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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-A Lasting Difference

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Book Pricing Update — Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pre-Pub Prices

by John Riley (Sales Director, Eastern Book Company) <jdriley@javanet.com>

Editor's Note: This column begins a new chapter in the Pricing Update portion of *Against the Grain*. Thanks to Celia Wagner for her years of work on the column. She was a great advocate for "numeracy" and her columns were statistical models for pricing analysis. While I still plan on providing a once a year estimate of price increases to help librarians plan for future budgets, I wanted to take a different tack in examining pricing. I want to focus on different areas where pricing is an issue. In future columns I would like to explore out of print pricing, pre-processing charges, Amazon and other Web based sellers' pricing, etc. To accomplish this goal of looking at pricing from many angles I invite librarians, vendors and publishers to participate. Feel free to contact me with any issues or forward any articles you would like to have published in this column. — JR

When new reference sets are published it is customary for many publishers to offer pre-publication special pricing. This helps them to both promote the title and gauge interest in the publication. It allows a publisher to have a reservoir of capital before and at the actual moment of publication. From 40-60 new titles are published each year with special pre-publication pricing. Wiley, Elsevier and Academic are the most frequent promoters of their titles by pre-pub offers, but many other publishers such as ABC-CLIO, Cambridge, Routledge and Oxford have multiple offerings. The new imprint of Sage Reference plans on offering pre-pubs as well.

The offers begin anywhere from one year to six months before publication. The special pricing is promoted both by the publisher and by vendors. Publishers give special incentives to vendors to help them promote and consolidate orders. Publishers also benefit from the vendors linking the titles from their Website to the publisher database and from vendors updating customers on new release dates or other changes. Consolidated shipping helps both publisher and vendor. On larger orders we receive shipments directly from the printer to cut shipping charges.

When major reference sets are published, promotional mail, faxes and telemarketing calls follow. This is when librarians can face a blizzard of choices.

When sets such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *McGraw Hill Encyclopedia of Technology* were published it was not uncommon for librarians to receive as many as 15 different offers, sometimes from firms that only seemed to appear for the occasion.

In most instances you can receive the best pricing on pre-pub sets through your vendor. Since publishers offer incentives to vendors to boost sales, vendors in turn pass along a share of those savings to their customers. For example, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* from Pergamon is listed at a pre-pub price of \$7995.00, but many vendors are offering it at prices ranging from \$6750.00 to just over \$6900.00. For a set such as the *Encyclopedia of Analytical Chemistry* from Wiley listed at \$4800.00, you can find this for prices starting at \$4100.00.

Some vendors post pre-pub prices on the Web, making it easy to see what offers are available. Others choose to have librarians contact them for pricing. Some vendors post a wide array of publishers, while some vendors choose to focus on areas of expertise. Depending on policy, some vendors offer free shipping. Vendor Websites are a good place to begin when searching for the best price on expensive sets.

Some of the problems that can be encountered with pre-publication offers include: changing dates of publication or even cancellations of publication leading

to problems with encumbrances, especially if they overlap fiscal years; claiming can become a problem if the publication date is moved; and finally vendor turnaround statistics can be skewed because of the long lag time between ordering and receipt of an item.

Another problem arises when a publisher makes a publication available only if ordered direct, or even more problematic, when the publisher sells a set to the public for less than they do to the vendor community. Oxford University Press is not the only publisher that has issued a number of sets that would cost vendors more to acquire than the publisher is selling them for, leading to confusion amongst librarians and a dilemma for vendors.

Vendors would prefer to be able to supply all publications, even if it means accepting a low margin rather than not being able to serve their customers. Likewise, librarians find this situation troublesome when they place an order with their vendor but are forced to order direct.

A good rule of thumb is to look at all of the offers available on the more expensive pre-pubs. If you choose not to encumber monies ahead of time, hold the orders in a queue, listed by order deadline. That way you can place your order only when the set is about to be published. This would also eliminate the need for claiming and you could adjust the true publication date as it changes. 🐾

Issues in Vendor / Library Relations — A Lasting Difference

by Bob Nardini (Yankee Book Peddler) <rnardini@YBP.com>

It's a scary thing, the January 1981 issue of *American Libraries*. A scary thing in the year 2001 if one is a vendor, that is. Then as now, *American Libraries* was an advertising showcase for companies doing business with libraries, each issue a snapshot of what the library marketplace looked like. The first thing today's vendor will notice about the issue is that most of the vendors in that marketplace are gone.

Twenty years, not a long time in the

overall scheme of things, is time enough for scores of companies to vanish and leave no trace. Porta-Structures Industries, for example, ran a full-page ad aimed at libraries mounting book displays, with photographs of "a proven winner," their system of portable kiosks: "See the Newest Porta-Boutique in Action!" Other ghostly names may still be remembered, such as CLSI or the McGregor Subscription Agency; but how many today can recall Information Fu-

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tures, *New Magazine Review*, Tantalus, Database Services, Reflector Hardware Corporation? And what to tell Moore-Cottrell Subscription Agencies, since 1869 the "nation's oldest and most experienced subscription service," who in 1981 asked librarians, "Doesn't that tell you something?"

Not only have the companies turned over, so have the goods. What firm today, as Gaylord did then, would highlight the choice of shades and colors in a line of plastic pamphlet files, "Desert Sand, Red, Blue, Green, Gold, and new 'Putty.'" One is struck most of all by the diminished place of encyclopedia publishers, so far among the unluckiest participants in our Information Age. These mainframes of a pre-digital age still enjoyed a heyday in 1981. They were an advertising staple, to a library publication then like beer or automobiles or cosmetics are to a general magazine now. The competing sets paraded for page upon page in multi-volumed formation, *Compton's*, *Academic American*, *World Book*, *Britannica*, *Britannica-Junior*, *American Educator*, *Grzimek's*. They marched with bookmobiles, microfilm catalogs and readers, card kits, with the *National Union Catalog*, and in rank with the 63 bound volumes of G. K. Hall's catalog of the **Hoover Institution** library.

Pamphlet files and encyclopedias, and for all I know, bookmobiles, can still be bought today. And many of the companies advertising in 1981 still advertise today, warhorses like **Gale, H. W. Wilson, Oryx, Bell & Howell, Highsmith, Baker & Taylor, and Faxon**. They likely have metamorphosed over the twenty years, but companies like these have been successful enough to avoid either grand finales or subtle diminutions. A less nimble company than these was, improbably, a December 1980 advertiser in *American Libraries*. This was American Motors—remember them?—whose ad referred to its larger campaign for the Javelin, a car so sporty an earlier ad had said they "might lose a few librarians as customers."

Librarians complained about that remark in numbers enough for American Motors to turn to *American Libraries* as a platform for apology. With nothing to lose, the firm took the opportunity also to pitch the Javelin directly to this unfamiliar market, suggesting in a re-insult that librarians might actually be able to afford the car. Elsewhere in the ad American Motors played David to three Goliaths. "If you had to compete with GM, Ford and Chrysler," asked the car manufacturer, "what would you do?" What they did, eventually, was sell out to Chrysler in 1987. And so American Motors went the way of fallen bookmobile manufacturers, subscription agencies, microform companies, and kiosk producers, some absorbed, others expired, all dead either way.

How many libraries have we lost since 1981? We have gained quite a few, just as we have

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gained companies to take the places of the ones plowed under. But libraries, public and academic libraries at least, are remarkably stable institutions. They may re-engineer, reorganize, and rename themselves; their roles and supporting operations will change as much or more as those of other types of organizations; and the relative prestige and support enjoyed by libraries will rise and fall in cycles. But once open, libraries seldom close.

Not so the library vendor. Symbols of permanence, on daily display on every campus, are foreign to the vendor workplace, where there's no statuary to be admired, no pillars at the front entrance, no frisbees on the quad—no quad at all, of course—no football team, no cheerleaders, no marching band, no faculty club, no art gallery, no administration building, no homecoming, no caps and gowns or commencements, no degrees, no endowment, no tenure.

If librarians and vendors have their differences, here's the root of them. For librarians, institutional permanence is a fact of life; but the odds say their vendors, whether in the long run or short, are transients. Librarians and vendors often refer to the "community" they inhabit. They do share a community, since librarians and vendor representatives usually have had a similar education, often a similar work background; they speak the same jargon, attend the same conferences, call up the same

Websites, read the same publications. They sit down together to dinner and lunch, sometimes breakfast; send e-mail back and forth, talk on the phone, and often enjoy one another as neighbors do. But in this community, vendors occupy the houses that seem to have a new occupant every so many years, librarians the houses whose kitchens the realtor never sees.

As the company, so the individual. While librarians certainly do get demoted and even fired on occasion, all employees of a library vendor, no matter how venerable the person, serve at the pleasure of someone or other. Leavetakings are so common, all of us understand farewells to a departed employee off to "pursue other opportunities" to be a shorthand for all manner of unpleasant endings; and an invitation to private conversation about "what really happened" to a person who will likely turn up again before long anyway to tell their own story, carrying the card of a new company.

All of this is a fine thing for libraries. Not the comings-and-goings of individuals, but of companies. What if vendors never went down, and new vendors joined a permanent stable of the old ones? The result would be ecological collapse, librarians overcome by a rain of business cards, e-mails, market surveys, direct mail, phone calls, sales calls; invitations to dinner, focus groups, hospitality suites, lunch. The

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Darwinian rules under which we instead play, happily, free librarians from day upon nightmarish day filled up with closing the door, walking away, hanging up the phone, wearing out the delete key. A good thing too for vendors, who keep a reasonable chance of gaining an audience, and need suffer only a normal quota of rebuffs.

Whenever librarian and vendor face one another across a desk, the interplay between permanence and likely impermanence somehow informs the exchange. On a personal level, the vendor may wonder how it would feel to have the security or the accoutrements enveloping the librarian, who may at that moment be playing with thoughts about the freedom from routine vendors seem to enjoy. On a business level, the librarian must always raise the question, how stable is this vendor? The question may be kept silent or may be put to the vendor, but it is always there, at the bottom of any decision to give business, or to withhold or withdraw it. Will the library's business make the vendor stronger (always at the expense of another), and so a better partner to help the library toward its own ends? If the answer isn't clear, how much risk should a library take on, toward the somewhat abstract goal of a healthier marketplace? Is there a stronger vendor out there anyway? If a library is already invested heavily with a particular vendor, is there any benefit in hedging the bet, by opening a fledgling business relationship with a second vendor? And how stable is that vendor?

Meanwhile, the vendor is at work trying to gain (or hold) a piece of the stability and permanence the library offers through its business. The business itself will naturally be welcome at headquarters. But a new or larger or older account is also a personal mark for the rep, whose career might advance with a nice portfolio, and might collapse without one. Having an association with a library can be as important as the resulting sales. Some of that aura of permanence may rub off. To be associated in some way with a prestigious institution, especially, is a comforting thing, since others within a company will take note, as will the competitors without.

Small wonder that successful vendor representatives sometimes identify with their best customers as much as they do with their own company. Everyone knows vendor coffee mugs, paperweights, and other small gifts adorn the offices of librarians. It's not such common knowledge that posters and pennants from our leading universities are on display in the hallways and offices of their vendors, whose representatives have bought them and mounted them, lovingly, on the wall. 🐉

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Will Amazon Wal-Mart the Book Vendors?

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Yankee Book Peddler) <nardini@YBP.com>

John Abbott is Coordinator of Collection Development, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.

Column Editor's Note: It's become a commonplace to say that anyone who displays bibliographic data and/or delivers books within an academic setting—library book vendors, that is, as well as the libraries themselves—should emulate some of the practices of Amazon.com. John Abbott, at the recent Charleston Conference, made an interesting opposite point, that Amazon might want to act like a book vendor. After hearing him, I invited John to take part in this exchange. — BN

BN: John, we book vendors by now are nearly used to being compared to mighty Amazon, and to coming out of the exercise feeling something like brooks or rivulets. We'll concede a lot to Amazon—who can usually deliver a book more quickly than we can, who makes it easy to find books and then tells you a lot about them once found and suggests others too, and who in general is just more fun than we manage to be.

But I'm not so sure about something you said at Charleston, that Amazon might be an approval plan vendor in the future. A book is a book, it's true, and we have that in common with Amazon; library vendors sell books. Beyond that, though, I don't see much resemblance, since the context in which we sell is so entirely different. For Amazon, the book really is the end; today's book, and the one they hope you and millions of others will buy next time online.

For us, it's been years since bookselling has been mainly about selling books. What bookselling has become, for academic library vendors, is figuring out ways to deliver books to libraries in ways that minimize library work in buying them and putting them onto shelves. It's not one-by-one transactions we're asked to focus on, but library workflows organized around mass-buying. So, can we deliver bibliographic and acquisitions information that will load into the library's system? Can we bind, stamp, and label the book just as the library would have? Can we supply instant management information on purchases and returns—a transaction we make nearly as easy as a purchase—in a choice of formats,

and offer to sort the data in different ways? What we'll volunteer to tell Amazon, too, is that these library workflows and specifications all are different. What will work wonderfully for one library will be no use in the next.

That's only the start, since we haven't talked about the bibliographic core of things with approval plans. I wonder how willing Amazon would be to set up an operation to describe and evaluate new books prior to anyone's buying them. Just the physical handling and the necessary systems to make sure you actually get the ones you've told publishers you want—it's about 50,000 titles annually that Amazon would need to account for, somehow keeping this operation separate from their other workflows—is a job in itself. Then, how to describe the books? Would Amazon rely upon the data publishers supply? That was one of the early reasons for the growth of approval plans: the unreliability of what publishers would, or could, tell you about their own books. Who decides if a book is really a textbook, or a reprint, or a dissertation? Who decides what subject(s) a book is about? Finally, before we forget, how does the library's approval plan profile, which has to intersect with all of this description, get written in the first place, and how revised later on?

Granted, we may not be a pretty face. But vendors have worked for years to devise systems to accommodate the particular ways academic libraries buy books, ways that don't have much to do with how an individual might kill an hour on the Web browsing and buying at Amazon. Why would Amazon want to divert any focus to this altogether different group of buyers, a demanding group that would never account for more than a fraction of total sales anyway?

JA: Bob, two things. First, whenever anyone is silly enough to ask me to speak, I look at the marginal possibilities and suggest those possibilities that may have real currency, and therefore the "Amazon" thought arose. It may be unlikely, but it is possible and worth considering. Second, your argu-

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