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Converse-ations: Seeing the Relationship from the Flip Side

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FOLIO, the success of the Marketplace will depend upon the support of the participants. Though not all of the wider library community has been convinced of FOLIO's viability, if ultimately successful, the FOLIO initiative could produce a library technology infrastructure that is sustained and allowed to evolve through collaboration and community involvement.

Much like "crowdsourcing," another technological innovation that libraries and vendors can explore together is the manipulation of "big data." The concept of big data involves the analysis of large data sets to reveal patterns, trends, and relationships. As big data technologies mature and research applications are explored, new types of scholarship emerge that did not exist previously. These areas of developing research approaches provide exciting opportunities for library-vendor involvement in the research process.

For instance, the advent of digital scholarship, especially in terms of text and data mining of vendor collections, can allow vendors and libraries to integrate themselves into scholarly research in ways that extend beyond merely providing access to information and instruction on resource use. Access to data sets will allow librarians to work directly with researchers on the formulation of the research question, development of the data extraction plan, manipulation and analysis of the extracted data, and the eventual production of research results by applying data visualization and other presentation applications to the analyzed information. With such an arrangement all parties benefit: vendor content is made more useful, librarians can more fully serve their patrons, and researchers ultimately interpret existing content in new ways.

Though partnerships across the library community are not a new construct, the advent of online technologies has greatly enhanced the ability of the community to collaborate and develop various cooperative arrangements. Not all partnerships produce immediately successful results, however, collaboration has a successful track record of achieving advances that could not have been achieved without willing partners. By engaging in creative acquisition models, collaborative problem solving, cooperative system/product development, and digital scholarship exploration; vendors and libraries have found mutually beneficial ways to serve their patron populations more completely. Partnerships have grown from basic approval plans to online development communities in a relatively short period of time. As technology progresses, library-vendor cooperative arrangements will continue to evolve in form and function alongside it. Future developments may expand partnerships into areas beyond traditional librarianship or it may contract to exclude for-profit institutions or it may continue along the lines being established today. Whatever the future may hold, partnerships will continue to evolve so long as mutual benefit is felt by all partners. 🌱

Conversations: Seeing the Relationship from the Flip Side

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Information providers such as vendors and publishers have always worked closely with their librarian counterparts in a traditionally customer/vendor relationship. The authors feel that this relationship is more nuanced than many give it credit for. We would also contend that to get the most out of the relationship, both parties need to become more aware of how the other manages this relationship. Yes, libraries are the customer, yes content providers are selling information or services but everyone wants to put the best information in front of the students.

When we are all rowing in the same direction, library users will be successful in their research. Recently, a group of librarians and vendors interviewed each other to get insights into what it's like on the "flip side."

Questions and Answers

Question: *How much of your position is dealing with vendors? How much did you think it would be, and how much is it in reality? And to follow up, what's your ideal amount of time to work with vendors?*

UNT: (Allyson) I thought it would be some (getting quotes, negotiating, contract work, etc.), but in reality it ends up taking up about half of my time or more. This includes emails, calls, etc. The communication happens daily with various vendors. I was very surprised with the amount of interaction with vendors and not being able to do the work behind the scenes.

GVSU: (Jeffrey) I agree with Allyson — interaction with vendors takes up about half of my time. This includes all the little pieces, such as, sorting through all the communication to find the relevant information. That "extra" takes up time.

UNT: (Allyson) A lot of time is spent making sure we aren't missing out on something versus evaluating a resource or going to look for a resource. While we are taking all this time just to get to the relevant infor-

mation (e.g., making sure we aren't missing out on some huge platform change), we could instead be evaluating resources or finding new products for our students. Sorting through everything coming in is not the best use of my time.

GVSU: (Jeffrey) My ideal would be to spend about 25% of my time with vendors. The "extras" can be frustrating. I spend a lot of time going through the mass of emails to find the few relevant ones in the mix. If we could eliminate the "extra" time spent shifting through things and spend more quality time with working with vendors, I'd be all for it.

Question: *How much time do you deal with customers? How much time with other stakeholders?*

Vendor: (Claire) I feel as if it's 100% of my time, but that's because even when working on an approval plan or doing things behind the scenes, I still view that as customer-focused. 90% is probably more accurate. I'm answering email all day, every day. There is a huge part of my job that is very customer-service oriented. I spend a lot of my time doing training, helping with day to day issues, setting up/editing notifications, liaising between different departments, running reports, and soliciting advice and expertise from internal/non-customer facing colleagues.

(Ashley) All the time. We do have internal partners, but if it's your primary sales rep you're asking this question to, they are spending about 85%-90% working directly with libraries. I work directly with libraries, but I also spend a lot of time behind the scenes working with my team. Your primary rep also spends time with internal groups, on calls about new products/development or giving feedback from the field, but the expectation is to be in contact with libraries regularly and working to make sure our partnerships with libraries are productive, that they stay on top of new trends/products to let you know about them/find good

continued on page 20

fits, and to ensure a long-term partnership that enables a sustainable ecosystem of library and vendor relationships.

Question: *What is the right balance of communication with a vendor? How often/only when relevant? Only when directly asked to communicate?*

UNT: (Laurel) Our library has a set way of thinking on this. We want communication when there is something important the vendor wants us to know; such as, when some big changes are coming, a platform shift, or when it affects our library or our patrons. That is the standard. As for other types of communication, it's nice to be alerted via email to new developments. We do not prefer phone calls, as we need time to consider things on our end and starting in writing is the best way to do that.

(Allyson) We get a lot of sales communication and it's best when it's tailored to our institution and what we teach.

GVSU: (Patrick) We agree with UNT. We also would like it personalized to the person reading it. Send the sales stuff to head of collections and the technical stuff to the tech services person.

(Jeffrey) I agree. We have some vendors that are aware of what we (GVSU) teach and offer, and therefore tailor a message to the person that deals with those topics. It is my responsibility to be aware of what vendors are offering, but if it's a form sales letter, I will scan the subject line at best.

UNT: (Laurel) Some vendors tend to follow up repeatedly before we are ready or have an answer. Nudges too often are not helpful and can cause negative feelings. We also do not like to get unsolicited phone calls.

Question: *What type or frequency of communication would you like from the library? What can we do better as customers?*

Vendor: (Ashley) We love getting responses regardless of the answer. If we don't get a response, the question of "did this get to them?" creeps in and we may follow up with you unnecessarily. It saves time on both ends. And we should extend the same courtesy to a library. If I get an email from someone I have a 24-hour policy. You will hear back from me, otherwise I didn't get it. Even if it's just to say, "I'm looking into this." I think letting you know that I got it, heard it, and am working on it is a professional courtesy.

(Claire) I agree with Ashley. I'm pretty sure I'm immune to being offended by hearing "no" at this point. Additionally, one other time I like hearing an answer, even if it is a "no," is when I offer to visit. Logistics for planning travel and meetings can be complicated, so the clearer a library is on whether they'd like a visit the better! There is a lot of preparation and follow-up involved for each visit. If I can dedicate more time to the libraries themselves and not the travel planning, I view my time as much more productively spent.

Author Bio

Ashley Bailey, Director of Customer Retention, joined GOBI Library Solutions from EBSCO in 2008 after earning her M.L.I.S. degree from the University of Southern Mississippi. As a Senior Collection Development Manager with GOBI Library Solutions, for more than eight years, Ashley has extensive experience with assisting academic libraries meet their collection development and acquisition goals. 🐾

Question: *What are the best qualities or attributes of a productive vendor relationship?*

GVSU: (Patrick) Preparedness. Know what our library has.

(Jeffrey) Know your product. The library shouldn't know your product better than you — get into the weeds. Be knowledgeable. Tell me why I need it. Also, be fun. Be able to enjoy the job. This is important stuff, we are talking about a lot of money and we need to be good stewards of our university's budget, but we also need to enjoy it. Have a good laugh in addition to getting some work done.

UNT: (Allyson) We are a little different in this aspect. We view this as a bit more focused. A little different than GVSU. Once the working relationship is in line and functioning we can move toward more of a friend-like relationship. I'd also add in, we value patience. Sometimes it takes a while for us to get answers. Our system can be bureaucratic. We also have lots of vendors and are juggling hundreds of vendors. If I don't email you back that day, please be patient with me.

GVSU: (Jeffrey) We don't control our budget, so sometimes we don't know if we have that money. More than one person must sign off. There needs to be a give and take here. We must go through the proper channels to find out if we have the funding/decisions for certain products. If the contract or agreement is new, we often have to get University counsel involved, which can also take time.

UNT: (Allyson) There are a lot of layers beyond the library that make a decision that affect our budget. It can be some time before we know the set budget each year.

Question: *How do you make the most of your library/vendor relationships?*

UNT: (Laurel) We liked to stay focused. We speak among ourselves how we are going to use that precious time before a vendor comes. We don't want to waste their time or have them waste our time. Be coordinated. Leveraging each piece of communication to be the best it can be. We think hard about ways to do that.

GVSU: (Patrick) The communication we do have is open and honest. Be truthful. If money is not an issue and we don't like the product, we let the vendor know.

(Jeffrey) I have found good success with working with vendors on things more than just selling. These are partnerships — beta

testers/input on products. I will take some of my time for us to be partners and that helps in two clear areas — anytime I can have input on your products, if I'm keeping our users in mind, that's good for our end users. And if I'm willing to give you some of my time, we get better deals in the long run. It can pay off for the library.

Question: *What don't Librarians know about being a vendor that we should?*

Vendor: (Ashley) First off, I love my job. I've always thought wearing a sales and librarian hat is fascinating. It's challenging and I love working with hundreds of libraries in my current role. I have always viewed myself as an extension of the libraries I work with. I try to keep both sides of the coin in mind when I work. I always try to do what's best for the library I'm working with (all are a little different — some very similar, others like night and day!), but know that I also keep my company in mind. I am firm believer we are co-dependent. We can't exist without you and your jobs would be vastly different without us. So, knowing that, we want feedback. We want to hear what you think. We listen. Do the same for us. Decisions at a vendor are made on multiple levels. If something doesn't go the way you want it to, it probably went another way someone else asked for. We can't please everyone we work with, but I promise we are doing our very best and in the end, we want what is best for all involved in the process.

(Claire) I really think Ashley summed up what a successful vendor should strive for (and what a successful library/vendor relationship can be). My hope is that I'm doing a good job at cultivating relationships with my libraries where I am dependable, transparent and quick to respond. I would like to think that is how I operate, and that how strongly I enjoy working with "my" libraries has a lot to do with my [public] library background and my deeply rooted love for all libraries and what they stand for. My experience as a public librarian was very much geared toward connecting with patrons, providing customer service, and providing access to all relevant information for an informed decision, and I still connect with all of those pieces as a vendor. 🐾

