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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 are all 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 seated 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 statement 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 shifts 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 use 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, avant-garde films, sports favorites, significant books, treasured travel spots, alma mater, pets, politics, any or all are likely on display.

If fact, 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 BIB; Ulrich's, even Dialog. Oddly, they're almost all from Michigan. Hmm... I won't speculate.

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? 🦌

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Little Red Herrings
by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herrimg@wintthrop.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 wounded off what would have become America’s Great Depression long before 1929. In 1907, Morgan averred 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 libraries? Greene was the daughter of Richard T. Greene, the man whom W.E.B. DuBois dubbed one of “America’s most gifted black intellectuals,” and representative of DuBois’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 lure 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, 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 attired. 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 policies 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.