able to compete with the non-incumbents of the new information economy. We have too much to offer to allow ourselves to be pushed to the margin of the information age.

Rumors

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the Website out—www.serialssolutions.com.

Marietta Plank was looking great. And it's still hard as hell to drive a bargain with her!

John Tagler <j.tagler@elsevier.com> was talking about the debate at the 20th Charleston Conference between David Goodman and Tony Ferguson. Maybe next year we can get John on the debating podium. Suggestions for topics? Debaters?

As shown at ALA in Washington, Faxon, RoweCom Library Services have implemented a completely electronic claims handling process with major publishers including John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Elsevier Science, and Kluwer Academic Publishers. The process utilizes Internet FTP and other electronic exchange methods to transport industry standard EDIFACT messages between Faxon and its suppliers.

Last but not least, I have to brag for a minute. My daughter Ileana Strauch, has just published a book on the College of Charleston in the College History Series of Arcadia Publishing (0738508362, \$19.99). I'm not telling you all to go out and buy a copy, but it's a great book and will have lots of anecdotes for the next time you visit Charleston!

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Back Talk — Libraries in the

NEW INFORMATION ECONOMY

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I suppose everyone but me has read *Blown to Bits* by **Philip Evans** and **Thomas S. Wurster** (Harvard Business School Press, 2000). If not, you should get your hands on a copy. In the first chapter they talk about the effects that changes in the technology of communication are having upon the economy. They use *Britannica* as a case study in the perils of being the established leader in any given sector of activity: "One of the greatest brand names in the English-speaking world was nearly destroyed in just five years – by a cheap, shiny disc" (p. 4). They go on to discuss four lessons that can be learned from *Britannica*'s experience. I will focus only on one of these lessons, one that has special significance to large academic libraries:

"Even if the executives of the established businesses fully grasp the impact of new technologies, and even if they can reason their way beyond their corporate myths and assumptions, they still face a massive competitive disadvantage arising precisely because they are incumbents. Incumbents are saddled with legacy assets – not just clunky mainframe systems, but sales and distribution systems, bricks and mortar, brands and core competencies. Competing in the face of the new economics of information requires cannibalizing those assets, perhaps even destroying them. Incumbents hesitate to do that, especially as long as the business has positive margins. Rather, they do complex financial calculations and get bogged down in internal political debates. Insurgents have no such inhibitions." (pp. 5-6)

These words are extremely relevant to what is going on in large academic libraries. Let me substitute a few of my words and otherwise paraphrase Evans and Wurster's words to bring this lesson closer to my library world (although publishers and vendors can do it as well):

Even if we librarians from large academic libraries can fully grasp the impact of new technologies and reason our way beyond the myths and assumptions that have grown up around libraries, we still face a competitive disadvantage arising precisely because we are the incumbents of the information delivery world. Information incumbents are saddled with legacy assets – not just

our huge stores of books, but acquisitions, cataloging, and public services systems, bricks and mortar; our status as the people who are supposed to be meeting the information needs of our students and faculty and core competencies to perform this mission. Competing in the face of the new economics of information requires cannibalizing those assets, perhaps even destroying them. Librarians as the information business incumbents, hesitate to do this, especially as long as the larger proportion of the faculty are tied to the culture of the print on paper world. Rather, we get bogged down in developing new ways of doing old things and in just as costly a manner as in the past. Information insurgents have no such inhibitions.

Who are the non-incumbents and what are the legacy assets that we should think about cannibalizing or even destroying?

Non-incumbents. We don't have to look far to find the non-incumbents of the education and information worlds. In higher education, the **University of Phoenix**, **Jones International University** and other intentionally lean institutions of higher learning are good examples. They do not invest in the bricks and mortar of academe, instead they focus on teaching and forget the research and social missions that regular universities defend as critical. Their libraries are also much leaner – focusing only on what the students will need to complete their courses. For them, digital forms of information are not a disputed diversion, nor do they apologize for collecting for today's instead of tomorrow's student. They make a virtue of what we so often label as criminal.

In the information world, the non-incumbents include the likes of **Questia**. A recent brochure notes:

No longer are users limited to just the resources available in their brick-and-mortar libraries, rather, with an Internet connection, they can access and interact with the full text of tens of thousands of books and journals. Students can reach all these resources at any time from home, the computer lab or anywhere else they connect to the Internet. This is what information access was truly meant to be.

— (Questia: Innovative. Scholarly. Indispensable)

Our legacy assets. As indicated in the paraphrased version of the Evans and Wurster quote, our legacy assets are only too apparent. One need only go to the ARL Statistics yearbook to view a numerical record of our many legacies: Number of total volumes, number of volumes added, number of current serials, amount spent on monographs and serials, number of professional and non-professional staff members, etc, etc. They represent everything that is wonderful about large research libraries and, when I am doing research, I want to be at the biggest one on the planet – and yet, these strengths are our vulnerabilities when it comes time to figure the size of the bang that our universities are getting for their buck. But we are loathe to change as long as the right 5 percent of our faculty defend us, as long as 15 to 20 percent of our students push their way past our turn-style machines on a daily basis (we intentionally don't build libraries big enough to house even half of the students at the same time). Instead, we get involved in the politics of information. We get involved in all sorts of important activities and make connecting students and information a low profile activity. The people who do this kind of work get paid the least in our libraries.

What Should We Be Doing? It is, of course, easy to whack away at what's wrong, and more difficult to say what should be done. If we are to learn from the words of **Evans** and **Wurster**, I believe we need to do the following:

- Independently meet the needs of today's students and faculty.
- Consortially meet the needs of tomorrow's students and faculty. Non-incumbents do this – it is called selling the same piece of information to large numbers of people. We are already doing a lot of this, we just need to do even more.
- Don't look for brick and mortar solutions – find a digital solution. Recognize that the question is when, not whether, we will digitally reformat research information.
- If you can't find a digital solution, share the cost of whatever it is with as many other institutions as possible. If not, non-incumbents will figure this is a niche market and do it for you.

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