

Against the Grain

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Back Talk – Lessons Learned at the Cupcake Store

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Back Talk — Lessons Learned at the Cupcake Store

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During this past **Charleston Conference**, I made my annual sacred pilgrimage to **Cupcake DownSouth** on King Street, a little way north of the **Francis Marion Hotel**. While I was making my choices and photographing my beanies, I heard another conference-goer remark, “Well, this isn’t a library, is it?”

As I walked back to the conference, cupcakes and beanies securely tucked away, I began to wonder what they could have meant. Were they sure? There’s that famous *Harvard Business Review* article from 50-some years ago, “Marketing Myopia” by **Ted Levitt**, who wrote that if the passenger railroads of the 1950s had known they were in the transportation business, they might have stayed in business longer. Are we sure we know what business we’re in?

Take the cupcake store, for example. They have a small, carefully curated collection, expert advisors, patron-friendly seating for examining the collection, and even a user-friendly catalog of the necessary metadata on the wall to tell you which flavors will be available on which days of the week. There’s enough similarity that perhaps we could learn a few things. Their metadata, for example, are clear, comprehensive, and easy to use in the discovery process and the interface (sign on the wall) is very easy to use.

Since then I’ve been ambling about in my usual way, thinking about what business libraries are in by looking at other businesses for guidance. Coffee isn’t my passion, but I did stick my head into a **Starbucks** for an inspection, and what struck me there was that their “reading room” was much more like a library than the one at the cupcake shop. To spend time in a cupcake shop, you

pretty much have to be eating cupcakes. At **Starbucks** (or the **Panera** near my home), you can be starting a business, planning a wedding, seeking the meaning of life, or catching a cup of coffee or a bite to eat. They certainly want to “push product” as we say nowadays, but they’ve learned that letting the prospective users define their needs for the space is better than requiring a tight connection between finishing your coffee and rushing out.

Then I thought about my cell phone. I’m a sad person these days, because my wonderful palm-sized Blackberry is getting old and tired. I’ve also got an iPhone, which I detest (as near as I can tell, nobody can type on one), and I’m experimenting with a new Blackberry about the size of the first-grade reading book we used in school a long time ago. So, I’ve had to go to the phone store — and the phone store, I think, is really missing a beat from not understanding libraries. Getting your phone right is a fundamental need today, but the phone store is all stand-up transactional, with long waits for an available representative, nothing else you can do there, and always an edge of anxiety about whether you’re going to get what you really need. The people there might or might not be knowledgeable, but they will surely be pushing hard for what their bosses want the customer to do, not for what you think you’re there for.



that this weekend when I realized that in order to go to “the grocery store” in my neighborhood now, I actually have to go to three or four different places, and of course one of them is the **Amazon** store — yes, I mean “Whole Paycheck.” Mobbed, absolutely mobbed.

I don’t know if **Amazon** buying the chain had something to do with that, but what’s clear is that even the company that defined Internet-only retailing is now working very hard to have these physical points of presence in neighborhoods where people who are willing to pay more than they do at **Safeway** or **ShopRite** can easily be found. But **Amazon**, of course, has its flaws. Grocery stores have lousy customer metadata and cataloging. All customers have to go by are rough “subject” categories, like “cereal” and “cheese,” sometimes found in more than one place in the store. Even in those categories one may have to rummage around a while. And what if you need something that doesn’t fit those categories so easily? Next grocery store you go into, ask yourself where you’d find a jar of taramosalata, the Greek fish-egg spread, halfway between caviar and hummus. I happen to know you can often find it at a **Whole Foods** store, but there’s no telling where — and in my experience, even if you find a store employee, it can lead to a long circuitous wander. Metadata, metadata, metadata, **Mr. Bezos**: study up on the subject — it could take your mind off your personal troubles.

Hmm. Then, of course, I had to think about **Amazon**. I had a chance to do

Last stop on the weekend’s shopping was **Target** — I needed a slightly specialized kind of household cleaner for stainless steel cookware: something called Barkeeper’s Friend. I have a lot of confidence in **Target**, even though their metadata leave a lot to be desired as well. I became a **Target** fan for life the time I went looking for something for the kitchen and was having trouble finding it. Just then, a man in a security guard outfit came up to me and said, “Can I help you?” Now it’s a truth universally known nowadays that when a fellow in a uniform asks if he can help you, what he may mean is, “What are you riffraff doing and I’m about an inch away from rousting you out of here!” Oh, I said defensively, I’m looking for the Whatchamacallit. At this point, the guard speaks into the mike of his radio — not a good sign — and says, “**Priscilla**, where do we keep the Whatchamacallits?” And “**Priscilla**” says something back to him into his earpiece, and next thing you know the security guard — the security guard! — is leading me right to the shelf. It struck me afterwards that a security

ADVERTISERS’ INDEX

23	ACCESSIBLE ARCHIVES	8	THE CHARLESTON REPORT	27	INFORMS
71	ACS PUBLICATIONS	11	GOLD SPRING HARBOR LAB PRESS	72	MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE
5	ATG	31	DE GRUYTER	19	THE MIT PRESS
13	ATG MEDIA	45	EMERY-PRATT	7	THE OPTICAL SOCIETY
37	BREPOLS PUBLISHERS	3	GOBI LIBRARY SOLUTIONS	2	PROJECT MUSE
15	THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	9	IGI GLOBAL	53	UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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continued on page 69

ATG Profiles Encouraged from page 68

WHAT EXCITES OR FRIGHTENS YOU ABOUT THE NEXT FIVE YEARS? I see the need for recalibration that causes Big Deal breaks, but it feels like a giant step backwards, as users lose tremendous amounts of access for what are usually small financial gains. I hope we can develop the truly sustainable and flexible solutions that maintain broad access to content for our users, and that will take creative thinking and bold, collaborative actions.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU THINK OUR READERS SHOULD KNOW? I am grateful every day to work with such engaged and thoughtful people at every level of our member libraries. Virginia has phenomenal libraries – come visit us!

Back Talk from page 70

guard who's also encouraged to be helpful probably has a better and more interesting job than the one who stands around glowering.

So, what have I learned from my retail adventures? Well, for one thing, libraries do many things right. But the experience emphasized for me that we should be thinking of our libraries as, first of all, places where people are encouraged to come for their needs, not just to serve our idea of what we're there for. Second, we should work hard on those discovery systems and the metadata that users require. Third, if a **Target** security guard can be that helpful, we should be supporting every last library employee to be potentially the answer to a patron's question about where to find a book about Whatchamacallits — and with a smile.

OK, this day I need to go to **Liuzzi's**, Connecticut's best little Italian grocery. Hmm, I wonder if a library should be putting out those great samples of sliced breads and imported cheeses for everybody who comes in. That could do wonders for our gate counts... 🍷

Let's Get Technical from page 67

ervation. A series (490) field "Carol Barton Collection" was inserted. The local description (500) field would be taken directly from the spreadsheet when applicable. For *Duz: Magazine #2*, the local description reads: "Shoe box printed inside and outside in black ink; inside a gold shoe wrapped in tissue paper (original tissue paper replaced); Color printed map of Brazil with a narrative text printed on the back; Small wire-bound book with illustrations on how to dance the cha-cha printed over with narrative text by the artist, white clay-coated pages printed in black, red, blue, and grey ink; Halftone and offset printing; Narrative text is about a mother writing a letter to **Lawrence Welk** asking him if her daughter could play piano on his show and the daughter not wanting to; *DUZ Magazine* information printed on the bottom of the shoe box: — from local description." The Local Note (590) field was inserted as: "Forms part of the **Carol Barton** Collection (CB-AB-0001)." The Subject Heading (650): "Artists' books" was always used with additional topical headings. The Genre/Form Subject Heading (655) contained "Artists' books (delimiter 2) rbgenr." In addition, the **Allison Jai** thesaurus was consulted, and more specific form/genre headings were included when applicable. Agreement on use of the thesaurus was made prior to cataloging

the records so student assistants could easily list the entries in the master spreadsheet, but this still required double-checking for usage (singular versus plural, being one example).

Other collaborative decisions were made after cataloging started. Two examples were 1) the identification of miniature books and 2) modifications of metadata in the records based on curatorial expertise. Miniature books are 3" x 3" or less and were separated from "regular" sized works into smaller housings to save space and to keep them from shifting in larger folders. For these, an "S" was added to the control number ex. "CB-AB-S-0108." A modification to the description based on curatorial expertise included the change from "coldpressed" to "cold-press" paper for the book *Small Oddities*. (Cold and hot-press refers to the finish on a paper. Cold has more texture or "tooth" and hot has a smooth finish.) On another work, *Short + Story*, the students doing the initial inventory labeled the process as "intaglio" when closer inspection under magnification could only determine that the work was a line drawing — perhaps a reproduction of an intaglio print but not an actual print.

The Results

Today, the Artists' Books Collection is the most heavily requested resource in Special



Collections. Class visits happen multiple times a semester from Photography, Graphic Design, Art Education, and Book Arts classes seeking to jumpstart ideas for projects based on structures

and printing processes, etc. We have hosted classes as varied as high school students at the **Shenandoah Valley Governor's School** in Fishersville, Virginia to K-12 Art Educators attending **JMU's** Content Teaching Academy for "Art & Media Literacy on Growing Inclusivity" to a geometry professor teaching "Research Experience for Undergraduates" through the **Institute for Visual Studies** here on campus. **JMU Libraries** continues to collect artists' books in support of the curriculum, and the **Carol Barton** Collection is *still being processed* with over 700 pop-up or "movable" books in the queue for cataloging, and several boxes and portfolios of **Carol Barton's** papers awaiting manuscript processing. The occasional artists' book continues to turn up in her papers, but we expect a final tally in 2019.

Resources

<http://allisonjai.com/abt/vocab/index.php>
<https://omeka.lib.jmu.edu/specialcollections/exhibits/show/carol-barton>
<https://omeka.lib.jmu.edu/specialcollections/collections/show/4> 🍷

Biz of Digital from page 66

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