

September 2017

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Recommended Citation

Gruenberg, Michael (2017) "Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians-Any Questions?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 4, Article 65.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7914>

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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — Any Questions?

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In a previous career, I was a school teacher in Brooklyn, New York. I taught in what was called a middle school which encompassed grades 5 through 8. I thoroughly enjoyed being with that age group of students simply because you could see the beginnings of maturity on some of those kids. It was a challenging job, but one where the rewards of success became apparent. A key indicator of a students' growth came with their ability to ask questions when the lessons being taught were unclear. I always knew that the students who asked the most questions in class would probably be the ones to find later success in high school and hopefully college. Those students sought clarity so as to more fully understand the concepts being presented to them.

In the world of sales, the ability for each side to ask questions of the other person is most essential if there is to be any hope of success for buyer and seller. In the library world, the salesperson needs to uncover the library's needs, understand the current funding situation, know the competition and be aware of all the people within the organization that can affect the potential sale.

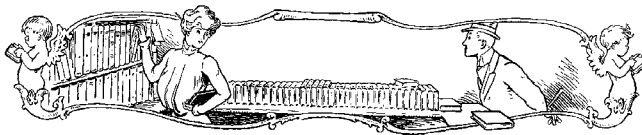
On the other side of the table, the information professional needs to compare the strengths and weaknesses of all the vendors vying for the library's business. Unless you are dealing with a sole source product, it's a fair bet that there will always be 3-4 vendors who have e-resources that are similar in nature. Making the best choice will depend on many factors. Both library and vendor are living in a very competitive environment. Ultimately there may be no "right or wrong" choice of which company is chosen to provide data to the library, but there certainly will be a "best" choice of who can make available the most relevant and comprehensive e-resources so vital for the library's patrons.

Vendors are keenly aware of their competitors. To counteract the competing forces of vendors seeking to unseat the incumbent data provider to the library, some of those providers have developed the "gatekeeper" strategy. One of the downsides of being in a market with a finite amount of vendors is that inevitably one vendor or maybe two become the top providers of resources to a specific library community. These information industry companies are running profitable businesses and want to keep that business. Furthermore, selling content to libraries on a subscription basis is an annuity business and successfully renewing that content each year is vital to the cash flow of those companies.

As a result of guarding the renewal business while at the same time hunting for new business

opportunities, some vendors in the information industry have purposefully adopted a "gatekeeper" strategy. That means that their singular goal is to have as much content as possible flow through their pipe to the library. This way, they can control the flow of content, ward off any other vendors who threaten to seize parts or all of the current business while at the same time tightening their stranglehold on the library's buying process.

A savvy salesperson will recognize a gatekeeper strategy by the competition by asking questions of the information professional at their initial meeting. Similarly, the information professional must be prepared to ask questions of the potential vendor to understand how well their offerings match to the needs of the library. All of which brings us back to the premise of this article, and that is, the ability to ask questions of the other party so as to clarify what's being presented and how it may or may not be purchased.



Every day, thousands of meetings are conducted at libraries throughout the world where a well intentioned salesperson is attempting to interest a well meaning librarian in a new or existing product or service. If those two people are not engaged in a spirited discussion that includes questions and answers, then the likelihood of both parties walking away from the table satisfied with the outcome is bleak, at best.

So, how does one avoid participating in a meeting that can become a monumental waste of time? Simple, it's all about preparing for the meeting and that means researching and finding out as much as possible about the person you will be meeting. Secondly, it's all about creating 10-15 questions that will be asked during the meeting to clarify each other's objectives.

For the information professional, questions to be considered about:

- Relevance of content
- How this resource was developed
- Sources of content
- Technology requirements
- Availability of customer service
- Billing considerations; special deals
- How the product matches the competitors offering
- Training
- Recourse if the product does not live up to expectations.

After discussing the merits of the product, the salesperson could have questions about:

- Ascertain and confirm that the product is, in fact viable and can meet the needs of the library
- Funding procedures and when is the expectation of payment
- Approval process and who else needs to get involved for finalization of decision
- One-time purchase or subscription or perpetual access
- If the library is at a University, is alumni access a key consideration
- North America, South America and/or Global access.

In sales, we call this the "consultative sales approach" which simply means that each side asks their questions and when both participants have concluded their questions and are satisfied with the answers, and then a review is concluded to make sure there are no loose ends and the sale can either go forward or be stopped dead in its tracks.

If the meeting between buyer and seller is one-sided, which means that only one person is doing most of the talking, then that means that only half of the equation is involved, which will probably result in no satisfaction for either party. Both sides need to be prepared, engaged and honest with each other for this to work.

The group **Chicago** included a song called "**Questions 67 and 68**" written by **Robert Lamm** and recorded for their debut album **Chicago Transit Authority**. While that amount of questions may be a bit excessive in negotiating an eContent license, the more questions asked by each side, the better the chances are that a successful conclusion will occur. 🐼

*Mike is currently the Managing Partner 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**" has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and 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*