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The Grass is Often Greener -- Settling In

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In July of 2010, after a period of unemploy-
ment occasioned by the corporate buyout of
my former employer, I had the good fortune
to be hired by a college library untroubled by my
unconventional resume and imaginative enough
to see the advantages of bringing a former sales
rep into academia. After nearly thirty years as
a commercial traveler for three different book
vendors, I had learned a thing or two about the
industry and the folks who inhabit it, and I was
about to use that experience in the service of The
College of New Jersey.

My plan in this series of articles is to reflect
on my transition from an itinerant peddler to a
stable, and open to new ideas, librarian. I am par-
ticularly reassured others contemplating a move either to or from the commercial sector.

Settling In

My arrival at TCNJ was a bittersweet time for the acquisitions staff. My predecessor, Marilyn
Apelian, fondly known to many readers of ATG as a regular attendant at the Charleston Conference,
had been absent on a long medical leave. When
Marilyn’s illness ultimately proved fatal, there
followed the usual bureaucratic wait to determine if
(would there be an exception to the hiring freeze?),
then how (should the head of acquisitions be a
faculty-status librarian?), and then by whom (the
extended search) the position should be filled.
The upshot was a department in stasis for nearly two
years, struggling mightily to keep up with their
faculty-status librarian), and then by whom (the
 uppshot was a department in stasis for nearly two
years, struggling mightily to keep up with their

orders from the selectors. I saw what I thought
would be an easy target: eliminate the 3x5 cards
by taking advantage of systems offered by our
vendors and streamline our workflow by shifting
manual processes to automated ones. Thus began
my first lesson in library land.

In a way, the fundamental work of a vendor rep or an acquisitions librarian is quite similar: we
solve problems. In sales, though, the problems are
sometimes hyped or even manufactured. We’ve
seen all bloated or overly complicated solutions
being marketed to remedy minor inconveniences.
Incremental improvements in library processes are
regularly heralded as revolutionary and indis-
pensable. Sales often relies on the grand general-
ity, the vague reassurance that all will work out
fine once the deal is done. Details are relegated
to customer support, those great, unsung heroes
of any successful enterprise.

In acquisitions, it seems the opposite is true.
We are blinded to potential advancements by
entrenched habits and comfortable workflows.
Problems may exist we barely recognize. Some-
times it takes a fresh set of eyes. As a new acqui-
sitions librarian, I saw that we really didn’t need
to manually key in orders, that we could order
from our book vendor’s web site, that the vendor
could send us order confirmation records which
we could load into our system. But it wasn’t
effective enough to assert that I could help to make all of
these things happen, and it wasn’t as easy as the
sales folk would have you believe. The devil was,
indeed, in the details.

My first challenge was getting the confirma-
tion records to load correctly into Voyager. Note
the operative word “correctly.” With the help of
our extremely patient systems librarian who was the
local Voyager administrator, we were able to
get the records to load in fairly short order. Now,
I had heard the term “bulk loader,” but had not
entirely grasped its significance. Our systems
librarian had not encountered the process before
and, eager to gratify the brash new acquisitions
librarian, assumed that all record loads are created
equal. The problem was, we were loading order
confirmation records into the cataloging module.
This did not please the catalogers.

Bruised, but undaunted, I set about digging
through manuals (not something a brash new
acquisitions librarian, particularly a male one,
does eagerly) and took to shamelessly imposing
upon various friends and contacts within the industry
(something this brash new acquisitions librarian does do eagerly). I learned
the correct loading process. When this finally worked as promised, I was elated. But this wasn’t
the entire solution.

Since we are not a research library and most of
our book buying is of newer imprints, it occurred
to me that some of our obsessive, pre-order du-
plicate checking was, shall we say, inefficient. I
wanted to adjust our workflows accordingly, but
also wanted to be fully confident of our systems.
In the course of the aforementioned manual read-
ing (ugh!), I discovered that our vendor’s Website
offered openURL linking to our catalog. This
would enable us to directly confirm whether or not
we held a title offered on the vendor’s site.

“Aha!” I thought, “Let’s set this up.”

Here beginneth the second lesson: Unless
one explains one’s needs very clearly to systems
people in language replete with their arcane
jargon, one must be prepared to ask the same
question multiple times. It took me a few weeks
to make myself understood by our link resolver
service, and the results are still not exactly what
I’d prefer, but, as someone once said, “Good
enough is usually good enough.”

The third lesson I learned in this process was
perhaps the most important. It’s also something I
should have already learned: Don’t be too quick
to make assumptions. I assumed that the duplicate
checking function I was setting up was a two-part
operation. We would check our holdings and we
would check our open orders. I didn’t realize that
in Voyager the 035 field would be retained and
used as a key part of duplicate checking. I was
making things harder than they needed to be.

My work isn’t done yet in this project, but the
major hurdles have been overcome. There are
still areas of monographic acquisitions that are not
amenable to the processes I am putting in place (sub-
sequent editions, for example, are problematic),
but I can see things getting wrapped up. Ann and I
will need to write up some procedures and the upcoming
addition of a notification plan will, no doubt, bring
some complications. Still, it feels good to have one
success under my belt and to have the satisfaction
of both learning and teaching a new trick.

Next time: the notification plan and thinking
about eBooks. Stay tuned.