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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Offices

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The set of activities known as “library-vendor relations” aren’t usually thought of as a place-bound phenomenon. But, of course, these “relations” do unfold, at least in part, in certain places, or rather types of places which all of us come to know well. Convention hall exhibit floors, the sidewalks of convention cities, library meeting rooms, off-campus restaurant tables or tables at on-campus dining facilities all are familiar examples, each with a different protocol.

To cite another minor example, airport boarding lounges become a twice-yearly venue of library-vendor relations under an ironclad schedule surrounding **ALA Conferences**. Conference-goers who happen to have been booked on the same flight are sure to encounter one another as they wait for the airline agent’s call to line up and get on the plane. While this can be a chance for a moment of bonding forged in small talk over some shared hardship inflicted by the airline, or can be a providential opportunity to talk with someone whose attention you wouldn’t get otherwise, these encounters can also seem a little unfair, since nobody feels quite on duty as yet, and since unlike other venues, whom you run into isn’t predictable.

Suddenly you are standing or sitting near someone whose face you recognize but whose name you don’t recall. Do they recognize you? You don’t know. Or worse, clearly they do recognize you and seize the chance for conversation. Use your wits to make the best of it. Or you do recognize them, but you’d much rather take up their particular piece of business via

email. Do you engage them, or look away? Or maybe you don’t want to talk to anyone at all just yet. After all, it might be 6:35 a.m., you may have a thousand things running through your mind—if your mind is active at all at this point—and what you really want is to request that the agent announce to the lounge on your behalf, “I want to be alone.”

In fact, our protocol allows that. Airport boarding lounges are one venue where it is permissible to refuse eye contact, to make perfunctory conversation or no conversation, to relocate to the very perimeter of the common space, and turn your back on everyone; even to walk away.

But airport lounges are a backwater of library-vendor relations. To get to the heart of things, where the place-bound element of our mutual business really is defined, it’s necessary to discuss offices. Not vendor offices, since librarians and vendors only occasionally encounter one another on the vendor’s distant premises. Far more common to find librarian and vendor sitting on either side of a desk in the office of a librarian.

All the clichés about offices apply, of course. If you, the vendor, find yourself sitting in an expansive, nicely appointed, upper-floor corner space with a splendid view of campus spread out below, probably you are in the director’s office, in case you are wondering. If, on the other hand, you sit in a windowless square room outfitted with state-issue furnishings and last painted maybe eight or nine years ago, you are more likely in the office of the assistant acquisitions librarian.

Either way, it’s a good thing to be there at all, and an invitation to sit with the assistant acquisitions librarian might actually be the better opening. No rule says a librarian has to let a vendor representative into their office. An office is quasi-personal space, and to share it even momentarily with an outsider is a welcoming gesture, possibly an implicit state-

ment that you, the librarian, are open for business. There are plenty of other library spaces where it’s possible to receive vendors, after all—conference rooms, teaching labs, workspaces in the back, hallways, tables in the reference department, standing up over the circulation desk, sitting in the café (more and more often), someone’s cubicle, someone else’s office.

Not a good sign for a vendor to see nothing but a succession of these library spaces. When the librarian you really want shuts their door on you, perhaps literally as you are spotted down the hall, well, there’s always email. “Sorry we didn’t get much chance to talk last week when I visited,” you start the message, and wonder what to say next. When an office serves as a perfect refuge that only email can penetrate, things can only get better, would be the way to look at it.

More happily, “Why don’t you come into my office?” is an invitation no vendor rep refuses. At the very least there will be a chance to sit down and make conversation. That will be easy enough even on first meeting, since every office in the world is like a museum exhibit, but one all about the curator. Is the librarian in the middle of an important project? If so, there’s evidence among the papers, notes, and reports spread out everywhere. Did you used to live in Montana? The framed wall map begs visitors to ask the question. Just back from that big conference? The badge, mug, and program are pretty good clues. Hobbies, heroes, hometown, family, favorite films, sports favorites, significant books, treasured travel spots, alma mater, pets, politics, any or all are likely on display.

If not, the absence of this kind of paraphernalia might instead mean, “I’m all business, so please get to the point.” Usually an office will concretely express some overriding metaphor in the librarian’s mind. Is the office a study, dominated by the bookshelves lining the walls such as you would expect to see in the History Department or Philosophy Department? Is it a parlor, with healthy green plants, Oriental rug, a sofa? Or is it a hub, a busy command center buzzing with communications and comings-

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coworkers are starting to suspect. I try to block the screen whenever one of them walks past my desk. I can’t sleep. I’m losing weight. Help me, Gabbey, before it’s too late!

Melancholy in Michigan

Dear Melan,

Losing weight? Maybe you’re on to something! No, seriously, you’re not alone. You wouldn’t believe how many letters I get from people who can’t stop surfing the BIP, Ulrich’s, even Dialog. Oddly, they’re almost all from Michigan. Hmm... I won’t speculate.

adrenaline rush. Now I’m spending my days going through full publisher lists. I think my

Try calling your local chapter of LWP (Librarians With Problems). They have trained counselors available and a nine-step program to help people such as you. For BIP surfers, admitting the problem is the first step toward recovery. You are in my prayers.

Dear Gabbey,

How can I be sure that my girlfriend likes me for me, and not for my collection of early twentieth-century sheet music?

Uncertain in Utah

Dear Uncert,

You can’t. Does it really matter?

and-goings? Or a workshop? A gallery? A Fortune 500 suite? A place you could possibly mistake for an electronics showroom? Does it appear that the occupant slept there last night? Then a flat or a bachelor's pad. Very clinical, perhaps, a physician's office?

Always there are clues as to how the business will go. Is the vendor offered some workspace, a table or so much as a desk edge? Or, is laptop actually balanced on lap? This could be a little difficult. Is the office set out like a nice waiting room, with interesting objects to look at, a coffee table, coffee, coffee table books even? Well, things could go better here, but it might take awhile to get going. Are all of your competitors' calendars and other giveaways on prominent display? Definite bad sign. Does the office resemble a paper recycling depot, hazardedly crammed with imbalanced towers of books, files, photocopies, printouts, catalogs; stacks of bibliographic slips

accounting for most of the color spectrum and several world languages; with desk, tables, chairs, and bookshelves long overmatched and much of the floor called into duty to control overflow? Probably best not to expect fast action here.

To be fair, most librarians are remarkably hospitable, to the point that vendor reps in need of a favor are often enough, say during a break in the day's agenda, offered use of the librarian's computer, telephone, desk, even the entire office. They make their offices a good place to meet, whether to exchange gossip or actually to start some business. It does not go unnoticed among vendors, whose own offices as often as not are modest setups, that many librarians have pretty nice offices, spacious, bright, technologically up-to-date, ergonomically outfitted, aesthetically attuned. They're proud of their offices. And why not be?

For a vendor there is no more intimate customer moment than when a librarian says please come into my office and sit down, then with a touch of drama closes the door and turns to you.

Now what, you think, in a flash turning over in your mind you and your company's entire history here. Are we in trouble? Are they giving us all their business? Usually neither one. Big library decisions are rarely made or delivered in person by one individual. More often, these come out of official committees, groups, meetings; the vendor may have been present at some of these official meetings, usually held in a conference room. And the subsequent decisions are delivered officially, by email or letter. But a briefing on library politics or personalities, a caution about ongoing negotiations from a librarian who might favor your company or from one who favors someone else, these moments of confidence require the closed office door.

Who knows, in the years ahead maybe every forecast for libraries will come true. The patrons at distance, the reference desk virtual, all periodicals online, backfiles discarded, books digitized, shelves of no use. What will be left for bricks and mortar? The café, maybe. But, no doubt, the offices.

Little Red Herrings

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Librarians: Today's Polymaths

"Small and slender, with dark hair and olive skin dramatically set off by light green eyes, **Belle Greene** had an extraordinary allure...." So begins a chapter in **Jean Strouse's** magnificent *Morgan: American Financier*, a compelling look at **John Pierpont Morgan**. **Morgan** may have been America's richest banker; doubtless, he was one of America's last great barons. **Morgan** was not only in the same league with **Vanderbilt**, **Carnegie** and **Rockefeller**, but also in a league of his own. Indeed, at one point he "bailed" out **Carnegie** during one of **Andrew's** more troubled times. He also warded off what would have become America's Great Depression long before 1929. In 1907, **Morgan** averted market disaster and lost millions — tens of millions of his own dollars — in the process. Some think the market crash in 1929 would have passed without incident had **Morgan** been alive.

But who is **Belle Greene** and what in the world could she possibly have to do with librarians? **Greene** was the daughter of **Richard T. Greene**, the man whom **W.E.B. Du Bois** dubbed one of "America's most gifted black intellectuals," and representative of **Du Bois's** "talented tenth." Interestingly, both **Belle** and her father have separate entries in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, but under different names, and with no cross-referencing.

Belle became **Morgan's** librarian when he lured her away from **Princeton**, where she worked for the princely sum of \$40 a month. For the royal sum of \$75 a month, **Belle Greene** became **Morgan's** rare book librarian. **Belle** had a life-long love of rare books and excelled in the process. She soon took over **Morgan's** acquisitions and it is to her, and her intelligence,

that we owe **Morgan's** famous incunabula of *Gutenberg Bibles* and other such notables.

Belle was her own woman and kept her own counsel. "Just because I am a librarian," she is reported to have said, "doesn't mean I have to dress like one." Ouch! She wore couturier gowns and jewels to work. Ah, what a sense of style to note with ardent pleasure to our own laid-back (and sometimes laid-off) sartorial style, or lack thereof. **Belle** became "the soul of the **Morgan** library." Her sense of humor and indomitable wit out-smarted most who thought they knew more.

For example, she smuggled a number of rare items into this country for **Morgan** by letting examiners find less important things "with great seeming hesitation." On one such occasion, **Belle** let the examiners find several unimportant items while she remained, as she put it, "very indignant." The smug examiners walked away with their catch never knowing they had fished in the wrong pond. Unknown to them were a painting, three bronzes, a special watch and other items she brought back to her boss, the very items for which the visit had been made in the first place. When **Morgan** saw her haul, **Belle** reported to a friend, "he & I did a war dance & laughed in great glee."

When I read over these words not so long ago I thought of the number of times I have to explain what I did for my life's work. I haven't smuggled anything, but I have been called upon to do any number of legal and ethical jobs not precisely encompassed by the word "librarian."

When asked what a librarian does, I have taken to the prosaic these days by copying what **Chesterton** said when asked why he wrote so much: "To aid the Divine gift of Language and Letters to outlive us all." Perhaps this is a vision of grandeur, especially since many librarians find print so *de rigueur* these days. So just what is it we librarians do?

It's a fair question. On academic campuses, we fall between two chairs, between faculty on one hand, and administrators on the other, at times becoming one, the other, or both, depending on the matters facing us at the moment. There are even times we don't really know which we are, as any review of the literature will reveal.

So what do we do? At times we librarians, to offer a short list, are managers, planners, system designers, leaders, supervisors, mediators, resource allocators, writers, researchers, scholars, speakers, fund-raisers, subject experts, budget analysts, grant writers, statisticians, consultants, computer troubleshooters, entrepreneurs and more. Oftentimes it's hard to put a finger on what we do because different contexts require us to become different things at different times. The point is, we often become *what we have to become* in order to get the job done.

I can't really recommend smuggling, but you get the picture. Librarians, like **Belle Greene**, do whatever it takes to aid the divine gift of language and letters to outlive us all.