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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — Is That A Meeting Anyone Really Wants To Attend?

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At the monthly meeting of the local Boy Scout troop, the Scoutmaster gathers the attendees and calls the group to order. Among the topics dearest to the heart of the Scoutmaster is the part in the program where the young scouts are asked to describe the good deeds they have accomplished since the last get together. One by one, the Scoutmaster is continually heartened as he is regaled by the selfless acts of kindness, citizenship and honor as described by each troop member recounting their most recent noble activities. Finally, the youngest scout stands up and nervously faces the audience.

"My act of kindness was helping a little old lady to cross a crowded city street," the young scout softly said.

Immediately, upon hearing this, the Scoutmaster was quick to praise the youngster and then noting that the scout was young, a new member of the troop, inexperienced in the ways of the Boy Scouts and relatively short in height, he asked, "Did you have any difficulty in helping her across the street?"

"Well, actually I did. It took me two hours to get her to the other side of the street," he sheepishly revealed.

"Two hours?" replied the Scoutmaster. "What took so long?" he incredulously asked.

"She didn't want to cross the street."

This story is reminiscent of a situation faced at times by the vendor and the librarian when, in fact, one or both would prefer not have a meeting with the other. Libraries, by virtue of their modus operandi, are tasked with not only buying new sources of information but also renewing current subscriptions. In each case, the information professional is expected to deal with the vendor to accomplish one or both of the tasks at hand. The salesperson is expected to conduct a set amount of sales calls to libraries over the course of a specified time period. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, both are reluctant to have the meeting to occur. Simply put, they'd rather be somewhere else than sit across the table from one another.

Salesperson

A salesperson's compensation in the information industry is usually divided into two segments. There is the "new business" portion, which rewards the sale of a new product to the library. Selling a product defined as "new business" is highly regarded by the company and can be a source of great satisfaction and monetary payment to the rep for accomplishing this part of the sales plan. The reason that this portion of the compensation plan is highly

rewarded is because it's much more difficult to sell new products as opposed to renewing current ones. Since both those elements are important, when companies devise a salesperson's compensation plan, both the new and renew portions are married to an overall dollar responsibility with the implicit direction to actively service the account. This means that the rep is paid a certain percentage for selling new and a lesser percentage for renewing products, but is also compensated for regularly being in contact with the customers. It's the rep's responsibility to sell, renew and service the accounts in their territory. The rep is also being a responsible person when they make a client visit even though there may be no possibility of a sale on that particular appointment.

To sell new business, the salesperson will first contact all relevant current clients to gauge their interest and, if there is, then make appointments to visit and demonstrate the new product. When that first list of phone calls is exhausted, the rep is then expected to begin the dreaded exercise known as "cold calling." That means calling prospects not known to the rep at libraries to attempt to find the right person, have the conversation and then decide whether it is worth it to continue the dialogue, all within the span of a five-minute phone call. In all my years of being a salesperson and then managing teams of salespeople at many different companies I have never known one to say, "Hey Mike, I love cold calling!" It's a facet of the job that most reps do not like, although at one time or another all of us were required to do so.

To renew a subscription, the salesperson's involvement may not be as critical as selling new business. Many information industry companies have teams of phone-based customer service people who call the library on behalf of the rep to renew the product. However, the best time to sell something new is when you are renewing a product currently being bought by the library. A wise rep will use the renewal conversation as a lead-in to discussing the relevant new product and perhaps give a special pricing deal if both the new one is bought and the current one renewed at the same time.

The rep knows that they are obligated by the company to attend a certain amount of face-to-face sales calls. Given that a rep wants to maximize the possibility of a sale, a good salesperson will always decide to visit the prospect with the most upside potential. However, there are times when the rep will have to make a value judgment on arranging a visit that has no immediate chance of a sale. Hence the question, "Is that a meeting I really want to attend?"

To mitigate the reality that a scheduled sales meeting may not produce a sale in the present and possibly not in the future either, the rep should:

1. Study the current client subscription coverage and suggest additional content to be included at the next renewal cycle. ("You may want to consider adding this resource at the upcoming renewal since it fits in seamlessly with your current coverage.")
2. In conjunction with the librarian's understanding, schedule appointments at other areas of the institution. ("I plan to visit the Dean of Business while I am on campus today.")
3. Review current usage statistics of the client. ("Your usage indicates that your users are missing some searches of key information points crucial to your business. Let me show you how to maximize the benefits derived from that database.")
4. Talk about "what's new" at the company. ("Let me tell you about our new CEO.")
5. Schedule other appointments at clients/prospects that are located in the vicinity.

So even if the rep feels put upon because there is an obligation to conduct a visit with no immediate monetary reward seemingly in the offing, the above mentioned possibilities may ease the pain.

Librarian

Inevitably, librarians will receive phone calls from sales reps asking to come in and show the library the latest and greatest offering from the company. In some libraries, the first line of defense is not to answer the reps' initial inquiry and let the call go to voice mail. While that is a temporary fix, a good rep will call again or at the very least send a follow-up email or two (or three or...). I have always advised my library clients to set aside a portion of the week devoted to returning calls and letting all the salespeople who want to do business with the library know that the best time to call is at a certain time on a specific day of the week. Moreover, it is just a good business practice to advise them also that any calls received outside of that window of opportunity will not be dealt with immediately. This procedure puts everyone on the same page and avoids dangling conversations.

In the case of planning a new business meeting, the vendor has determined that there may be a need at the library for the services

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offered by the company and dutifully calls to find out if there is interest and then expects to make an appointment so as to explain why their product is the greatest advancement since sliced bread. Upon making the call, the salesperson will have a few questions to ask the librarian, whose answers to those inquiries will determine the relevancy of the product for the library. Moreover, those answers will help the salesperson to know if a follow-up visit is warranted.

On the other side of the phone, the librarian has to be prepared to ask questions of the vendor, as well. There are questions regarding price, sources of information, reliability of the platform, etc., to be asked of the salesperson so as to determine if there is even a vague interest to look further at the product being highly touted. It's far better to tell the salesperson upfront that based on the answers to the librarian's questions that the product is not applicable to the current needs of the library as opposed to agreeing to a meeting that will waste everyone's time.

All of which brings me to the most crucial point of all for the information professional who initially sees no need for the product, but feels bad about turning the salesperson down for a visit. In this case, honesty is the best policy. It will save everyone a significant amount of time and trouble to tell the rep to

forget about it. So if the feeling is "That the meeting is one that I prefer not to attend," then consider the following:

To ensure that working with salespeople will yield positive results and not waste time, the librarian should:

1. Designate a specific time and day(s) of the week for interactions with the sales reps. ("Call me any Tuesday between the hours of 1:00-4:00 PM, and I will gladly answer all your questions." "Thursday is the day I set aside to meet with salespeople.")
2. Be prepared with questions when responding to salespersons' requests to come and show you their latest product. ("Bob, that sure sounds like a great addition to your offerings, but can it do...?")
3. Be honest and forthcoming. ("Would love to see you to speak more about that product, but I simply do not see it as a good fit for us at this time. Call me again in six months.")
4. And if the rep insists on coming out to see you, ask for a proposed agenda so you can review it and decide if the trip is really worth your time and theirs.
5. If there is interest in the product discussed but there are no funds currently available for purchase, make that known to the salesperson. ("Mary, that is a database we can

certainly use, but I cannot commit to buying it until our funding situation clears up, which should happen three months from now.")

The late, great **Marvin Gaye** recorded the song "It Takes Two" with **Kim Weston** in 1965. It was a huge hit for **Marvin** and **Kim**. The lyrics talk about how two people can be successful if they are able to face life's challenges together. Of course, this song has little relevance in the world of library/vendor negotiations. The title however, does have enormous relevance for the vendor and the librarian as they embark down the road of negotiations. It takes two people to investigate the possibilities of making a deal. It takes two people to come together to negotiate a fair deal for both. And it takes two people who want to be there and work together to finalize a deal. 🌿

*Mike is currently the President of **Gruenberg Consulting, LLC**, a firm he founded in January 2012 devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, "Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success" is available on Amazon and Information Today. www.gruenberg-consulting.com*