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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Moving From Librarianship to Entrepreneurship: How Different Is It?

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Serials Solutions

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purged from libraries. The **Library Bill of Rights** states that

books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

Furthermore, *The Whole Library Handbook* 2 says that

describing or designating certain library materials by affixing a prejudicial label to them or segregating them by a prejudicial system is an attempt to prejudice attitudes and, as such, is a censor's tool; such practices violate the **Library Bill of Rights**. A variety of private organizations promulgate rating systems and/or review materials as a means of advising either their members or the general public of the contents and suitability or appropriate age for use of certain books...or other materials. For the library to adopt or enforce any of these private systems, to attach such ratings to library materials, to include them in bibliographic records, library catalogs, or other finding aids, or otherwise endorse them would violate the **Library Bill of Rights**.

For academic libraries, book selection is largely based on standard review sources, which would identify the scholarly biographies and filter out those with the inaccurate information. On the other hand, librarians in public libraries recognize that their patrons want libraries to purchase thoroughly researched biographies along with slasher biographies by such authors as **Kitty Kelley** because these titles are popular reading materials. If libraries refused to purchase the slasher biographies, based on the premise that these books contained unsubstantiated information, this practice would be considered censorship. Placing labels in the catalog record or on the spine of the book designating these library materials as "unreliable" would also be a violation of the **Library Bill of Rights**.

Hopefully, reading book reviews and writing to the publishers about the lack of end notes, bibliographies, etc., are ways in which librarians can address this issue of combating unreliable biographies. In order to not censor materials in the library, the decision whether to read the trashy biography or the scholarly one ultimately rests with the patron. Librarians need to take a strong role in educating their patrons about biographies, either at the reference desk or with the reader's advisory service. Librarians teach patrons how to evaluate Internet resources, why not teach them how to evaluate biographies?

What can librarians do to educate their patrons about evaluating biographies? I do not have any definitive solutions, but here are a

few suggestions to ponder. Since readers must think about the issue of subjectivity, they should read several biographies of the same subject in order to gain multiple perspectives on the person's life. To encourage this, librarians could create bibliographies of biographies of a particular individual that the library owns. Signs stating that some books contain more reliable information than others could be placed in the biography section of the library. These signs could refer patrons to the reference desk or the reader's advisory desk where they could receive more information about evaluating biographies. Handouts or fliers with easy ways that patrons can determine the reliability of a book, such as whether there is a bibliography and/or end notes, could be created and made available in the library's biography section or at certain service points such as the reference desk or the reader's advisory desk. Finally, copies of book reviews could also be made available to patrons so that they could read the reviews before deciding to read the actual books. These are just a few suggestions that may assist in raising patrons' awareness that some biographies are better researched than others.

Perhaps, evaluating and reading biographies would be easier if all biographers would heed the advice of **Catherine Drinker Bowen** who said, "in writing biography, fact and fiction shouldn't be mixed. And if they are, the fiction parts should be printed in red ink, the fact parts in black ink." 🐼

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Moving From Librarianship to Entrepreneurship: How Different Is It?

by **Peter McCracken** (Co-founder, Serials Solutions)

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I inherited the "library gene" from my grandmother and her sister. My grandmother was a librarian, perhaps the university librarian — I haven't done the research yet — at the **University of Tulsa**. My great-aunt was a long-time branch director in the Memphis-Shelby County public library system. Both traveled from rural Tennessee to New York City, to attend **Columbia's** library school in the early 1930s. The gene clearly expressed itself in me: when I started attending library school, I realized it was what I enjoyed doing, and I looked forward to working in a library for many years to come. In just a few years I have worked in some great libraries and with colleagues that I deeply admire, I published articles and did some neat research, and, I believe, did a good job as a librarian. So when I decided to resign my position as a

reference librarian last April to work full-time at my company, **Serials Solutions**, it was a significant occupational move for me. I now spend two hours a week working in the library, and know more about the business world than I ever thought I would, but I think I'm still making a useful contribution to library services. The view from the other side of the exhibit booth has been eye-opening, to say the least.

While I cared a great deal about the successes and challenges of the libraries in which I worked, and the much larger systems of which they were a part, I didn't experience the ups and downs that I now imagine a library director must undergo. The state-funded libraries in which I worked were constantly beset by budget challenges introduced by the actions of state voters or legislators. Sure, I

could worry about these budgetary issues if I wanted to, but luckily it wasn't my responsibility, and wasn't in my job description.

When I started **Serials Solutions** with my two brothers and a high school friend, however, our budget suddenly became a serious issue. We didn't pay full salaries at the very beginning, all of us had second jobs, and even our first full-time employee (who later became one of the directors of the company) had to start flipping burgers for a while to make ends meet. Luckily for us, those times are over. We still need to be incredibly careful, though, as those times could always return in a hurry. And unlike the university libraries where I used to work, there's no guaranteed income — despite how small it might seem — from a state legislature.

Being so closely tied to the growth and de-

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coaster: the exciting times are exhilarating, and the frustrations can be felt in a dangerously personal way. Conferences are a lot of fun, and it's great to hear fellow librarians comment on how much they enjoy our product. Seeing patrons actually use our product in the New York Public Library's great reading room and periodicals room on 42nd Street was an incredible thrill. But there's not a lot of competition in librarianship, and in the business world you need to accept that others may repackage your ideas and sell them.

The process of developing new products has been particularly demanding. We started with an idea that came from my experience at the reference desk, and that met with very positive response from the library community. We still sign up five to ten new clients per week for our A-to-Z title list service, and the feedback I receive from clients is incredibly meaningful to me: it's a great thrill to have people be so positive, and appreciative, of the product we've created to sell to them. But if we don't move forward, we'll be falling behind. So we moved to what we believed was the next natural extension of our product, and combined our bibliographic data with CONSER MARC records, to create a completely new way to easily incorporate a library's electronic journal holdings into its catalog.

While we make sure that it's easy for the library, it was anything but easy for us as we developed the product. We spent more time, energy, and money putting together our MARC record service than I care to contemplate. It was a huge and complex problem, requiring the management of numerous sources of data and following rules that were designed to be done by humans, on a case-by-case basis, rather than programmatically by a computer.

Trying to teach a computer when to put a period at the end of a subfield, for example — except when certain punctuation appears, or when it's followed by a different subfield, and only then on days that are cloudy, it seems — took a great deal of programming time and energy. And as cataloging rules change, so must our programming.

While the impetus for creating this particular product came from the original goals of the company, the need for other products has been pushed by clients and by new developments in the marketplace. The obvious next development for our product was further linking technologies, so we started by perfecting a journal-level linking service that takes patrons from many abstracting resources to all of a library's full-text resources. Because we already maintained much of the needed information, our primary challenges involved ensuring sufficient server support to manage hundreds of thousands more searches than we had been previously supporting.

The next clear project, then, was a complete article-level OpenURL link server. This took on a life of its own; it forced us to reconsider which are the most important things we're currently doing, and identify what we could drop so that we could continue to develop the new OpenURL server. We had to figure out how to convince our current and prospective clients that our full-featured product is every bit as good as those that cost five to ten times more: we're sometimes surprised how some feel that they need to buy the most expensive product on the market, regardless of how it compares with other products.

Being on both sides of the booth has been quite an eye-opener. I have learned, for example, that librarians tend to take vendors for granted. For many librarians, part of ALA is attending great parties. While we may complain about the way some vendors operate, or gripe about the deficiencies in their products, we're only too happy to drink their booze and eat their fancy desserts. Can you imagine what any ALA conference would be like if Gale weren't supporting the daily shuttle service? How many of us (all vendors included) actually thank them for providing that service? Some vendors have told me that conferences are not a site for any sales for them, but they need to go, just to be seen by librarians and other vendors.

As the idea for **Serials Solutions** was developing in our heads, I talked with one publisher representative, who was responsible for organizing and paying for everything associated with their booth at ALA. I couldn't believe the prices she was quoting me for their booth and the regular wine and cheese receptions they held in the conference hall. Now I believe: several weeks ago I paid \$157 just for the chair I used for fifteen hours during a small conference in Chicago. I probably should have spent more time sitting in it, just to be sure I got my money's worth. At our first ALA conference, we were back in the table section, which only a few of the attendees managed to find. This winter, we'll have a double booth and Internet access for the first time. Despite the incredible cost, this will allow us to solve customer problems on the spot and demonstrate our products more effectively. So even though the skinflint in me cringes at the cost of flying eight people across the country, putting them in hotels and paying per diems for several days, spending a small fortune on carpeting, electricity, tables, chairs, signage, and Internet access, the librarian in me knows that our current and potential clients are going to appreciate the improved service.

Though we are glad to be out of the tables section, I encourage all conference attendees to go back there and see what vendors have to share. As librarians, we love the free espresso, and the free bags, and the impressive mega-booths, but the cutting-edge stuff is often in the tables, where people are spending all their time and money on their ideas, not on marketing gimmicks.

Vendor-to-vendor relations has been a completely new experience for me. Sometimes we're competing with a company at the same time we're working with them, or working and competing with a company that's quietly (but not secretly; we have ways of learning these things!) working with a third company that's also competing and working with us. It gets confusing. As a young company, one of our most exciting experiences came when we learned one large conglomerate was interested in acquiring us. Initially, dreams of the return of Seattle's dot-com

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people profiles encouraged

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Born & lived: Columbia, SC. Lived in Columbia until I moved to Spartanburg in 1996.

Education: B. A. from Columbia College, Columbia, SC, in English and Public Affairs

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Professional career and activities: I worked as a librarian in the Converse College Library from 1996 - March 1998. I have been employed as a librarian at USC Spartanburg Library since March 1998.

In my spare time I like to: Garden and watch old films and read books pertaining to Hollywood's Golden Age.

How/Where do I see the industry in five years: As a librarian, I think that there will be growing emphasis placed on electronic resources. However, I still would like to see a balance maintained between print and electronic resources.

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boom of just a few years before came flooding back to us. We weren't sure how it might work, but visions of quick wealth — less than two years after starting the company — danced in our heads. Three of us went to the corporate headquarters, where they put us up in the nicest hotel in town, took us out for a fancy dinner, and we met with representatives from all parts of the company. They gave us the grand tour, and showed us server rooms and computer resources we could only dream about. It was a heady and valuable experience for us, but in the end, we decided that acquisition wasn't in our best interest or those of our clients, at least not at that time. We aim high: we have goals that seem unreasonable to a reasonable businessperson, so no reasonable businessperson would pay us what we think we're worth. Since we plan to meet the goals we set, and don't know any better, we're not sufficiently scared of our unreasonable goals, and we know we're worth an unreasonable amount of money.

We like to say that we're a company founded by a librarian, for librarians. Of course, a librarian does not a company make. I didn't do this by myself: without the technology department, led by my youngest brother, **Mike**, we'd have nothing to sell. Without the fantastic and dedicated sales force, led by our high school friend, **Chris**, we wouldn't have the money to invest in re-

search and development. Without the critical customer support that **Tim** and his staff provide — and they are the true face of the company for all of our clients — we wouldn't know if we were doing things right or not, and we couldn't be sure that libraries were implementing our products in the most effective way. Without business guidance from my other brother, **Steve**, we wouldn't have office space (literally: for the first year, we worked out of his basement), we'd probably be in trouble with the IRS, and we'd have a much harder time defining what our goals are and how we're going to achieve them.

But there are aspects that are influenced by my background in libraries. I was always frustrated, for example, when I'd call to ask about the price of a product — even a standard print resource — and the representative would say he'd get back to me in a few days. I knew they went back to figure out how much money they could get out of us; I could almost hear them saying, "Oh, that's an **ARL** library — bump up the price a bit more." And my frustration with airline pricing, as much as anything, made it clear to me that everyone would prefer that we use simple, straightforward pricing, based on the work we would do for a client, not the size of their budget, the size of their student body, or any other irrelevant measure.

We also try to put as much information as possible on our Web pages. While we know that it tells competitors more than we would like — it is a competitive marketplace — we also know

that librarians want to start with as much information as they can. They want to do research, and they're not afraid to read a lot of text. We think it is important to present information the way librarians want to receive it, and I think we know that better than our competitors.

One thing that I've learned as a vendor, and that I'd pass on to librarians, is the importance of knowing and working with vendors. It is *not* all about the price, regardless of what the state purchasing guidelines might suggest. What is the cost of working with an unresponsive vendor? Librarians need to demand better customer service from their vendors, and I think that there's a tendency to accept mediocrity. When you have a choice of vendors, you need to use it: if you don't, you very well may lose it. When we must, we pay more for better customer service, because we know what poor service and poor products cost us. That's why we now only buy **Dell** computers, and no longer buy much cheaper **eMachines**.

I don't quite know where my experience with **Serials Solutions** will lead me. Perhaps, at some point, I'll return to working in a library. I certainly know the pleasure it brings, and I feel like I can make a difference there. But at the same time, I feel like our entire company is making a difference in libraries, and perhaps working on the entrepreneurial side of the equation allows me to make a bigger difference in librarianship than if I were in a library all day long. Either way, life is about experiences, and the experience from this side of the exhibit floor is pretty interesting.

ATG Annual Survey Report

by **Michael Litchfield** (College of Charleston) <libconf@cofc.edu>

It's time once again for the **ATG Annual Survey Report**. The surveys are all tallied up, and with considerably more returns than last year, the results certainly indicate some strong patterns. First, librarians were asked to express some concerns, and the answers are pretty similar to concerns over the past few years.

Major concerns are the rampant merging going on among publishers and vendors, with more than one respondent specifically worried about the **divine/Faxon** mess. This time around, however, no one mentioned a certain publisher with a penchant for acquisitions (at least not by name). Other concerns included budgets in free-fall while prices soar, the increasing need to keep the same information in multiple formats, and the struggle to keep up with rapidly evolving technologies. Other fairly ubiquitous concerns were increasingly restrictive copyright laws and license agreements. Respondents were also concerned about archiving: how to archive electronic resources, where to find the space to archive,

and how to adapt electronic archives to new technologies.

Then there was the age factor: most respondents were concerned about the decline in numbers of librarians, the decline in positions for librarians, and increasing age of the profession. The last concern is certainly a valid one: when asked how long they had been librarians, the average response was 19 years, 4 months; however, only 10 respondents had been librarians for 10 years or less. A further 10 had between 10 and 19 years experience,

while 29 had 19 years experience or more, with several respondents having over 30 years in librarianship, indicating that not only is the profession aging, it's rapidly aging.

eBooks

One of the first questions we always ask in the survey is whether or not the respondents have ever purchased eBooks, and if so, what kind of budget they had for this resource. Nearly three quarters of our respondents have purchased eBooks (36 had, 13 had not), but

most reported that they did not have a budget breakdown; most purchased eBooks through netLibrary and consortia. Of the respondents who did report spending on eBooks, the figures went to one extreme or the other: two respondents reported \$50,000 budgets, while two others reported \$5,000 budgets.

Outsourcing

Everybody's doing it. Most outsourced; approval plans (which I suppose is somewhat redundant) and cataloging. Respondents also reported outsourcing binding, processing, and databases. Only four respondents, or 8%, reported outsourcing their acquisitions.

Downsizing

Not quite everybody's doing it. About one quarter of our respondents, 13 out of 49, said that they have been downsized in the past year. This percentage has held firm over the past three years, and while not enough for a quorum, it is still a fairly high number. The largest amount of downsizing has occurred, not surprisingly, among the ranks of professional librarians, with paraprofessionals coming in a close second.

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