

September 2000

Biz of Acq-Brining Out the Dead: The Romance of Change in Librarianship

Rob Richards

University of Colorado Law Library, rrichard@stripe.colorado.edu

Forrest E. Link

Midwest Library Service, link@midwestls.com

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



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

Recommended Citation

Richards, Rob and Link, Forrest E. (2000) "Biz of Acq-Brining Out the Dead: The Romance of Change in Librarianship," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 5, Article 26.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3581>

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.

COUTTS

WORKING AS PART OF YOUR TEAM

We can handle all your book acquisition needs.

W

hen you put Coutts on your team, you gain extensive knowledge of the book trade:

- bibliographic accuracy
- a single source to handle both the mainstream as well as esoteric publications
- personalized service
- book approval plans tailored to your specific and dynamic collection management requirements.



COUTTS

Library Services Inc.

We handle firm orders, book approval plans, new title programs (notification slip service), continuations/standing orders, book processing and provide electronic access to information and PC software for ordering. Let our professional selectors and knowledgeable customer service specialists provide you with our, innovative cost-effective service.

*Please call or write for
more information.*

1823 Maryland Avenue, Niagara Falls, New York, 14302-1000 (716) 282-8627 Fax: (905) 356-5064, 1-800-772-4304

Biz of Acq — Bringing Out the Dead: The Romance of Change in Librarianship

by **Forrest E. Link** (Northeastern Regional Manager, Midwest Library Service)
<link@midwestls.com>



Column Editor: **Rob Richards** (Technical Services Librarian, Univ. of Colorado Law Library) <r-richard@stripe.colorado.edu>

Column Editor's Note: *Constant change — technological, administrative, industrial — characterizes the working lives of most acquisitions professionals. Yet how many of these changes are truly innovative, and how many are producing useful results? In this month's column, Forrest Link of Midwest Library Service casts a cold eye on our current environment of change, and offers some provocative warnings and alternatives. — RR*

In my role as an itinerant book salesman, one of my chief functions has always been necromancy, literally divining from the dead, or, as Katina themed an earlier **Charleston Conference**, "Learning From our Mistakes." It is a part of my job to seek to improve the performance of my company by fixing our shortcomings and avoiding the errors of others. I have noticed along the way that our modern romance with novelty, be it techno-

logical or managerial, is so strong that we are willing to accept as new ideas and procedures which are not only not novel, but are, indeed, recycled and, in many cases, failed. The problem these days is that dead ideas, dead procedures, and, yes, even dead companies haven't the decency to stay that way. Now maybe I've spent too much time watching "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" with my fourteen-year-old daughter, but I'm thinking somebody on stake patrol is falling down on the job.

Acquisitions librarians with whom I visit, taxed enough by shrinking support staffs and endless re-engineering of their workflows, are now called upon to abandon professional gains. Serials librarians who invested careers in the one-time ultimate preservation medium, microfilm, are now trafficking in electrons. Catalogers who once prided themselves on tailoring their work to the needs of local patrons are

being standardized into oblivion. Publishers who prided themselves on their unique scholarly or regional bent find themselves marginalized or sucked into the maw of giant media conglomerates. Booksellers who have traded on personalized service are becoming either casualties or niche players in a market dominated by dubious technologies and predatory pricing models.

We've seen all of this before: library or university administrators blindly scrambling after the next big thing, otherwise sensible and prudent businesspeople who have sudden and sometimes disastrous epiphanies regarding their business model, governmental bodies that see no difference between bidding on desks and document delivery. Just when we think we've learned a lesson, school starts again.

In the eighties and early nineties, monographic and serials acquisitions librarians

continued on page 80



The Charleston ADVISOR

Critical Reviews of Web Products for Information Professionals



Yes

ENTER MY SUBSCRIPTION FOR ONE YEAR

Name _____

Title _____

Organization _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone _____ Fax _____ Email _____

Signature _____

I am Interested in being a Reviewer. ☐ Yes

618 S. Monroe Way, Denver, CO 80209 Ph: 303-282-9706 Fax: 303-282-9743 <http://www.charlestonco.com>

Order Yours Today!

Libraries Pay Less than

\$6.⁰⁰ per review

With Publishers at Less than

\$10.⁰⁰ per review

HOW MUCH
ARE YOU
SPENDING?

Web Database and
Quarterly Print are now
available at the low
Introductory Price

\$295.⁰⁰ for Libraries

\$495.⁰⁰ for all others

Biz of Acq from page 79

strengthened their positions as discrete professional specialties, each worthy of the attention of a full-time librarian. Expertise was developed. Materials vendors were viewed as necessary adjuncts to the acquisitions process, but professional librarians were in control. Nowadays, particularly in the realm of monographs, we surviving vendors have gotten very good at what we do. So good, in fact, that in larger academic libraries most book buying is done on automatic pilot in the form of comprehensive, sometimes shelf-ready, gathering plans. At the same time, there has been a trend toward redirecting the acquisition of serials and monographs (and even electronic information) into the hands of a single worker, often not even a professional librarian. Progress has been made, then abandoned.

A recent article in the *New Yorker*, by **Nicholson Baker**, details the quest by serials and preservation librarians to convert decades, even centuries of aging periodicals and newspapers to microfilm.¹ The promise of this conversion funneled huge amounts of money to our profession and launched careers. Now some are having second thoughts regarding the collateral damage wrought by the change. As we approach the digitizing of our collections, with its intellectual and commercial implications and promises, capital

and careers are again being mobilized. I wonder if we might pause and reexamine the arguments surrounding the microfilm debate. Or is the allure of the new irresistible?

When I was taught cataloging in library school, much was made of the need to accommodate local peculiarities in subject headings and name authority control. Now, particularly in larger libraries, divergence from **LC MARC** records is regarded as unnecessary at best, extremely troublesome at worst. The drive toward standardization and economy has left us with a bland, but very flexible vanilla record. The **LC MARC** record, sometimes regarded as a frame on which to drape local embellishments, is now, in some settings, an inviolable document.

Book publishing remains a very active business; new publishers come to life with encouraging frequency. But an examination of best selling titles will reveal a handful of houses contributing the bulk of the list. The successful presses are typically acquired by the conglomerates, sometimes retaining a ghostlike existence as an empty imprint. While this merger mania is not truly a new development, the process is accelerating. **William Morrow** is now an

imprint of **Harper Collins**, which is a part of **Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation**. Of more concern to some is the return to the old '70's style mixed-industry conglomerate. For many in librarianship, the recent acquisition of **Endeavor** by **Elsevier** is an industry-transforming event.

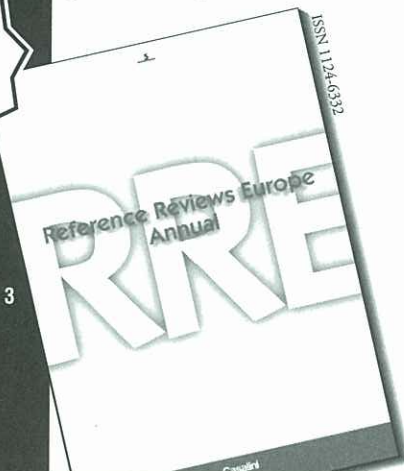
The practice of bidding for and contracting library services has gone in and out of fashion as oversight agencies have responded to prevailing political winds and as budgets have been flush or lean. It is always painful and occasionally amusing to see this wheel continually re-invented. It is also an extraordinarily stressful change for library acquisitions departments. The jury is still out on this one as there are enough historical precedents on both sides of the issue for justification.

I would be remiss if I did not note developments in my own area, bookselling. One change in the landscape is the accelerating growth of major mergers. **Blackwell's Book Services** and **Academic Book Center** are now one. **Baker & Taylor** and **YBP Library Services** march in tandem. In speaking with the principals here, I have been told that events and decisions taken over the last several years made this inevitable. The coming competition, it has been sug-

continued on page 81

*"Book publishing
remains a very active
business; new
publishers come to
life with encouraging
frequency."*

On-line edition:
www.rre.casalini.it



Via Benedetto da Maiano, 3
50014 Fiesole - FI
Italy

Tel. +39/055.5018.1
Fax +39/055.5018.201

<http://www.casalini.it>
gen@casalini.it

Casalini Libri takes great pleasure in presenting **Reference Reviews Europe Annual**. With its abstracted reviews and bibliographical citations in English, **RREA** is a unique source for identifying and assessing the value of European reference works for academic libraries.

The abstracts in **Reference Reviews Europe Annual** represent a cumulative selection of the abstracted reviews available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.rre.casalini.it>, under the title *Reference Reviews Europe Online*. They derive from the reviews that appear quarterly in *Informations-mittel für Bibliotheken*, edited by Dr. Klaus Schreiber, Württembergische Landesbibliothek and published by the Deutsches Bibliotheksinstitut, Berlin.

Reference Reviews Europe Online (RREO)
is available for print subscribers at no additional cost:
<http://www.rre.casalini.it>

Vol.5 (1999), 224 pages, ISBN 88-85297-60-9

Vol.4 (1998), 181 pages, ISBN 88-85297-47-1

Vol.3 (1997), 200 pages, ISBN 88-85297-41-2

Vol.2 (1996), 199 pages, ISBN 88-85297-28-5

Vol.1 (1995), 205 pages, ISBN 88-85297-16-1

Annual subscription and single issue:

ITL 54,000/us\$ 30.00

Additional desk copies for subscribers:

ITL 18,000/us\$ 10.00

Biz of Acq from page 80

gested, may not necessarily be so much among the remaining traditional jobbers, but between the forces of full-service mediation and disintermediation, that is, between price-is-the-only-factor internet suppliers and traditional, relationship-based booksellers. This change is largely unprecedented and our successors will be left to learn from our mistakes.

So we are all in this profession awash in oceans of change. What I propose is a sort of transitional triage. We need to identify the purpose of internal change (beyond its use as an antidote to ennui) and we need to control our love of novelty. Two of the most common justifications for change are to reduce work and to save money. I fear that in many cases neither goal is achieved. And I fear that the glamour of the prospect of fiscal savings or work reduction can blind us to objective historical analysis. Libraries and businesses should be as forthcoming about their failures and near misses as their successes. Maybe then we would recognize the dead — and let them rest. 🍀

Endnote

1 Nicholson Baker, 'A Reporter at Large,' *New Yorker*, July 24, 2000, p. 42.

Group Therapy

by **Rosann Bazirjian** (Asst. Dean for Tech. & Access Serv., Univ. Libraries, The Penn. State Univ., 507 Paterno Library, Univ. Park, PA 16802; Ph: (814) 865-0404; Fax: (814) 865-3665) rzb9@psu.edu



GRIPE

(Submitted by **Barbara Weir**, Technical Services Librarian, Swarthmore College)

I'd like to know if there are any libraries that have merged their interlibrary loan departments into acquisitions. If so, what was the reasoning for the change? What have been the benefits? Problems? If a patron requests to borrow a book that is in print, do you purchase it as a rush purchase rather than borrow it on ILL?

RESPONSE

(Submitted by **Suzanne Ward**, Head, Access Services, Purdue University)

The Purdue University Libraries Interlibrary Loan unit proposed a pilot project to purchase patrons' loan requests from Amazon.com, lend them to the patrons, and then add the titles to the collection. Staff analyzed previous monograph loans, developed ordering criteria, implemented the proposal as a pilot project for six months, and evaluated the resulting patron comments, statistics,

and staff perceptions. As a result of enthusiastic patron comments and a review of the project statistics, the program was extended.

Patron response has been overwhelmingly positive. There are preliminary indications that books acquired this way are subsequently used more frequently than similar books purchased through routine collection development. Library staff is pleased to accept recent titles identified by their patrons as works needed for research and study. The process provides a way of quickly responding to patrons' requests for research and scholarly material, rather than the more traditional model of analyzing ILL transactions months after they are completed. The project also demonstrated a successful partnership between the Interlibrary Loan unit in Access Services with the campus libraries and with Technical Services, both reporting to Public Services.

Funds have been provided to continue the ILL Amazon Project through December 2000. Staff is delighted to be able to continue this service to patrons. 🍀