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Public Prayers: The Reverent Wishes & Desires of a Public Library Collection Development Librarian

by **Roger Smith** (Collection Development Librarian, Charleston County Public Library) <smithr@ccpl.org>

In my previous column, I tried to introduce myself and my library, as I began the struggle to produce a meaningful, reality based materials budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Alas, the soap opera continues. South Carolina, like quite a few other states, counted its chickens before they hatched. The result has been a serious budget shortfall. The state is sharing its pain with all levels of local government. Our share of the misery will be an \$80,000 reduction in direct state aid. Our library has always put all state aid into the materials budget. Our administration has pledged to maintain the materials budget at last year's level. I am proud of their resolve and grateful for their efforts. But, in the end, we're left with a zero growth budget, higher costs for electronic resources and periodicals, plus a public clamoring for expanded audio visual collections.

What to do? What to do? Then it came to me. I'll go to San Francisco! I'll find the solutions to all our problems in the **Moscone Center** exhibition halls.

So there I was, a simple man from South Carolina, wandering the aisles, looking for answers, like love, in all the wrong places. Just what do the large vendors like **ProQuest**, **Gale**, **EBSCO**, and others hope to accomplish with those lavish displays, **Punch & Judy** power point demonstrations on the half hour, **Pavlovian** strategies for dispensing their trinkets, and squads of Stepford salespeople always on the lookout for the next client/target? Yes, I admit, I did sit through a superficial show-&-tell and dutifully received a box of candy. But I refused to have my passport stamped in order to receive a free travel mug. What happened to the good old days of simple giveaways? The vendors would say: "Hello, how are you? Here's a brochure and a canvas bag." The only meaningful discussion I had at any of the "mega-booths" was with our **BroDart** rep who actually took the time needed to answer my questions about their new online collection development product.

Two "mega-booths" left me kind of disturbed. The **ProQuest** spaceship made me laugh out loud. I think it won an award. But I found it to be really over

the top, like the **HMS Pinafore** joins the **Star Fleet**. I did not stop there because I was afraid they'd make me go up to their second level and subject me to alien probes.

And what was with **Baker & Taylor** and those philosophical signs with warm fuzzy messages for the new millennium? I circled around their "space" two or three times, looking for the shopping bags, then I moved on.

My most satisfying encounters at **Moscone** were at the smaller booths, real publishers and the smaller vendors. I met an editor at **Source Books** who told me that if I can find an attorney willing to do the revision, she will publish a new edition of *How to File for Divorce in South Carolina*. A small AV vendor gave me some ideas for stretching our video budget. But most profitable was an hour-long appointment with **Linda Crismond** and **Bonnie Dieffenbacher** of **Follett Audiovisual**, our major AV vendor. We discussed a variety of issues in depth and came out with a greater appreciation of one another's needs and problems. Particularly valuable were insights I gained about **Follett's** online ordering database and their internal operations. **Linda** and **Bonnie** also detailed some of their collection development tools that will help me meet some of the demands of our AV hungry public. If only other vendors would abandon the trade show glitz and make time and room for real conversations. My wife and I enjoyed the **Elsevier** chocolate, but neither **Elsevier** nor the **Charleston County Library** profited from the experience.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed San Francisco and the conference immensely. I found the meetings I attended to be stimulating and timely. And the opportunity to talk with other librarians is invaluable. Even my experience in the **Moscone** exhibition halls was profitable in that I left there realizing that there are no easy solutions to the problems facing us all. But there are lots of possibilities, and lots of smart, dedicated people trying to make them work.

So, I returned to Charleston, and confronted our budgetary problems as best as I could. We're pruning our periodicals



list of marginal titles. For better or worse, we're putting some faith in our **InfoTrac Onefile**, to guarantee us a degree of access to subject areas covered by the cancelled titles. We're also cutting back on Monday through Saturday subscriptions to a variety of national and international newspapers. And we're trimming away standing orders for expensive print directories at our branches. Branch staff will need to rely on the Internet and document delivery from our main library. I hope that these two operations will effect enough savings to at least absorb anticipated cost increases in the periodicals and continuations budgets and provide a little cushion for other budget lines. For any actual increases we'll have to look for outside funding sources, like the **Friends of the Library**.

I want to be straight with everyone. This is not fiscal crisis. Our users will continue to find bestsellers and new DVD releases on the shelves. Electronic databases will not be unplugged. We just have to be very careful. Marginal titles will not be purchased. We'll work hard at defining what is essential to our core collections. And in the meantime, I'll keep praying for:

State legislatures to get their acts together and provide steady, consistent funding for our basic public institutions. Library vendors to rethink their approaches to professional conferences and the need for meaningful communication with individual conferees. Stability in the titles indexed by online periodical databases. Please, try to keep the changes in the array of titles to which we have access to a minimum. Wisdom to select those titles, at all levels, in all media, that are core to users's needs.

Another great year for the **Friends of the Library's** book sale. 🐾