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sotto voce — My Last Word (maybe) on Mergers

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Yes, Virginia, our worlds really are different. If anyone had any doubts, recent vendor sales, mergers, and buyouts should have convincingly put that to rest. These changes seem to belie all the "vendor-speak" about partnerships and of our collegial relations with libraries. If we were partners, you're probably thinking, the period just preceding recent announcements of buyouts and mergers were characterized by our being silent partners.

If you think about it, the partnership thing never should have been believable. When the inevitable mergers were being discussed between companies, did you really expect to be included in those conversations? While that's something partners might do, no one believed that vendors and libraries had that kind of relationship, did they? Such a conversation would have defied common sense in the real world of business, a world which is significantly different than that of libraries.

In the context of a library, one can imagine the demise of individual jobs, but not of the library as a whole. Your existence, albeit an ever-changing one, is assured by the governments and administrations that guarantee you funds with which to operate. In the business world, no such assumptions exist. Every day is a battle for survival. Not only do vendors have to keep our services attractive to customers, much as libraries have to do with patrons, but we also have to stay one step ahead of competitors who are trying to push us out of the market. This latter aspect of business has few corollaries in the library world. While good library supply vendors try to populate their organizations with people committed to the ideals and values of librarianship, our first obligation is to attend to matters of profit and survival. If we don't, we run a real risk of disappearing. In such a context, the owners of these businesses have to take their own counsel when weighing possible mergers and acquisitions. That's not a violation of our relationship with you, it's just a reality. It means, though, that we're not your partners (and never were); we're your suppliers. Our hearts can, and in most cases still are, in the right places when it comes to professional commitment. But is it inaccurate of us to give you the impression that you should expect to participate in life-and-death business decisions as if you really were a part of the ownership structure? It isn't going to happen, nor should it.

"It is misleading to talk of partnerships or selfless commitment."

There are many factors that go into vendor mergers and buyouts: the current health of the companies involved; prospects for future viability in markets that are highly competitive and highly demanding in terms of constantly expanding infrastructure costs; economic self-interests: (In capitalistic societies those who take risks to start and run companies have the right to an ultimate reward for taking those risks. That's another major difference between running a library and running a company.); synergies: whether the proposed merger/buyout creates a more competitive organization as a result. (This is always desirable, but doesn't always happen.); cash on-hand: occasionally, acquisitions are driven by one company having such positive cashflow that it gets flush with "acquisitions fever." Sometimes this fuels outsiders to buy into industries they know nothing about. If they then don't understand enough of the businesses they acquire, these mergers may fail.

No matter how shocking or unexpected, there is nothing immoral in the actions of business owners who accept buyout proposals. It matters not whether they were motivated by self-interests or the long-term interests of their customers. They are within their rights as owners to act as they see fit. Conversely, when other business owners rebuff would-be suitors, their actions aren't necessarily short-sighted, even if it means they will have to work even harder to remain competitive. Their actions (or non-actions, as the case may be) may, in fact, be somewhat virtuous. Among the companies that remain in library supply, there are a number who are fighting very hard to maintain their independence. Those that run their businesses well, and maintain quality service to customers, have a chance of succeeding without selling out to more powerful companies. I'm hopeful they will succeed.

In whatever form our companies take, we vendors need to quit glossing over the true nature of our relationship to libraries. It is misleading to talk of partnerships or selfless commitment. Those values, while virtuous, distort reality. Whatever words we end up using, the ultimate value we represent to our customers will be in the quality of our actions. As individuals and as companies our legacy will be determined by the commitment we demonstrate through our work, not by the phrases we use to make our sales pitches more palatable to the ear and pleasing to the heart.

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