Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- You Kicked Our...Bible

Bob Nardini
Coutts Information Services, bnardini@couttsinfo.com

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This past week I arranged a string of meetings for someone just hired at our company. The idea was to help her get oriented by talking to people in different departments. As I walked back into the room during a break in one of these meetings, she’d struck up conversation with someone from the department and was sharing a laugh. These new colleagues turned out to be old competitors.

“You kicked our butt,” she said to him.

“Yes,” he agreed, “we did.”

It was Bibles they were talking about. Each had worked for a religious publisher with an online Bible, and they’d both been involved in these respective Bible projects. In this shared calling to publish Bibles the two companies might have had an identical larger purpose at heart, but the smaller purpose seems to have been to sell as many as you could. One company apparently had reached more souls online than the other had managed to reach.

Selling Bibles is hard business. You’re always being tested. My new colleague used to show her online Bible at conventions around the United States. Every so often a Biblical scholar would walk up to the booth and start talking to her — in Hebrew. “They just wanted to see,” she says, “if you knew it.” The New Yorker even ran an article on the Bible business a few years ago, detailing the market’s astounding variety — study Bibles, family Bibles, gift Bibles, devotional Bibles, and every other kind of Bible; thumb-indexed, gold-embossed, or leather-bound; in this translation or that translation.

I thought it must be the same for these two online Bibles, that one had the right features and the other didn’t. “No,” I learned in asking, “they were the same.” What made the difference, then? One publisher had licensed its Bible to another company and the other publisher hadn’t. Instead that Bible was offered only on the publisher’s site.

Not so long ago in the online world a phrase you’d hear fairly regularly was “content is king.” Bill Gates wrote something to that effect in the mid-1990s, when online content was still building up. Lots of people borrowed his phrase. Now there’s so much content — so many Bibles, so much of everything — that content has been knocked off the throne. Content? Heck, there’s still plenty of that in print, if anyone really needs something in particular. Content, move over. Today context is king.

Can people get to your Bible more easily than they can get to someone else’s? Can you put it somewhere where they’re liable to be spending time anyway? How well will yours fit with other “content,” if our pre-eminent public domain work can be thought of that way? Maybe you will need to share your Bible with some other company or companies who were not present at the creation, your creation that is. Questions like these might be more important than having whatever the online equivalent is to a great thumb-index feature, since everyone else’s Bible is going to have some version of that feature anyway.

The boundaries we know in the terrestrial world evaporate like mist when you put content online. It’s the trickiest thing, and not just for publishers and other businesses. In fact the best show in town right now might be to watch the interplay among one online for-profit colossus, Google, who runs a little side business digitizing books, two decidedly not-for-profit groups trying to put the world of content online, and a couple of as-yet-unborn “national digital library” visions.

It wouldn’t be easy to find a better icon of capitalism as we know it today than Google. Yet to millions around the world, Google is nothing like the other gigantic corporations who drill oil, or fly planes, or lend money, or make cars, or broadcast news, or run big box stores. While at times some people may love some of them, these companies are just as easy to not love, an approach most of us have taken at one moment or another at least. Google, on the other hand, seems like a gift sent down from the heavens a few years ago to make life on earth better for everyone, and not to forget, someone we don’t pay a dime to.

That’s not a view taken by the Open Content Alliance, by the way. The OCA is a collaborative organization free of commercial motives whose project is to create a universal online commons of books and other things. Among the comments about Google you can find on the OCA Website is a 2009 posting about the Google Book Settlement, “an insider deal cut between powerful, private interests that creates a profit-making monopoly over the greatest source of our culture’s common knowledge.” Then there’s HathiTrust, a collaboration of research libraries whose mission is roughly the same as OCA’s. Except that Hathi largely relies on Google scanning efforts, while the OCA does not, a difference which has led to occasional sparring between the groups. Then there’s the idea for a “Digital Public Library of America” spearheaded by book historian and Harvard University librarian Robert Darnton, who hopes to get everyone to work together. To date he can chalk up a steering committee and a meeting, which is more than writer and blogger David Roth-
But, despite the fact that mega-universities and their NCAA fan base, mega-universities are often beloved by alumni and their athletic programs, many would without much doubt, on any given day want to see their university enter the mainstream of our political discourse. When it comes to public love and trust, we all know where the federal government stands these days for many outspoken Americans, and can imagine the contours of that debate, should the idea get so far as to enter the mainstream of our political discourse. Altogether a deliciously complicated scene, as the contexts for all this content get worked out in the wake of the recent voiding by a federal court of the Google Book Settlement. For those of us who play on smaller stages, in some ways it’s not so very different. If your organization sells eBooks that means you might work for a book vendor, a bookstore, an online bookseller, or for Google; or for a serials vendor, a database vendor, or a publisher; or for an aggregator, maybe commercial and maybe nonprofit; or for a network or consortium. While your content may be similar your context won’t be, and everyone is trying to find the right combination. Your competitor today might be your partner tomorrow. Or the reverse. Or it might be hard to tell one from another.

For librarians, the job is to figure out which combinations will work best. Which ones will stick and which will fail apart. Difficult questions and another of those things they didn’t teach you in library school. It’s been so long for me, though, how would I know? Maybe they do teach it today, and if they do, I should go back and take the course — most likely, online.