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What Do You Expect from Your Bookseller?: A Forum

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What Do You Expect from Your Bookseller?: A Forum

As we all know, the bookselling world is changing before our eyes. *Against the Grain* asked several librarians to take the long view on the bookseller's role by responding to this:

Recently there have been countless things written about the place of the print book and the eBook in collection development strategies of academic libraries. It's not just the book, though, but also the world of academic book-selling that's seen enormous recent change. What do you see as the role of the bookseller in your own library's strategic vision? What do you expect from your bookseller today, and what will you expect in the future?

Answer from Rick Anderson — Associate Director for Scholarly Resources & Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, <rick.anderson@utah.edu>

For decades, libraries and booksellers have been partners with a common goal: to anticipate the needs of library patrons and meet them preemptively. Success in that shared endeavor meant that the book a patron wanted would be in the collection (and, hopefully, on the shelf) as soon as he or she went looking for it in the stacks. In an era when eBooks were barely beginning to emerge, when scholarly books went out of print very quickly, and when "out of print" meant "unavailable," this was the only strategy that made sense. Unfortunately, it was never a terribly effective way of meeting patrons' needs. It was a great way to build large and carefully-crafted collections, but to the degree that the purpose of those collections was actually giving patrons what they needed in order to do their work, the system worked only moderately well.

In 2010 we have, for the first time, the opportunity to completely rethink the traditional collection model. eBook availability has exploded and continues to grow; the very concept of "out of print" is in the process of being replaced by "available on demand" (cf. the **Oxford University Press** backlist; the **Espresso Book Machine**; etc.); commercially-available copies of print books can be located quickly and easily (and often at very low prices) on the Internet and delivered overnight. In other words, just-in-time procurement of books is now a much more viable option than it has ever been before. At the same time, budgets are being slashed — and when collection budgets are cut, it's the book budget that takes the hardest hit. Patrons (especially researchers) are generally less distressed to see the library buying fewer books than to see it canceling journal subscriptions. Less money for books, plus newly-emerging options that allow libraries to buy exactly what patrons want at the moment that patrons realize they want it, means the end of traditional bookselling to libraries.

What I expect my book vendor to do is help me take advantage of the opportunities this crisis affords. My goal is no longer simply to "build a great collection." My goal is to meet my patrons' research needs as completely and as efficiently as I can — and as far as I'm concerned, all options are on the table. Massive "Big Deal"-type packages; rental arrangements; patron-driven acquisition; tokens and vouch-

ers — I like some of these better than others in principle, but given the radically unsettled environment in which we now live and work, I feel that I can rule out nothing. I'm asking my vendor to take risks and invest time and energy in the creation of new structures and options. And in return for those risks and investments, I'll be buying fewer books. It's awful and it's not fair, but it's reality. A vendor that can't or won't help me figure out new ways of buying books — specifically, ways that put the patron in the driver's seat and that minimize the possibility of buying books that will never be checked out — will lose what little business I can still offer.

Answer from Kim Armstrong — Assistant Director, Center for Library Initiatives, Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), <karms2@staff.cic.net>

It's pretty easy to think about the role of booksellers while sitting in the offices of an academic library consortium with no collection, no books, and no users. I might argue that being untethered from the responsibility to acquire and place books (physical and electronic) in the hands of users (literal and virtual), I have a distinct advantage in considering how rosy the future should look for the bookseller.

There's no question that books, and all of their associated trappings, are still squarely planted in the projects and work we do on behalf of the **CIC** libraries day in and day out. We wrestle with: efficient models to store and retrieve them; effective partnerships to digitize them; clear strategies to migrate to more electronic versions; and robust tools to make any books more easily discoverable. But these lists of activities oversimplify a complex set of issues and questions which libraries, whether alone or by working together, are trying to address in a context of space and budget constraints and insatiable user demand.

Bookselling is starting to look a lot like the experience of serial agents at the time that electronic journals exploded onto the screen. Some publishers are able to offer eBooks directly to libraries without needing the intermediary. Libraries are grappling with what subjects or disciplines are best suited for electronic and which for print and how to reflect that in their buying plans. And as positions in academic libraries continue to dwindle, libraries will look to offload many local services to the bookseller.

With all of these competing opportunities, on what activities should a bookseller place their bet? In order to sell more books, more books need to be available electronically. Booksellers are in a position to demonstrate to publishers the shift in market opportunity and publishers are in need of evidence that the demand for eBooks will ultimately overtake print purchasing. If publishers show skepticism about this changing environment, so do libraries, and booksellers can offer print on demand and by-the-chapter purchase models that would lower the eBook entry risk and accelerate options for libraries looking to control the growth of the print collection.

Better business models need to be developed for cooperative collection building with eBooks. Libraries look to consortia to provide value for their content dollars, and consortia, in turn, should have booksellers and publishers who are willing to explore pricing models that are more sophisticated than one-to-one sales of individual titles or even bundles of titles. Drawing again on the e-journal framework, booksellers could give libraries/consortia the choice of purchasing eBooks that are mission critical and for which perpetual access is guaranteed and allow sharing of titles among consortial partners for an access or "top-up" fee.

Is there a role for the bookseller in the national conversation going on about shared print storage? If libraries are in need of strategies to reclaim space, booksellers should be able to compare library holdings to titles available electronically whether for purchase up front or through print on demand. Or, just offer up some inexpensive warehouse space with services back to depositing libraries.

Answer from Steve Carrico — Department Chair, Acquisitions & Licensing, University of Florida Libraries, <stecarr@uflib.ufl.edu>

Perhaps it is not coincidental that currently I'm working with technical services colleagues and our dean to craft a new vision statement that better connects our division to the evolving role of our academic library. Libraries are grappling to remain current, even relevant with emerging users who seemingly view libraries as information highway pit stops — a place to pull in, download, and drive away, almost always as fast as possible. Or worse, users who don't even think about libraries — after all, there's always **Google**. It is hard to resist the temptation to suggest that a new library vision statement

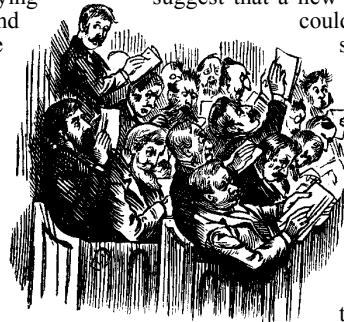
could easily be turned into a self-parody: provide all the world's information, in all formats, to all users, all the time.

While libraries struggle with an identity crisis, trying to reinvent themselves, booksellers themselves are re-thinking their own status while ever tinkering with new business models. What is the

role of the bookseller you ask? Isn't it obvious? Supply books and information immediately and conveniently; and oh by the way don't charge too much, libraries are in a financial bind, or haven't you heard?

OK, maybe that's not feasible, so what I would suggest is to continue forging partnerships. Booksellers must continue to work with libraries and publishers, much as they always have, as liaison and distributor between information supply (publishers) and information demand (users via libraries). In the past, user demand was for printed books, cataloged and housed on library shelves. Today the demand has grown, and boy has it grown. The demand is not just for books but for information produced in a variety of formats, whether it's printed

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Take a closer look at....

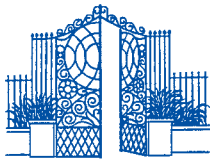
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What Do You Expect ...

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books or eBooks; print-on-demand; or providing digital and multimedia content on portable readers or mobile devices. To be successful in this often-interactive marketplace, booksellers must build and offer libraries new methods for selection, distribution, access, and purchase of information — whether those models target printed materials or e-versions.

Librarians know well they exist and operate increasingly in a business-driven environment, as recent economic downturns and staff layoffs have all too harshly taught us. Obviously publishers and booksellers want libraries to survive and be successful — it's in everybody's best interest. What stands clear amidst all this uncertainty is that the library/bookseller/publisher relationship must be rethought and retooled — if for no other reason, it makes good business sense. In their quest for profit and to remain in business, publishers and booksellers must offer less restrictive acquisitions models and help libraries provide users improved ways to access information with better service. Now that's a vision statement we can all work with.

Answer from Tony Ferguson — University Librarian and Chair of the Knowledge Team, University of Hong Kong, <ferguson@hkucc.hku.hk>

Even in today's academic world of more eBooks and fewer dollars for collection building, our library still needs booksellers. We continue to add about 55 to 60 thousand printed monographs annually — half of those in Chinese. My library spends about US\$3 million a year on non-electronic information, but with only a

dozen librarians to select books, teach library skills, do advanced reference work and do all the things which need to be done in the electronic world, we need knowledgeable booksellers who can help us get the most important books. For China where the book trade is enormously complex and not yet mature, given the large number of books we want to buy, we need bookstores, book agents, and other libraries to help us collect as much as is needed.

But things are already changing. We are almost at the point when we can buy eBooks as quickly as we can buy their print equivalents. Once that happens, I believe we will opt for eBooks for most academic monographic content. Of course for reserves library books we will need printed materials as long as students continue to reject electronic textbooks — but I don't think that is sufficient to sustain booksellers. For many years eBook agents survived by selling non front-line books, but at very low prices for those libraries or consortia which could buy them in very large numbers — in these years we bought eBooks by the tens of thousands in the US and by the hundreds of thousands in China from a few agents. But the situation is rapidly changing. Publishers of eBooks are increasingly free to sell their materials directly to libraries, via agents, and via the mega Web enterprises like **Yahoo**, **Amazon**, and **Google**. In this environment, traditional and eBook booksellers are faced by growing competition. But the chaos of the competition means that centralized well-organized booksellers which can help us select, acquire, catalog, and preserve eBooks, will get our business. With nearly two million fulltext eBooks (not just **Google** freebies), our experience tells us that for eBooks to be accepted, you have to have a lot of them and you must make them easy to use. We want eBook sellers to help us get the right eBooks and help us make them easy to use.

That doesn't just mean super platforms, although they won't be rejected, but they need to sell the eBooks with good MARC cataloging.

In our most recent biennial reader satisfaction survey, for the first time our undergraduates were evenly split between those in favor of printed and those favoring eBooks. I believe at our university, we are at the tipping point. We expect our booksellers to partner with us in the electronic world as they have in the print world.

Answer from Tony Horava — Acting Associate University Librarian (Collections & Information Resources), Bibliothécaire associé par intérim (Collections et Ressources d'Information), University of Ottawa / l'Université d'Ottawa, Canada, <thorava@uottawa.ca>

Our library's expectations of the bookseller have changed enormously in recent years. Indeed the term "bookseller" sounds antiquated and should be replaced by something more holistic and forward-looking; there is much more involved than merely selling the book. Our library is trying to get the best value for money and achieve the greatest efficiencies possible, whether it be for selection, acquisition, cataloging, shelf-ready, or invoicing workflows. This allows us to be user-centered and deliver books in the most efficient manner, and save staff time at all levels of the purchasing ecosystem.

We expect the bookseller to be an imaginative, competitive, efficient and pro-active in adopting new technologies, new services, and business strategies. Active listening to our needs is quite critical for this partnership to work. Pro-actively proposing new services based on analysis of current purchasing is also welcome. We expect the bookseller or vendor to provide a host of options for different book formats (print and electronic), different scales of purchase (individual titles or book collections), and ordering options (direct ordering by librarians, mediated ordering by Acquisitions staff, rush orders, etc).

In a multi workflow environment, quality customer service is critical to our daily operations as well as for longer-term goals. Books, in whatever format, will remain critical to our collection development strategy. Specialized, niche booksellers can focus on selling their unique content, but full service book vendors need to think comprehensively about the services they provide and how these services integrate together. The full-service vendor is a valued partner in our library enterprise, and assists us in reaching our goals of delivering the right books to patrons in the most cost-effective and efficient way. Libraries need vendors, and vendors need libraries, and both need publishers of course. The supply and distribution chain needs to be value-added at every step in the process.

In the future I expect and hope that vendors will provide creative and customized services, to offer more choices for libraries in how they acquire books, whether print or electronic, whether for individual titles, collections of books, or consortial opportunities. Selection interfaces need regular review and updating based on library feedback. eBooks will become the dominant vehicle for research publication in many fields. The vendor needs to keep on top of scholarly communication issues; the learning and teaching transformations in academia; new technological options and business partnerships for selection, fulfillment and delivery; and most of all, stay attuned to the library's rapidly changing requirements. It's an era full of potential as well as pitfalls! 🐼