

2015

Back Talk--On First Looking into My Inbox

Jim O'Donnell

Arizona State University, jod@asu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Donnell, Jim (2015) "Back Talk--On First Looking into My Inbox," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 4, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7136>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Back Talk — On First Looking into My Inbox



Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

I never get enough email. Heaven knows, I try, but whatever I do, I can never seem to get my email total over a couple of hundred a day. I miss the scammers who used to write all the time: made me feel useful, sitting there harrumphing and pounding the delete key, wondering why they didn't make a better effort to sucker me in.

But, now that I'm a librarian, I'm finding there are limits after all. No sooner had my appointment been announced than I started to get a stream of warm, friendly messages from people who had just — what do you know? — published books they were sure our library would be interested in. Knowing how considerate these people are in choosing to write to me directly about these fine volumes, you won't be surprised that a very high percentage of them are books with heartwarming stories with no possible audience in an academic library.

I hit the delete key and move on. That leaves room in the inbox for the cold-calling vendors. It's remarkable how many people have got just the solution to our library's needs and would be happy to talk about their offerings sometime in the next week. Since I've rarely heard of them or their companies, it's kind of them to tell me about their revolutionary new technology and to volunteer to sit down to explain it all.

But wait a minute: Don't we have a highly trained and dazzlingly competent professional staff whose job it is to find the right products and services and figure out which of them we need and can afford? Yes, and they know way more about such things than I do. Sorry. I hit the delete key and move on.

There's another layer of mail after that, from the vendors we *do* business with. A surprising number will be at the next library conference and only too happy to see me there, even invite me to special opportunity dinners at really nice restaurants, where the quality of the food and wine will have no effect on my professional evaluation of their products. Me,

I'm a student of the ancient saint who said in his *Confessions* that he was still never sure which temptation he'd give into next, so I take a pass on lots of those opportunities too. I do enjoy getting to know our key partners, but I'm a lot happier doing that when staff have helped me understand how to advance our interests by doing so and not just sit through another sales call. I decline regretfully, then delete and move on.

And what the blazes is this? I've got a LinkedIn notification here, so now I'll click on it. I rarely do more than click "yes" when somebody wants to connect with me (or "no" if it's a complete stranger, of which there are many). But this time it's a vanilla-flavored invitation from a search firm I've never heard of, to apply for a library director job I know little about and am not interested in. Say what? Doesn't this type of recruitment make one feel all warm and fuzzy? Do you wonder if the firm is counting everybody they've sent a robo-message to on LinkedIn as a part of their pool? What are the chances that a real human being at that search firm knows who their contacts are? Well, I'd like to write back and tell them a thing or two, but one has to be nice to search firms: you never know when we'll be trying to persuade this one to think well of somebody or, for that matter, when I'll be back out on the street looking for work myself!

Now the inbox is getting pretty empty, I'm sorry to say, so maybe I'll spend a little quality time on Facebook, catching up with dachshund and donkey videos. And when I come back, if I'm lucky, I'll start getting to the good stuff. One great message arrived a couple of days ago from a department chair who's fuming because something's not working between his faculty and their library contacts, and he wants to talk. I'm obviously not delighted he's got a problem, but I'm thrilled that he thought to write and let us work together to sort out any misunderstandings. Once upon a time in my CIO days, we discussed charging people for

asking questions of their IT support personnel, and one of our smartest wizards said, "Heck, I'd rather pay them for asking" — and that's always been my philosophy. We need to know what the problems are, and I'm happy when they show up in my inbox.

There's even more interesting email behind that: mail from our own Library staff. Sure, there's the usual back and forth with direct reports tinkering with a draft message to send out this week, but prose-crafting gets pretty ordinary after a while. What I find most valuable and save for last are the messages from staff with questions or ideas. Obviously, I can't meddle in operational decisions or become a waiting wall for complaints about co-workers or the like — what has to go through channels will have to go through channels. But ASU library has a couple hundred smart and interesting colleagues, all of whom know at least some aspects of our library much better than I ever could. Nothing brightens my day like a message from one of them, calling an article to my attention or crowing a little about a colleague's achievement, or alerting me to a new opportunity. In fact, we are putting into place an "innovation advisory group" that will help staff contribute ideas (and let other staff help refine those ideas) for ways to improve our services. There's creativity and imagination to be found everywhere in the library's buildings.

So how much is left in my inbox? You can predict that if you ask me two questions: have you traveled lately and what day of the week is it? If the answers are "no" and "Sunday," I have a pretty good chance of being down in the very low dozens. If the answer to the first is "oh, yes," then the number is heading north. We all have different panic attack levels, and mine is around 100. Right now it's Sunday, no travel, and I just got from 59 to 44 and by golly I'm going to stick to it.

But I sure hope I get some email tomorrow. 🍷

ADVERTISERS' INDEX

27	AAAS / SCIENCE	85	BASCH SUBSCRIPTIONS, INC.	88	MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE
47	ACS PUBLICATIONS	77	THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	9	OSA — THE OPTICAL SOCIETY
61	ACTION! LIBRARY MEDIA SERVICEL	8	THE CHARLESTON REPORT	51	RITTENHOUSE
87	ADAM MATTHEW DIGITAL	45	COLD SPRING HARBOR LAB PRESS	11	SIAM
43	ALEXANDER STREET PRESS	41	COPYRIGHT CLEARANCE CENTER	15	SLACK INCORPORATED
13	AMBASSADOR EDUCATION SOLUTIONS	59	EMERY-PRATT	23	SPIE DIGITAL LIBRARY
67	AMERICAN PHARMACISTS ASSOCIATION	71	EVOLUTIONARY ECOLOGY, LTD.	55	TAYLOR & FRANCIS GROUP
39	ANNUAL REVIEWS	2	IGI GLOBAL	81	TURPIN DISTRIBUTION
35	ASME	19	IGI GLOBAL	31	THE WORLD BANK GROUP
5	ATG	7	LM WOLPER INFORMATION DELIVERY	3	YBP LIBRARY SERVICES

For Advertising Information Contact: **Toni Nix**, Ads Manager,
<justwrite@lowcountry.com>, Phone: 843-835-8604, Fax: 843-835-5892.

@Bunning: People & Technology
from page 85

So the stacks, rows of them, are quiet, dark, silent. We hope the volumes that remain will reach out to readers — every book, a reader, every reader, a book — but books are dumb paper unless pulled off-the-shelf and read. And Google has read them once, and they, both Google and the books, stand ready to uncover their secrets at the mere tap of the keys.

So the rows are here to remind us of a once glorious era of the book, a once glorious era of print learning. I wander them and wonder which ones my eye will land upon, which one I will pull from the shelf, which ones I will read, standing alone in a row, illumined by wan light angling from a narrow vertical window.

I smile even as my smile turns to horror eyes as the reshelving robot passes by peeping a warning, a telling warning. 🐼