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# Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians-- Negotiation Skills 101: Where is That Course Given?

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# Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — Negotiation Skills 101: Where Is That Course Given?

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Vendors spend millions of dollars preparing their salespeople and executives to be better negotiators when dealing with their library clients. Publishers, aggregators, and subscription agents in the information industry follow their brethren in other industries by sending their salespeople and executives to school to learn how to be better negotiators. Whether their employees were great negotiators to begin with, a few days of training makes those salespeople even better when sitting across the table negotiating an e-content deal.

In checking the various curriculums at major library schools here in the U.S. and abroad, it is astounding to notice that virtually no courses are given on how to successfully negotiate with vendors. Given that every librarian that graduates with an MLIS degree will most assuredly come in contact with a plethora of vendors selling everything from databases to discovery services to desks and chairs, one wonders why this crucial part of the information professionals' training is not covered.

Given this inequity of having to face well prepared vendors schooled in the latest negotiating techniques, what can the information professional do to "level the playing field" so that there is a fighting chance to come away with a better than reasonable deal when buying any number of goods/services offered to the library?

**Paul "Bear" Bryant**, legendary football coach at the **University of Alabama** once said, "It's not the will to win that matters. Everyone has that. It's the will to prepare to win that matters." **Coach Bryant** never sold a database to a library, but his quote clearly gives the direction that is needed for any library to successfully negotiate with vendors. After all, it's all about preparation.

In lieu of taking a semester course on negotiating with vendors, I will offer at no additional cost an abbreviated course right here in *Against the Grain* and call it Negotiation Skills 101. It will give every information professional the basics on how to be better prepared for your next vendor negotiation. If you follow the steps that I will be outlining in this article, I guarantee that you will be better prepared for your next negotiating session. Additionally, by following the framework that I will outline, you will save money for the library as you acquire new products or renew current ones.

Successful product acquisition can only be achieved by following a simple, yet comprehensive preparation plan that involves four elements. There are four elements that need to be addressed:

**1. Objectives** — To be successful, you need to know what you want. The first step is to write down what it is that you want. In the parlance of sales, if the objectives are not written, they simply do not exist. And if those objectives are not written down, how can you possibly measure your success (or lack thereof) after the negotiations are complete? So the first step is — Write down what you want. For example, the Archeology department at the University has requested that the library should investigate the cost to acquire a new database on Middle Eastern artifacts from the 12th century as published by XYZ Data Systems and their competitors. The budget assigned to this will be no more than \$25K with capped renewal increases of no more than 2.5% over the next two years and final selection needs to be completed in six months.

So here's the "Statement of Objectives" — We want to acquire a database on Middle Eastern artifacts from the 12th century for no more than \$25K with a capped yearly renewal cost not to exceed 2.5% over the next two years. Final selection of the vendor of choice will be determined within the next six months.

**2. Timetable** — The goal is to get this deal done in six months or less. This is the part of the process where the information professional must make clear to the salesperson the ground rules on time and communication. "Bill, thank you for presenting your company's 12th century Middle Eastern artifact collection to the library. We will be back in touch with you over the next three weeks if we need more information. Please don't call me or anyone else in the library since I

will contact you if more data is needed." This part of the process requires ground rules on when communication is required and when it is not.

As we all know, the salesperson is all too happy to work hand-in-hand with the library. Unlike the library however, the salesperson in the information industry has monthly revenue goals to attain. If the rep knows that the possibility of selling the company's 12th century Middle East collection is in the queue, then he can accurately predict when that order is expected and all is well. On the other hand, if the rep has no idea when it may or may not come in, the rep will dutifully call the person at the library that was the contact point for updates on the status of the possible order. If the library person does not return the call or tell about the status of the order, then the rep may call others at the library for an update. By communicating ahead of time to the sales rep of the decision-making schedule, embarrassing phone calls to library administrators asking about the status of the order will be averted.

**3. Team** — The buying and selling process for libraries can, in many cases, be a complicated one. Information professionals need to know that they are not alone in the negotiation process; or rather they are only alone if they choose to be. The reality is that there are many people within the library can be of enormous assistance in hammering out a favorable deal with a vendor. The librarian just has to look around the organization to find those people. The salesperson is surrounded by a "team." To better respond, the library needs a "team," as well. Here's what that team may look like:

- **Team Leader** — That's the person who deals directly with the seller.
- **Financial Authority** — That's the person with the money; the person who reinforces the fact that your organization has the money to spend for the resource in question.
- **Technology Person** — Every library, be it academic, public, government, corporate, legal, etc., has a person or a team of persons whose sole job is to make sure that the technology associated with the intended purchase is operational so that all the users at the library are gaining unrestricted access to all data services. The tech person can tell the team if the database under consideration can be effectively used.
- **Legal Person** — Your legal department needs to be kept abreast of the impending deal and it is best to review the vendors' contracts as the negotiations continue so that when a final decision is made, your organization has already reviewed the paperwork so that the deal gets done without delay.
- **The Boss** — Whomever it is that has authority over the librarians' activities needs to always be in the loop. Sometimes, at critical points during the negotiation, the appearance of the boss at the meeting may actually hasten the purchasing timetable, which is good news for both parties.

**4. Strategy** — The final piece of the puzzle is to develop and implement a strategy, which means going back to your original objectives. For example, you may tell the vendor that your budget for this resource is \$18K. That means that the first price you tell the vendor that you're willing to pay is \$18K and then see what their counter offer may be. You may be surprised to find out that their counter offer could be below the anticipated \$25K.

Strategy is not about hard-ball or soft-ball. It's about how you want to deal with the salesperson. I have spent a career in the information industry going into every negotiation trying to be as flexible as possible on price and terms. It's all about your negotiating comfort level. Whatever the strategy, write down your objectives and assess yourself

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Of course, I'll think a little about just how it makes sense to sell a book at that price at all and where the concept of profit has gone. Which part of the \$1.45 pays for the printing and binding, which for the distribution to booksellers, and which part for the shipping to me? It's a good choice for a professor to assign her students in a world of overpriced textbooks.

While I waited for that to arrive, I happened to walk past a bookstore. You remember bookstores. They're easy to spot: big sign "Books" outside and lots of greeting cards, wrapping paper, and writers' supplies inside. But behind them, actual books. It took me thirty seconds in the store to find what I was looking for: Vintage books edition, near-exact reprint of that copy that went to college with me.

I photographed the ISBN and mailed it to myself. Back to Amazon: if I search for editions of *Ulysses* or even just paperback editions of *Ulysses*, I do not find the Vintage edition at all. I do find its cover illustrated on one entry on page 13 of the hits, but that points only to four used copies priced each at more than \$2,000 (two thousand dollars: not a typo, but no explanation what could justify the price). If I input the ISBN, I get the correct edition, for \$12.45, Prime eligible. It comes with other tabs for hardcover and eBook editions, but those tabs lead to editions that have nothing to do with the Vintage edition. (When I wrote up this sad tale on the redoubtable *Liblicense-l* discussion list, a reader pointed me to an **Oxford World's Classics** edition. It is similarly invisible to the basic search but available if you know the ISBN already.)

That copy of *Ulysses* I took to college must have come from the **Basset Center Book Store** in El Paso, where the leftist philosopher **Paul Goodman's** books spun on a rotating rack just across the aisle from the special corner hosting the richest selection of **John Birch Society** publications I've ever seen. I never knew I had it so good. And you can't go home again.

You can, of course, go to a library. I'll resume this story in my next column and explore the alternatives. **Joyce** is not dead yet. 🌿

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throughout the process. If you don't write it down; it doesn't exist and at the very least cannot be measured.

A strategy document for negotiations is really a "living" text, which means that as you progress through the process, some demands will be met whereas others may go unfulfilled. That's what naturally happens and it is certainly understandable that you may win some and lose some. No matter, to gain your favorable results along the way leading to the final objective, stay the course, continually assess yourself and success will be imminent.

I am reminded of the song sung by the great **Harry Belafonte** called "Hosanna." The opening line of this calypso tune is "House built on a weak foundation, will not stand." In negotiating, the foundation of those discussions must be built on a strong foundation. That involves Objectives, Timetable, Team, and Strategy. If those four elements are covered, the library will be prepared and after all, preparation is the name of the game. If not adequately prepared, success will be fleeting, if at all. 🌿

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*Mike is currently the President of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is 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, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. [www.gruenbergconsulting.com](http://www.gruenbergconsulting.com)*

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## Being Earnest with Collections from page 75

- Unglue.it: free to join, and pledges accepted. Not supporting at this time.
- UC Press Luminos: \$1,000 minimum sought. Not supporting at this time.

Along with these investments in external programs, we're investing internally as well. **Dr. Miller** has initiated an internal grant program for Rollins faculty as an incentive to adopt and/or create open educational resources (OER) for their courses. Our OER page at <http://www.rollins.edu/library/services/oer.html> provides an explanation of the grant program, a brief note on the costs of textbooks (some are over \$350), and links to OER repositories. The grant provides a stipend to the faculty member, as well as a team of collaborators consisting of a librarian, an instructional technologist, and the director of our Institute for Effective Teaching. The first recipient, **Dr. MacKenzie Moon Ryan**, is bringing OER to her course on global art history.

After **Dr. Miller** presented the OER grant program at the Florida ACRL meeting last week, several in attendance remarked that he had given them a nudge toward actually taking action and investing in what we're talking about so much. OER is an important element of the open access movement, and has become a hot topic recently as textbook prices continue to rise.

As we head back to Charleston, I'm hoping to hear about how other librarians are choosing to invest in open access. Are you supporting some of the programs we've listed, and/or others? Are you collaborating with faculty members on identifying and/or creating OER, and researching the usage rights for those resources? If we're going to be earnest in supporting the open access movement, we're going to have to continue investing time and funding in open access resources. 🌿

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