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Michael Gruenberg

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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — It's the Relationship

Column Editor: **Michael Gruenberg** (Managing Partner, Gruenberg Consulting, LLC) <michael.gruenberg@verizon.net>
www.gruenbergconsulting.com

In all the years that I have interacted with libraries and librarians, the one constant has been and always continues to be the “relationship” between the vendor and the information professional. I recently came across a chapter in a book written by **Ronald A. Gagnon**. It is titled “Library/Vendor Relationships from a Public Library Perspective.” He states, “Relationships are critical to the success of all library projects. While relationships with constituents and funding authorities are easy to understand and important to address, the role of a library’s relationship with its vendors should not be underestimated.” Although this was written in 2006, **Mr. Gagnon’s** observation is still very relevant today and will continue to be as long as vendors call on libraries.

When my father came to this country from war torn Europe in 1939, he got a job as a salesperson. Relocating to a new country at his age prompted him to take whatever employment that was available at the time. At first, he worked for a furrier, but over the ensuing years, he held a variety of sales positions in different industries.

Watching him do his job as a young boy, I was fascinated with the process of his selling and interacting with customers and prospects as he did on the phone. Although he travelled to see customers and prospects, much of his work was done over the phone. He had a home/office so he did a considerable amount of work from home which allowed me to occasionally listen in to those conversations. Sometimes, when he wasn’t home, I took messages from customers for him. I felt quite important doing that role for him. His demeanor on the phone was always the same. He developed strong business relationships with his clients.

Sometimes, he attended trade shows. I remember that a few times he took me for a day or two with him to the trade shows as long as attendance at those shows did not interfere with my schooling. I remember being overwhelmed in cities like Boston and Philadelphia where I had never been before. I will always be grateful to him and my mom for giving me the opportunity to travel and learn about other locations than just the block in Queens, NY where I lived.

One day, I asked him about this mystical world of sales that he seemingly operated so effortlessly through. I was no more than 12 years old at the time and I will never forget what he said to me. He said, “**Mike** you need to understand that the secret to successful sales is in the relationship. I don’t care if you are selling pencils or Cadillacs. If people like and trust you, they will buy from you and success will be yours.”

Yikes! You mean if they like me, I’ll be successful? He smiled knowingly, as only a parent can do and said it’s not as easy as you may think. He suggested that a career in sales would be a tough business for me and that perhaps I might try a profession that was less risky. As it turns out, some twenty years later after that conversation, I began a sales career that lasted 40 years. In all that time, my father’s words were always in the back of my mind. If they like you, they’ll buy from you. Hmm... Ironically, my first boss believed in that premise which probably explains the success that the two of us had.

Quite frankly, when I began my sales career, success was not immediately forthcoming. The first year was pretty rough. My first major sales breakthrough came in November of that first year, ten months after I started. I was lucky to have a boss who was very supportive of my efforts and owners of the company who supported every idea that we both devised to bring more sales through the door.

As is the case in any business, there are no shortcuts to success. Hard work, attention to details and a willingness to listen to the customer are all aspects of a successful sales organization. We used to say, “The customer is always right; and if they are not right, we need to work to make them right.” That’s a tough concept, especially with all the Type A personalities that make up the majority of sales organizations through-

out the world. Sometimes, making the other person right, translates to making oneself less than correct. Maybe that concept is fine in our personal lives but not in the vendor/customer relationship. Each side has to feel that the relationship is beneficial for both. Making the other person wrong just to make yourself right is not a way to sow the seeds of success.

The customer has to feel confidence and trust in the salesperson. That trust develops over many years of conversations, visits and fair negotiations. It takes years to develop that mutual trust.

I am concerned to see that many information industry companies today seem to turn over their sales staffs with great frequency. While I understand the need to constantly improve the quality of the people representing the company, time needs to be invested in training and coaching to help the employees to succeed. One of the major complaints that I hear from my library friends in assessing the quality of the salespeople who call on them today is that there always seems to be a new rep every year. How can you develop a relationship with someone if there is a new person every year?

So what can vendors do to ensure that their sales reps are operating at the highest level in creating strong relationships that will ultimately result in more sales for the company and ensure customer satisfaction?

- **Know Your Market** — If you are selling products to government, corporate and academic libraries, understand that each market is different with their own set of challenges. In today’s complex world of information dissemination of varied databases, don’t expect your reps to be successful with the “one size fits all” solution. Market specialists, who understand the “ins” and “outs” of their particular markets, are worth the investment. A successful sales rep selling in the corporate space probably will not have the same success selling in the academic arena.
- **Training** — Like any profession, library sales professionals need to be made aware of industry changes and new challenges arising from competitors. Take the reps out of the field for a few days a couple of times a year and refresh their skills and attitudes. The way to “Know Your Market” is to create “Training” programs to help them understand the power of strong relationships with the customer.
- **Interaction** — Customers and prospects are literally deluged every day with calls from salespeople wanting to sell them something. Some reps are cleverer than others in reaching the proper person at the library, but the bottom line is that you can’t sell anything unless the rep is in front of the right person. A way to ensure that this happens is to have a member of senior management accompany the sales rep on certain meetings. Bringing along a VP or even the President of the company shows the customer how important they are. How powerful is it to say, “At our meeting next week, I’d like to bring along our SVP of Operations to meet you. She would like to share some ideas with you to better serve you and is interested in hearing how you feel we are performing in delivering timely data to you.” That may prompt the customer to bring someone from their organization on the same level which will elevate the meeting to a more dynamic one. A VP or President or CEO in attendance at one of my sales meetings was always met with great respect because it showed the customer how important they were to me and the company. It all helps to build the bond.
- **Advisory Boards** — A one-on-one meeting is good and it certainly has its place, but if you can fill a room with clients

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Marketing Touchpoints — Segmenting User Groups for Greater Inclusivity

Column Editor: **Jill Stover Heinze** (Founder, Saddle-Stitch Marketing LLC, Charlottesville, VA 22902)
<jill@SaddleStitchMarketing.com>

Over the years as I've given workshops and talks about marketing, I've found there are some marketing concepts that just don't immediately resonate with my colleagues in libraries and related organizations. Rightfully, many library professionals are skeptical of applying for-profit ideas to non-profit goals that seek to advance the greater good. I applaud and encourage those folks for bringing a selective, critical perspective to borrowing from business theory and practice. I'm also of the belief that we should selectively adapt marketing methods as they make sense to benefit our users, rather than adopting marketing ideas wholesale for the sake of being more "business-like" (which isn't inherently better). However, in some cases, valuable marketing ideas get sidelined not because they're inappropriate, but because they're misunderstood. One such marketing idea in particular never fails to stimulate debate and resistance among librarians — segmentation.

Segmentation is a widely-used marketing approach that involves analyzing and breaking up the group of all potential users an organization might serve into smaller groups based on how likely those users are to respond to particular offerings. The general idea is that you can't serve everyone equally well with generic offerings, and by selectively targeting and tailoring products and services to distinct groups, you improve the chances that members of those groups will respond positively.

Intuitively, most of us recognize this principle as a fact of life in a commercial world. Our mobile devices and digital behaviors, for examples, give companies troves of information to present us with precisely personalized offers and ads based on profile data we provide, geographic location, social media likes, our purchase history, and so on. For many of us, customization — sometimes helpful, sometimes creepy, and often in-between — is a firmly entrenched expectation.

In general, this concept has great appeal to many businesses, and similarly great potential to benefit users. Businesses, for their part, can dedicate limited resources to focusing on understanding and serving the needs of customers they are best-equipped to help with products and services that provide a precise solution to customers' problems. Ideally, in doing so they maximize their resources' potential and end-user impact while avoiding the waste that results from targeting groups they can't serve sufficiently. Customers too can benefit from segmented approaches, as the target customers should receive more relevant offerings and communications that are more likely than generic ones to offer meaningful solutions, while reducing the time it takes them to cut through clutter to find suitable marketplace options.

While librarians may concede these benefits in a commercial sense, it's easy to see where the segmentation concept falls apart in an applied non-profit context. We librarians serve everyone, after all. It's anathema to preferentially select one user group over another as it's the antithesis

of our core values of inclusion, diversity, and equity. If you believe this, how could segmentation ever be applied ethically and effectively in libraries? Should it even be considered?

My answer to those questions is an emphatic, "Yes!" It's absolutely true that segmentation done poorly can alienate, exclude, and harm users. But done well, segmentation can be a go-to means of ensuring our institutions' efforts make positive differences in people's lives and actually further inclusiveness.

Accidental Segmentation Can Lead to Harm

We librarians segment all the time. While mission statements typically assert that we serve all, our practices differ by necessity. If, for example, you work in an academic library, you welcome users from all over the world, but your day-to-day work is most likely devoted to the faculty, students, and administrators affiliated with your institution. You wouldn't turn away the casual community researcher of course, and you may also create some services for these folks, but the bulk of your teaching, acquisitions, outreach, and collection management efforts almost certainly aim to advance the research and teaching activities of your college or university. Within those affiliated user bases, you also probably subdivide users by characteristics like discipline, rank, locality (on-campus vs. remote), etc.

Left unexamined, these organic segmentation activities can perpetuate inequalities and exclude underserved groups. Take for example the growing movement to apply a social justice lens to our services and acquisitions practices. As a *Library Journal* article on the topic states:

Historically, libraries have shown a low tolerance for risk and a strong tendency to allocate limited resources of time, money, and energy in areas that yield the greatest results (or, at least, the highest numbers in areas that are easy to measure) and perhaps the least potential for problems. Some libraries of all types, however, are reevaluating the role they play in their community, questioning whether it is still good enough to provide equal access, or if it is time to pursue an active equitable access that focuses on empowering the less powerful and amplifying the voices of the unheard.¹

In other words, librarians' relatively mass-market approach to serving users is being reassessed by some who find such an approach reaffirms endemic social power structures. The remedy proposed here is to selectively examine the perspectives of underprivileged groups to bring greater visibility to their voices and viewpoints via library collections and services. A segmentation approach, in this case, can be wielded to serve the underserved.

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and/or prospects and get those people to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of your company, then you've got the makings of building a strong relationship within your marketplace.

Relationships between vendors and customers are built over many years. The rock group, **Canned Heat** accomplished a gold record award for their hit "Let's Work Together" which is a fitting postscript to this article. 🐼

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