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## Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- A Lifetime in Library Supply: 45 years of Change

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# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — A Lifetime in Library Supply: 45 Years of Change

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**Column Editor's Note:** Readers of this column will recall my saying that a genuine reward of being in this business is the colleagues with whom I have the pleasure of working. For the past four years I have been in almost daily contact with **Jonathan Waring**, who is the **OASIS Product Manager at Coutts**. Systems such as **OASIS** were a gleam in no one's eye, however, when he first entered the book trade. Now working on his fifth decade in this business, **Jonathan** shares a few recollections below. He lives in Northampton, England, and can be reached at <jwaring@couttsinfo.com>. — **BN**

**A**s **Coutts**, with **OASIS** at its core, develops and implements an increasing number of eBook and print patron selection plans, I cannot help but reflect on how much the trade has changed in order to meet developments in the library world over the years. This year I “celebrate” (if that’s the right word) 45 years in the library supply business, and yes, one or two things have “matured” — not the least being me!



In the Spring of 1966, after no more than eight months working for a lowly wage at good old **W & G Foyle** in London’s Charing Cross Road, I was offered the “Technical Rep’s” job developing academic library business at all levels in the southern half of England. I was given the keys to a brand new **Ford Cortina** and a large quantity of book jackets and was left to get on with it! Training? What’s that?! I quickly learned the fundamentals of how book selection worked in the 1960’s. Visit and present your customer with relevant jackets promoting forthcoming titles and write out by hand a list of those chosen. I also learnt to suss out what was relevant to the curriculum (without the benefit of a quick Web search) and to refine the selection I presented in order to maximize sales — and it worked! The area had been neglected and I was soon able to build existing business and acquire new. All very nice when there was a useful commission earned on each sale — there was plenty to spend money on in London in the ‘60s! Not much changed during the five years I worked for **Foyles**, but in 1970 I moved to the two-year-old **Collets Library Supply Service**. The first challenge was to establish a name for a “new” company against the might of **Blackwells**, **Dawsons**, and many other established companies, great and small. We also ran a subscription service and, as a member of the Association of Subscription Agents I spent many happy hours at conferences in the company of **John Merriman**! We also had to work in an environment of tight budgets held by growing institutions that then came to rely more and

more on the processing services of a supplier and, given the Net Book Agreement that restricted discounts, acted as a bargaining tool when trying to win business.

Although I didn’t realize it at the time, my future life was mapped out the day I met **John Coutts** for the first time at Brown’s Hotel in London. Having been recommended by a University customer of **Coutts**, we quickly established a good relationship and did a deal whereby **Collets** supplied **Coutts** with certain UK books, and vice versa with US and Canadian publications. It was important for libraries to freely obtain titles that were theoretically only available one side of the Atlantic and a sign that librarians were impatient with parochially-minded publishers! All went well until **Coutts** was taken over by **Menzies** and the relationship could not be sustained. But when **Keith Schmiedl** and his partners bought out **Coutts**, the relationship was successfully re-established. The ‘80s and ‘90s were often difficult times for library vendors, especially if under-capitalized, and having risen to Director level, I knew it only too well. **Collets** came unstuck in 1993 and I was fortunate to be appointed Sales & Marketing Director for **Coutts**, looking after the customers in the UK and Europe. Currency fluctuations made life “interesting,” as did the growing trend towards “international” publishing that began to even out price differences. The abolition of the Net Book Agreement in 1997 heralded change in the UK book trade and began the move towards competitive tendering, which then led to many smaller firms going out of business.

A former colleague at **Collets**, **Keith Edwards**, moved, in 1993, to an “upstart” company based in Ringwood, Hampshire in the South of England with the enigmatic title “**BMBC**,” standing for “**Business and Medical Book Centre**,” an ambitious outfit, being the last ever such company to start up in a difficult economic climate. **Bob Gray** was the founder, but soon his son **James Gray** was dynamically leading the business forward. Mutual exchanges took place between **BMBC** and **Coutts**, and it is possibly my fault that **James** and **Keith Schmiedl** came to meet, resulting ultimately in the integration of the companies in the year 2000. I believe that **James Gray**’s innovative leadership and strong devotion to good customer service and, as an “outsider” able to “think the unthinkable,” led to a change in the library bookselling trade. He was supported by many very experienced members of the trade who helped him retain his perspective, but his forward-looking attitude led to the establishment of **MyiLibrary**, still the only eBook platform developed successfully by a book vendor, and everything that that and **MyiLibrary**’s competitors have meant for us all since, librarians and booksellers alike.

During the last years of **Collets**, I became involved in the design and development of a computer system; pioneering stuff in those days with some staff resistance to automation. The external people I worked with on that taught me such a lot and created the ongoing interest that later drew me into my involvement with **OASIS** at **Coutts**. Interestingly the underlying development aims probably haven’t changed over the years — i.e., creating something that works well for both users and colleagues. We’ve had our moments during five + years of development, but I regard **OASIS** as streets ahead of earlier systems, with amazing future potential.

I’ve enjoyed working with librarians in the UK, Europe, and North America, but one of these days will have to contemplate “shuffling off into the sunset.” Maybe the retirement present could be a “gold iPad” instead of the “gold watch” of old, although I won’t have to hang on very long before that is overtaken by some new device! Whatever, I will always have an abiding memory of working with and for so many wonderful people! 🌿