2015

Back Talk--On First Looking into My Inbox

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7136

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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 condescending 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 reach out to readers — every book, a reader, every reader, a book — but books are dumb paper gadgets waiting 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.