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Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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Column Editors' Note: *This column for **Against the Grain** is devoted to discussing issues affecting library acquisitions, library vendors and the services and products they supply to academic libraries, and the publishing marketplace as a whole. It is an ongoing conversation between a book vendor representative, **Robin Champieux**, and an academic librarian, **Steven Carrico**. — RC and SC*

Steve: So another ALA Annual has come and gone. I learned a few things, like DC can be hotter in the summer than Florida!

Robin: Yes, it was a long, but productive week. I attended quite a few interesting sessions, spent a lot of time at the booth, and managed to squeeze in some good meals with friends and colleagues. I could go on about what I learned and ate, but I understand that you have a topic to explore.

Steve: You should know; one of your colleagues at EBL made an interesting comment on the librarian-vendor relationship: he feels many librarians look down on vendors because they work for companies motivated by profits while libraries work for non-profit organizations. You know, the “make a buck” professional vs. the “noble cause” professional. Way too over-the-top comparison for me, besides being irritating it’s not exactly accurate — librarians get paychecks too. Really I don’t think most librarians begrudge vendors for their efforts, but do feel that libraries are sometimes taken advantage of; because libraries are beholden to library users to provide information as needed, so our power of negotiation is minimized. What’s your take on this issue?

Robin: Personally, I have had experiences with librarians dismissing and distrusting my ideas and work because of my job. This is rare, but it does happen and, frankly, it’s maddening. However, like you, I don’t think it’s simply a matter of these librarians not respecting what I do; rather, they are wary of my motives. And, this goes both ways. Believe it or not, sometimes vendors feel taken advantage of and a bit powerless. Unfortunately, there seems to be a low level of mutual distrust that permeates vendor/library relationships.

Steve: Could it be a case of a few vendors or publishers viewed as profiteers, but all the vendors feel the heat? Let’s flip over what you said and look at it from the perspective of the glass being half-full: “fortunately, the mutual trust between vendors and librarians is relatively strong.” I like the sound of that much better, and don’t you think it’s true? I do. As an acquisitions librarian my experiences working with vendors have been mostly positive and productive. Honestly, my issues are far more with the publishers than with the vendors.

Robin: That is a great point, rightly encouraging, and I completely agree: the large majority of my experiences are positive, productive, and fun. It is interesting to me that you make such a strong distinction between publishers and vendors. In my mind, I draw no such line. Please speak to this a bit more.

Steve: In this distinction I’m referring to publishers as content hosts and vendors as content distributors. I realize in many cases this distinction is blurred — Elsevier, for example, is a publisher and vendor, as their content is both developed and purveyed. I’m using the term vendors here to mean the academic book service providers or the eBook aggregators. As a librarian acquiring e-content, it seems many of the restrictions in getting the content to our users in the methods they most want are publisher-based. Bundling e-journals and forcing libraries to accept the entire bundle as it costs more to cherry pick is a prime example of publishers not having the libraries or users’ best interest at heart. For eBooks, problems arise for libraries when eBooks are not issued simultaneously with print editions; but this goes back to the publisher, not the eBook aggregators. Yet, to be fair to the publishers, I will admit they certainly have their hands full developing reasonable pricing models, getting past distribution hurdles caused by DRM, and still earning a profit. Those can’t be easy problems to resolve.

Robin: They are difficult problems to solve and especially now when so much is in flux. I think this is true for all vendors, not just publishers. In many respects, traditional business models are being exploded, but we don’t quite know what comes next. At least, no one — libraries, publishers, content distributors — is willing to bet the *whole* farm on it. I also feel that libraries and publishers often exhibit a common trait: risk aversion. This is not to say that there are not a lot of innovative individuals and institutions out there, nor am I saying the community is devoid of experimentation. But, hedging aside, this timidity causes a certain stubbornness that is not always very productive. Rather than focusing on the goal, publishers, libraries, and, yes, even eBook aggregators, fixate on how we want to get there. This makes it difficult to envision new solutions and mutually beneficial models and processes. And sometimes we retreat to blaming each other.

Steve: All great points, but I hope publishers or vendors don’t think librarians blame

them as the cause of the problems, because I hope that’s not the case. And you’re so right about risk aversion! Many people get in comfort zones and resist change. But if you stop and consider, since the emergence of the Web the library and publishing worlds have undergone radical transformations. Maybe we are both standing too close to the picture: you the vendor, so intent on developing new and better models of providing content to libraries; me, as the acquisitions librarian, so involved in acquiring content and making it accessible to users, that we feel things aren’t changing fast enough when in fact they might be.

Robin: Maybe blame is the wrong or too heavy a characterization, and I’m not implying that vendors think that at all. But let’s consider a hot topic like interlibrary loan for eBooks. This subject can spark pretty contentious discussions among and between libraries, publishers, and vendors. I think this is warranted, and there’s a lot to figure out. However, sometimes the expectations, both of vendors and of libraries, are wed to workflows, business models, technologies, etc., that don’t necessarily reflect the capabilities, needs, and cost and cost savings of a digital environment. When this happens, we lose site of the goal, which in this example hasn’t really changed. You are right in noting the importance of looking at the big picture, but we also need to acknowledge that how we react to and navigate new technologies and user needs, for example, has a massive impact on whether we have an active or passive relationship with the big picture.

Steve: What’s ironic about all this is in the end-use, library user never knows anything about all the elaborate license agreement and pricing negotiations that go on behind the scenes. Libraries try to brand their resources so it’s evident that the library is responsible for providing the access, but the message often doesn’t get through.

Robin: But would you want the end-user to be aware of all the behind-the-scenes stuff? Wait, don’t answer that! I think we just found the topic for our next column.

Steve: Sounds like a good area to explore. Not only making users aware of what it takes for libraries to acquire — and more importantly pay for — the resources they use, but making sure they know what and where to find them. That too is an ongoing problem. See you next time, professor. 🍷

