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Manuscript 8381

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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — Enlisting Support to Achieve Your Goals

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Negotiating success never comes easily. There will always be differences in the way in which both parties perceive the outcome. After all, everyone wants to “win” and, as we know, there can only be one winner. Actually, that axiom only works for all activities pertaining to sports. Whether it’s kids playing basketball at the local schoolyard or professional athletes that are competing on fields of grass, hardwood floors, ice skating rinks, tennis courts or swimming pools, the reality is that there can be only one winner in those competitive contests.

However, the preferred outcome of a negotiation is to achieve a truly successful result so that the final agreement is one that benefits **both** parties. In previous columns that I wrote for *ATG*, I pointed out that the desired result in any negotiation is a “win-win” result so that both participants can walk away pleased with the results by believing their side got the best deal for their organization.

The assumption going in is that both the buyer and seller have efficiently organized their thoughts and objectives into a clear and concise mission statement delineating what they hope to achieve prior to the first meeting. Knowing your goals and objectives is the first step in working towards a favorable deal.

Now that we know how to prepare for the first session and now that we know what we want to achieve, what about understanding the management of the relationship between the two parties throughout the process? In other words, what does each side need to know about the person sitting across the table that will enable a deal to be accomplished in the shortest period of time while achieving optimal results for all?

When I managed sales forces, there was always a buzz about what our competitors were doing. Do they have a new product coming out soon? Have they raised their prices or plan to do so in the foreseeable future? Can you get a copy of their latest brochure? Is there a published price list? On and on, some salespeople became obsessed with knowing everything there was to know about the competition. I get it and I understand why and those that chose this awareness were wise to do so.

On the other hand, it is better to be positive about your products as opposed to obsessing about someone else’s offerings. This paranoia runs deep at some sales organizations. I once worked for an information industry company that hired a guy to walk around the industry trade shows, posing as an independent consultant. He would go from booth to booth of the company’s competitors asking pointed

questions of whomever was manning the booth at the time. Usually, he honed in on salespeople or marketing personnel that were relatively new to the company and who didn’t realize the game he was playing. He basically wasted the time of everyone as he engaged in pointless conversation hoping to find a gem of information for our salespeople to use the next time they went to a customer/prospect. A week or two after the trade show, he would meet with the sales staff and present his findings of what the competitors supposedly were up to. It was a somewhat underhanded way to operate, but he was viewed as the competitive intelligence guru.

Collecting intelligence about your competitors is a time honored tradition. We see it in politics and in business. The information as gathered under banner of competitive intelligence could ultimately be nasty stuff. And once you get it, how do you use the negative information? Quite frankly, my stance has been and always will be that the sales reps should stress all the positive aspects of their offerings as opposed to tearing down the competition’s products. The practice of saying bad things about the competition really makes everyone else a bit uncomfortable. Stress the positive; eliminate the negative!

At many of my weekly sales meetings, I often was asked about the products, policies and personnel that were present at the companies we competed with. While I was provided with key facts and figures that I shared with the group, I continually pointed out that the data that I was giving them was to be used for their general knowledge and not to be brought up at any meetings with the client. I also pointed out that part of their job responsibilities was to gather as much information as possible about the competition. To help them do that, I initiated a program to accomplish that goal.

I therefore established a new agenda for the salespeople to be used at all the trade shows we attended. I called it “Take A Competitor to Lunch.” The hypothesis of the program was

that every one of our salespeople had a similar person(s) doing the same job at the other companies. That salesperson, much like the ones from our company regularly called on the same clients/prospects as we did. It’s not difficult to know the sales rep who is your counterpart. “Heck, they call on the same people you do” I would remind them. More often than not, they are probably in the waiting area of the customer/prospect waiting for the next appointment after you leave. I told them that you and they have common interests. I counseled our sales reps to get to “know the competition” as often as possible, not in an underhanded way, but more in a mutual exchange of facts in a collegial manner. Unless they met their sales counterpart while travelling at the airport or meet in the lobby of the hotel or are in line at the car rental counter, the best way to learn about the other person is over a meal.

A lunch or breakfast meeting among two people is a casual affair. Various facts may be discussed that probably would not be said at the competitors’ booth under the watchful eyes of their executives. Not surprisingly, those breakfast/lunch meetings usually unearthed a treasure trove of information that was most valuable for us. Moreover, as a result of some of the meetings as described I was able to recruit talent for our organization. It’s all about communication. That type of communication is critical when negotiating.

In a negotiation process, rather than treat your counterpart as an adversary, why not regard that person as an ally? Why not enlist their support to help you? For example, there are many questions that can be posed during a negotiation that encourage support and achieve a better working relationship. For example, I was often asked by savvy negotiators, “can you walk me through the process by which your company came up with the pricing for the product you are trying to sell us?” This is a non-confrontational question that actually asks for help in a nice way to help understand the price of the proposed product.

Can you help me implies that you are asking the person seated across from you for assistance. Those few words of “can you help me” empower the other person to be in a position who can be of assistance, as opposed to being adversarial.

In the companies that I worked for, there was always a fairly long litany of terms and conditions attached to any order form that required a signature from the buyer to complete the sale. Our sales goal was always to present the product, negotiate a fair price and close the

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sale. The outcome desired was an authorized order form. We used to say "we pay commission on signed orders, not mind orders." A simple way for the buyer to understand the items contained in that legal mumbo jumbo is to ask the seller, "Can you tell me what the contract says?" Once again, the buyer is asking the seller for assistance in understanding the elements of the order form. Understanding the legalese as explained by the seller allows both parties to know what the expected outcome is for the seller.

Sometimes in a negotiation, the buyer and seller simply cannot agree on a certain item. Although the mantra I have used (which was suggested to me by one of my favorite Product Managers many years ago) was "The customer is always right; and if they are wrong, our job is to make them right." However, sometimes an item on the agenda just cannot seem to be resolved. If that is the case, then acknowledge that fact and try to move on and collectively figure out an alternative.

The buying and selling process involves working together, helping each other and knowing one another. I am a proponent of

strengthening the relationship between buyer and seller.

In closing, the song that best exemplifies this process is "Help!" by the Beatles. "Help, I need somebody, Help, not just anybody, Help you know I need someone, Help!" 🌿

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

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teaching and learning center colleagues and others to develop campus-wide strategies for textbook affordability. Over the next few years I believe we'll see more states passing textbook affordability legislation or funding efforts to create OER, in addition to federal programs. I mentioned my current involvement in launching a statewide textbook affordability initiative in my state that seeks to involve and support every academic institution to promote OER adoption. We are joining other states in taking this "go further together" approach to making textbook affordability a highly visible education issue. With all these efforts now in motion I see us achieving a critical mass in the next five years that will position OER and library-licensed content as the primary content delivery system for student learning. If it takes ten years we are doing something wrong. The one unknown factor that's difficult to account for is what actions textbook publishers will take during this period to maintain their market for learning platforms and content delivery. If the past year is an indicator they will seek to evolve their own affordable options, but perhaps we can learn to work in unison to do what's best for students and the future of affordable higher education. 🌿