September 2003

Op Ed -- Issues in Vendor/Library Relations: Are Two ALAs Too Much?

Matt Nauman

Blackwell's Book Services

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

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

Recommended Citation

Nauman, Matt (2003) "Op Ed -- Issues in Vendor/Library Relations: Are Two ALAs Too Much?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 15: Iss. 4, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4478>

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.

Op Ed — Issues in Vendor/Library Relations: Are Two ALAs Too Much?

by **Matt Nauman** (Director of Marketing & Publisher Relations, Blackwell's Book Services)

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Senior Vice President & Head Bibliographer, YBP Library Services, 999 Maple Street, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 800-258-3774 x. 3251; Fax: 603-746-5628) <nardini@ybp.com>

Are Two ALAs Too Much?

During the **2002 Charleston Conference**, I participated on a panel that discussed the expenses associated with publisher and vendor marketing tactics. My talk concentrated on the expenses associated with **ALA** exhibits and the fact that little business is actually generated there. The paper ended with suggestions for better ways of using those funds and I thought that was the end of the matter. However, after reflecting on the panel for several months, it seems to me that the suggestions did not go far enough. After thinking about this and discussing it with publishers and booksellers, I believe that it is time to have only one **ALA** exhibit per year.

The Time is Right for a Change

This does not indicate in any way a lack of support for the **American Library Association**. As a group I am sure that all exhibitors support **ALA** and its membership. They are, after all, the reason we exist. The exhibits have always been a good place to meet with customers and suppliers and to be involved in the issues we all face. However, during these difficult times everyone needs to look at the economic realities of the library supply chain. The harsh reality is that the business we are in will not support the costs of developing and maintaining library services while increasing amounts of money are spent on multiple exhibits.

It's no secret that library bookselling has been difficult during the past few years. It is also no secret that the future looks challenging. This comes after many years of declining budgets in general. Publishers' academic book sales have been in decline for years, threatening the very future of the monograph. At the same time library booksellers have also seen steep declines in book sales. This means that for both booksellers and publishers, book sales that pay for product development as well as exhibit marketing are down. Add to that the cut that electronic resources are taking from the materials budgets and it becomes obvious that business will not continue as usual.

We have all been over the scenario before but it is still worth reviewing. Publishers are struggling with book sales in general and especially with li-

brary sales. To make ends meet they frequently look at cutting discounts to booksellers. At the same time, booksellers are facing economic pressures from their customers. Many libraries have cut staff to maintain materials budgets and require more services from their vendors. These budget situations also mean that libraries are looking for deeper discounts from vendors. The booksellers are then put in a position of declining sales, declining margins and increasing demands for product development.

Readers who attended the **Charleston Conference** heard me describe the hefty expenses a mid-size company pays for an **ALA** exhibit. It is important to consider that those expenses were only for one **ALA** — many exhibitors also have expenses for **ALA Midwinter**, **MLA**, **SLA**, and **ACRL** on alternate years, and various other national and state library shows. Add to that the fact that many regular **ALA** exhibitors also exhibit at **BookExpo America** and it is clear that exhibits require a large cash outlay each year that is increasingly difficult to maintain in these economic conditions.

Exhibits like **ALA Midwinter** and **ACRL** were once smaller and more economical for publishers and vendors. Over the years they have grown into large, expensive exhibits while business in general has been in decline. Unlike **ALA**, the **ABA** only participates in one major event per year. At one time multiple **ALA** conferences could be explained by the need for academic meetings. However academic meetings are increasingly held online. No one argues against the importance of academic meetings. However, the publisher-bookseller community should not have to be a major source of funds for the meetings when they are also putting so much into development. Multiple yearly meetings must also be a strain on library budgets and on individual librarians who often pay their own way. Clearly the large sums spent could be put to better uses.

Better Ways to Spend Money

As noted above, the pressure on publishers and booksellers for product development has become intense. For publishers, development of digital materials to meet library needs is an expensive proposition. For booksellers, development of all-encompassing databases as well as extensive technical support services has been expensive. These are not one-time developments but longer-term projects. There is also a greater need for customer service functions at both publishing houses and booksellers. Furthermore, booksellers rarely are able to develop services that automatically fit all customers. Most often they must customize their services to meet each library's unique needs. In difficult times these services and the business they engender are far more important than exhibits. To that end I propose that **ALA Midwinter** return to its roots as a meeting for librarians and that **ALA Annual** becomes the single large event for the year.

A Proposal for the Book Industry

Rather than just complain about marketing expenses, I would like to make a proposal that has potential to help the book industry in general. I propose that **ALA Annual** and **BookExpo America** cooperate to develop one large exhibit each year. This could be one week that brings together publishers, booksellers, and librarians, demonstrating the importance of this group as a whole. Such a meeting has the potential to raise the profile of the entire industry by bringing all parts together in one place. It also has tremendous potential for improving the dialogue between the different parts of the industry. One publisher suggested that **BEA** be held at the beginning of a week and **ALA** follow immediately. They would then have one booth set-up and could rotate crews depending on the market. Obviously this is a major change. But change is all around us these days and it is time to look at how we do business. Let's talk about it.