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Cynthia Hsieh

University of the Pacific Library, chsieh@pacific.edu

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Biz of Acq — Book Vendor Evaluation from a Small Academic Library's Perspective

by **Cynthia Hsieh** (Head of Technical Services, University of the Pacific Library, 3601 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, California; Phone: 209-946-2571) <chsieh@pacific.edu>

Column Editor: **Audrey Fenner** (Head, Acquisition Department, Walter Clinton Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, P.O. Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402; Phone: 336-256-1193; Fax: 336-334-4731) <fafenner@uncg.edu>

Column Editor's Note: *How do acquisitions librarians determine what vendors to use? Do they evaluate their vendors' performance? According to Cynthia Hsieh of University of the Pacific Library, these processes often are impressionistic and highly subjective. Hsieh describes a proactive and more objective vendor evaluation and selection project that was undertaken at one academic library. —AF*

Abstract

This paper describes the process of conducting a firm order vendor evaluation at a small academic library in California. As indicated in *ALA's Guide to Performance Evaluation of Library Materials Vendors*,¹ acquisitions procedures vary widely from library to library; therefore, it is more beneficial to share the process rather than the final results.

Introduction

Due to limited human and material resources, small libraries do not usually have the luxury or feel the need to conduct a thorough vendor evaluation. Instead, the majority of smaller libraries select vendors based on the staff's subjective impressions and their past experiences with individual vendors. This was how the acquisitions unit at the **University of the Pacific Library (Pacific Library)** operated for years.

University of the Pacific is a small, predominantly undergraduate, independent aca-

demic institution located in California's central valley. **Pacific Library** has an annual monograph budget of \$125,000, and only 1 FTE acquisitions staff member who runs the entire acquisitions operation. Except for a few standing order titles, the majority of **Pacific Library** acquisitions are firm orders.

Although **Pacific Library** had vendor agreements with several vendors throughout the years, in order to take advantage of the high discounts, a decision was made by the former Head of Technical Services to use a single vendor for all of its firm orders except some specialized science titles. This single vendor approach worked adequately for many years, and the acquisitions staff maintained an amiable relationship with the vendor's representative.

In March 2003, after **Pacific Library's** migration from a proprietary system to an integrated library system with a more open architecture, the need to re-adjust workflows was very much felt in every unit of the Technical Services Department. Taking advantage of high discounts was no longer the only consideration for the acquisitions unit in selecting a firm order vendor.

The pressure from **Pacific Library** administration for a more cost-effective and streamlined Technical Services Department added to the urgency in conducting a formal vendor evaluation for its firm order operation.

Planning Process

To accommodate the changing needs and

challenges faced by **Pacific Library**, rather than looking at vendor evaluation from the perspective of "what are we getting from our vendors," we decided to follow **Lynne C. Branche Brown's** advice² to look at vendor performance proactively, asking, "What do we expect from a vendor?" How do we define our expectations? **Brown** suggested conducting customer interviews.

For the acquisitions unit, the primary customers are the nine reference librarians/bibliographers at **Pacific Library**. Through interviewing reference librarians/bibliographers, a detailed evaluation plan emerged. An overall goal, three objectives, and four major criteria to evaluate vendor performance were developed.

The overall goal for the evaluation was to replace the current single vendor approach with a new model that consists of one primary vendor and several supplementary vendors. The decision was based on the fact that, even for a small academic library like **Pacific Library**, no one vendor is capable of supplying all the materials requested in the most cost-effective fashion. The other benefit of the new multi-vendor approach is to avoid sudden unexpected business failures of vendors.

The assessment plan also identified three objectives. They were 1) To maximize **Pacific Library's** purchasing power; 2) To provide better and more timely services to patrons; 3) To investigate vendors' technological currency.

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the same journal issue. It copies only one article and sends the other requests back unfilled, explaining the copyright law to the borrowing library. A borrowing library insists this is incorrect and that if it (the requesting library) is going to pay copyright royalties, and they say they are, then the lending library should copy for them whatever they ask. Which library is correct?

ANSWER: The borrowing library is correct in this instance. Section 108 is written so that a library does not have to pay royalties. If it goes beyond the exemption provided in the statute, then the library should seek permission and pay royalties, if requested. Here, the borrowing library is paying royalties, so the lending library is not limited to one article per issue for the borrowing library. Moreover, the one article restriction applies to an individual user not a library borrowing for users. It is the borrowing library that is responsible for enforcing the one article per issue for a user or for paying royalties in order to provide more than one article per issue to a single user.

Book Reviews from page 76

The format of each chapter is very appealing. The illustrations—both drawings and photographs—are mostly taken from the time period. If possible, they include representations of the people who made the leap toward equal treatment. There is an immediacy to each story seeing these people and getting a clearer idea of the time in which lived. A good example is the textile mill strike in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1912. Now nearly a hundred years old, the news photos are quite striking and moving. One sees the large demonstrations and parades, but also, there are photos showing children working in the mills themselves. Within each essay are sidebars containing primary documents and other shorter articles further illustrating—perhaps with another example—the inequality described within that particular essay.

Although the book is published by the **Oxford University Press**, it appears to be more of a project of the **Southern Poverty Law Center's** section called **Teaching Tolerance**. Its purpose is to provide support for school programs teaching a respect for individual differences and giving students an appreciation for diversity. **Maria Fleming**, compiler and contributor of *A Place at the Table*, was formerly associated with **Teaching Tolerance** as a staff writer. **Teaching Tolerance** is a natural extension of the **SPLC's** original mission of racial equality and justice.

This is a good book. It works on many different levels. It is a good read and it teaches some worthwhile truths, all at once. Don't let the "juvenile" label deter you from reading it and adding it to your collection. Reading and learning about injustice and inequality (and the people who have fought against it) isn't just for kids.

The plan's evaluation criteria comprised four main areas, namely cost, fulfillment, service, and technology. Each criterion was further divided into the following:

1. Cost

- Price/discount (for different type of publishers)
- Shipping and handling
- Other surcharge

2. Fulfillment

- Fill rate
- Turnaround time
- Defect rate
- Discrepancy rate

3. Service

- Claiming
- Frequency of contacts
- Inquiry turnaround time
- Invoicing
- Reporting

4. Technology

- Collection management tools
- Order management tools
- MARC-like record exporting
- EDI interface

Although there was a general consensus about the need for a formal vendor evaluation, the anxiety over extra chores that might add to the already demanding work schedule was felt among Technical Services staff members. To ease staff anxiety, a compromise was made to include a maximum of five vendors in the evaluation. Preference was given to vendors with whom **Pacific Library** already had a vendor agreement (whether active or inactive) to save staff time from processing new vendor agreements.

Another compromise was to shorten the time frame for the evaluation from one year to five months. It was decided that the entire population of firm orders for domestic publications between January 15 and June 15, 2004 would be used for the study. Choosing this period worked well, since reference librarians/bibliographers were asked to spend all their material funds by March 15 to prepare for fiscal year closing.

The final picks of vendors to be evaluated included:

- 1. Vendor A** — **Pacific Library's** current vendor for all firm orders.
- 2. Vendor B** — A leading academic library vendor that is currently working closely with **Pacific Library's** new ILS vendor in deploying various technical functionalities.
- 3. Vendor C** — A leading academic library vendor and a major competitor of Vendor B.
- 4. Vendor D** — The only new vendor to be included in the evaluation and a strong player in non-book materials. A competitor of Vendor A in terms of discounts.

Methodology

After determining which vendors would be evaluated, the next step was to search and re-

view library literature on this topic in order to formulate appropriate methodology for the evaluation.

Basically, there are three different approaches to methodology: to be objective, to be subjective, or a combination of the two.³

Compared to large university libraries with material budgets in the millions, small academic libraries do not have much leverage to negotiate favorable contract terms. Good services often depend on good relationships with vendor's representatives. Furthermore, relationships cannot always be measured objectively with figures and numbers.

For this reason, we decided to apply a subjective-objective dual approach to data collection. One was to conduct a vendor interview (subjective); the other was to establish an automatic tracking system via our ILS acquisitions module, so relevant data needed to assess performance evaluation would be recorded and later retrieved (objective).

Subjective Approach

Before tracking actual ordering and receiving, we invited the sales representative of each vendor evaluated for an on-site visit with library representatives from both Technical Services and Public Services departments. We verbally asked a list of standardized questions to gather information regarding the vendor's cost, fulfillment rate, service, and technology. We also requested vendor's representative to give us a brief demonstration of the vendor's online system.

After the face-to-face meeting, the information gathered was reviewed and compared. Technical Services Department representatives also rated vendors based on friendliness, helpfulness, and how informative they were. This somewhat subjective approach served as an indicator of the kind of library-vendor relations that could be expected.

Objective Approach

Among all the objective-oriented methodologies described in the literature, of particular interest to us was the random distribution of orders, called "dealing cards" method, used by several large academic libraries including the **University of California**.⁴ We simplified the method to tailor it to **Pacific Library's** needs.

Instead of eight publisher types, we condensed them into four types: University Press, Trade, Sci/Tech/Medical, and Others. For the purpose of this study, we classified publishers according to the four vendors' publisher lists. Once a publisher was classified into one of the four types, all orders for its publications were treated as that type of order regardless of subject.

Instead of comparing data gathered to "industry standards" to determine the vendor's performance, we decided to use our expectations as our standards, that is, what is acceptable or not acceptable to us. For example, we defined that if an item is not received within 90 days, the order is defined as "unfilled."

After all the perimeters were set up, the acquisitions staff member spent nearly a

week to work with library system staff to test the automatic tracking system.

Data Analysis

Because each criterion is not equally important to **Pacific Library**, the decision was made to employ a "weighted point" method to analyze data. In this method, each criterion was assigned a "weight" according to its importance to **Pacific Library**. For example, to satisfy the library administration's requirement for a more cost-effective and streamlined acquisitions operation; criteria measuring this aspect of vendor performance would be given greater weight.

Conclusion

Our preliminary conclusion from the study was that the library's expectations could be met effectively at this time by one primary vendor and one supplementary vendor. We made our choices based

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mainly upon technological support, since all the vendors evaluated were comparable in discounts and services.

Endnotes

1. American Library Association, Collection Management and Development Committee. *Guide to Performance Evaluation of Library Material Vendors*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1988): 1.
2. Brown, Lynne C. Branche. "Vendor Evaluation," *Collection Management*, 19(1995): 47.
3. Brown, 53.
4. Baker, Joseph W. "Random Vendor Assignment in Vendor Performance Evaluation," *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory*, 9(1985): 265-280.