Collection Management Matters: Frienemies: Vendor Tech Support

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work by others. Researchers, data authors, publishers, data distributors, and affiliated institutions all receive appropriate credit.”

On the second day of the seminar, attendees performed an exercise to become familiar with the Dataverse Network and then each individual developed a workflow and prepared an action plan appropriate to his/her own environment.

Based on the attendee evaluations, this initial Charleston Seminar was a success. Attendees liked the mix of theoretical and practical information, despite the amount of material presented. Over 80% of them said they would attend another Charleston Seminar in the future. One comment summed it up well: “It ran very on-time. And they fit everything in! Very impressive.”

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Two of the many responsibilities that I juggle are being the administrator for both our link resolver and facilitating access to our online journals. To have both of these services function effectively, I have to communicate with the vendors’ technical support departments on a regular basis. When these people are responsive and genuinely care about making the product perform as advertised, things can be resolved fairly quickly and satisfactorily. However, if the support department does not really know what a link resolver does or understand why your access to the journal results in an error screen, it can lead to a long, drawn-out, frustrating, and sometimes futile effort.

Our former Dean was a forward thinking and loved library innovation and technology, so consequently, when we migrated to Innovative Interfaces (III) in 2005, we purchased a couple of products that looked wonderful in the demos, but no one had the will or the skills to implement them once they were ours. One of these was our link resolver. We knew what it did, but even after our Webinar, we were clueless as to how to make it work. Both the Webmaster and computer specialist, who back then doubled as the systems person, would not take it on. Not wanting to waste money and seeing its potential for helping students link to full-text articles, non-techie me decided to make an attempt to implement it. After I had some initial success, with heavy support from the III HelpDesk and the WebBridge Listserv, I decided to keep going and install the link resolver in every database that was open URL complaint. Thus began my love-hate relationship with vendor tech support.

Some tech support departments are very helpful and will even go to the extent of using a guest login, so they can have the same user experience you are describing to replicate the error. Technical support at two of my major vendors were very helpful when I was implementing WebBridge, and they even checked back with me to see if I was satisfied with the solution. “Jerry” at a third aggregator’s site shared advice about copy/pasting the URL into Notepad and how to get rid of white space. If it was not an issue on his end, he made helpful suggestions about how I could remedy the situation on my end and encouraged me to call him back with the results. But he moved on, and the folks that followed were not as helpful. For instance, I found a page on their support site that had the open URLs for one of their subsidiary products. Tried as I may, I could not get any of them to work. I contacted technical support and was told that open URL linking for that product was not supported. When I sent a screenshot from their support Website that displayed the erroneous open URLs for the subsidiary databases, the tech told me that she would check with the product manager. After sending follow-up inquiries for a month, I received an email from the same rep that said the open URLs were not supported for the product — virtually the same wording as her first response. The page with the errant URLs disappeared from the vendor’s support site.

Even more aggravating are the vendors who hire technical support personnel who do not have sufficient experience with open URL linking. I had problems getting the link resolver to work in one database of a large periodical vendor. When I contacted the III HelpDesk, they said that the problem was with the database vendor. After much back and forth, I was finally put in touch with a senior tech support supervisor who did not understand what the problem was, although I kept sending screenshots with explanations. When I found myself sending email with definitions of open URL linking and explaining how it worked, I realized that if I had to explain it to her on that level, there was no way she was going to be able to help me. In desperation, I went back to III and explained that the vendor was incapable of solving the problem, and they resolved the issue for me. This same vendor listed the WebBridge link twice on each citation and could not remove it. Even today, they cannot just have the link resolver show on abstracts only. It offers “all or nothing,” so the link resolver button has to appear on every article citation or not at all.

Over the years I have learned some tell-tale signs of when to know whether or not I am dealing with someone who can actually solve the problem once it lands in their lap:

a) They give you bad advice about what to do to solve the problems, without testing their solutions themselves and when those fail, then
b) They don’t respond to your email about what progress they are making with solving the issue, until,
c) They tell you to check the link resolver listserv and the wiki to see if you can solve the problem yourself, as if you have not done that already! Many a time my hands have been poised over the keyboard preparing to write a nice-nasty note saying, in effect, “You did not ask me, but I have already done that!” Then I figured what good would it do? They obviously cannot help, so I move on to the next option.

My experience with an article delivery service taught me that things can always get worse. After being assured that they had a WebBridge expert to help me implement the service, I received a corrupted coverage load and a manual written by another library system’s department. I got it up and running except in one important database with heavy usage. I offered a guest login, which they ignored, and every solution they sent was continued on page 75
Vendor technical support is a long arduous journey that usually book for the spring, especially when you have field experience working with various databases.

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vendor did not send it, and nothing else was done. I contacted the vendor rep for my region, who said that it was out on the server for the loan request. The current average is 72 hours, and we are exploring ways to ensure faster delivery times. Additional concerns about the shared acquisitions approach include length of checkout for faculty; CI-CCI has met this need by extending the loan period from ten weeks to 120 days.

As the CI-CCI transitions to the collection development phase of our project, we are considering whether to merely coordinate our acquisitions so as to minimize duplication or to go a step beyond by developing areas of subject specialization at member libraries. The subject specialty approach is of particular interest to some of our faculty. Task forces are currently looking at options for a common vendor solution for print books and whether we can establish a common eBooks collection. The group realizes that prospective collection development will be a challenging endeavor given the differences in budgets and curricula and subject specialities of the colleges. The varying degree of adoption of eBooks and patron driven acquisitions are other factors that challenge us in coming up with an approach that meets the needs of each campus.

In the coming year, several tasks await. First, we will consider expanding the partnership. The University of Northern Iowa, a state-supported institution with 11,000 students, hopes to join the collaborative in the fall of 2014. UNI is employing SCS and will have a stand-alone data set since incorporating their data with CI-CCI data would require a data refresh by the entire group. We are thrilled at the possibility of bringing in a larger institution especially as we begin to look at prospective collection development. Second, each school must decide how and whether to weed, and we will implement an OCLC Shared Print Symbol to register title retention commitments in WorldCat. We will also update the MOU to reflect current practices and new member(s), and as we expand the scope of the collaborative we will have to consider how we fund and staff our work, which means possibly seeking grant funding or budgeting for a project manager.

Finally, based on a presentation by Prof. Andrew Stauffer (University of Virginia, Founder of BookTraces http://www.booktraces.org/) at a symposium held in 2014 to celebrate the Maine Shared Collections Strategy (http://tiny.cc/7hdcpx), Drake will consider examining candidates for withdrawal for such evidence of reader interaction as marginalia, inscriptions, insertions, etc. This examination will help Stauffer and others establish the incidence of these interactions as scholars and librarians try to determine how to preserve the history of reading practices and cultures.