November 2013

Charleston Conference Future Dates

Editor

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2375

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As a librarian in acquisitions, my understanding of our vendors is often limited to evaluating how they are filling our needs. I know when they can or cannot comply with our requests, when they will or will not change to meet our particular requirements. But I don’t usually know why. Which parts of the vendor’s organization or staff are working smoothly and which parts are in flux? Where is the company spending their resources? What parts of the approval process are less of a priority? How can we know how our requests are handled, how our needs are evaluated, if we maintain a distance between our libraries and the companies we interact with?

I had a chance to learn more about our partners recently, when I interned for two library vendors. In September-October 2009, I interned at Otto Harrassowitz, in Wiesbaden, Germany and Casalini Libri in Fiesole, Italy. The most valuable parts of the trip were learning about the vendors’ new developments, understanding their core processes that affect Stanford’s work, and meeting the staff who I’ve only known before on email. Not only was I able to better understand the vendors’ perspectives on their work with Stanford, but I learned how these two companies are developing and how they are positioning themselves for the future. The internship was a valuable opportunity and led me to ask: how can we learn about our vendor partners without spending weeks in another country?

New Developments

One of the central new developments for both companies is eBooks. Harrassowitz and Casalini are expanding their current eBook programs so both vendors were interested to learn how Stanford handles eBook purchasing and what we need from our vendors. I gave a presentation to both companies about the current state of eBooks at Stanford, and in response, both vendors spent time talking with me about their plans.

Libraries often have chances to hear about new eBook programs or new products from vendors. However, learning about these new developments needs to be combined with understanding the vendors’ environment and the challenges they face. This could be through spending time at their workplace, as I did, or it could be simply by taking a broader look at the marketplace for their services. One library’s ideas about how the vendors can meet their needs or one request for a change in their services may be one of many requests from different libraries, all of which conflict with each other. How does your request fit into the vendor’s development plan and the wider library ecosystem? Understanding this will help both sides shape and prioritize the request so it can be fulfilled.

Core Processes

Approval plans are one of the core processes that define our work with our library vendors, so this was an important topic for my internship. I have little background in approval plans so I enjoyed learning about how they are created and managed from the vendor’s side. It was particularly interesting to hear the challenges in sourcing books from the various European countries. I had naively assumed that European countries were similar in their book trade, but I learned that there are vast differences in publication infrastructures throughout Europe and that leads to very different approval processes for each country.

Unexpectedly, throughout the trip, I found out as much about Stanford as I did about the vendors for whom I worked. As I investigated approval plans, when I didn’t know the answers to the vendors’ questions, I sent emails to my Stanford colleagues and gradually built a better understanding of our own processes. How can we gain this broader insight into our own organizations without the goad of having to explain it to others? A good start would just be to map the flow of material and information through your organization and know where your work fits in. At first it felt dilettante for an e-resources librarian to spend so much time poking around into approval plans, but soon I began to consider how these approval workflows would translate into electronic books and how the publishing infrastructures in European countries would dictate the kinds of electronic content they could produce and thus the ways Stanford’s collection could develop.

People and Environment

The most enjoyable part of my internship was interacting with the people in each company. I got to know many of the staff members at Harrassowitz and Casalini, and learned how they see their organizations, their work environment, and their country’s contribution to the global library marketplace. Many of the staff members do not travel to international conferences, so I also provided them with a face for the Stanford Libraries and for libraries in the United States as a whole. I met the directors of both companies and understood better what types of personalities are leading these organizations.

Establishing relationships within these organizations helped me learn about our vendors’ environment. Conferences can be another good place to meet not just the sales representatives but a company’s executives or sometimes their technical staff and get a feel for their strengths and their personalities. The customer service staff that answer missing serial claims or questions about their online system are often the people in the company that know the most details about what problems libraries are experiencing in a particular arena and may see patterns that are not evident to others. One of the best parts for me about visiting Harrassowitz and Casalini was meeting the people who have been expertly handling our serials claims for years and put faces to each of their names.

My internship was a great way to gain insight into the needs and priorities of two companies that make up a significant part of Stanford’s ecosystem. With this background, I will be better prepared to collaborate with these companies, and more knowledgeable about the work processes for library vendors in general. Entering negotiations for services with an understanding of what each party wants and needs is a huge advantage.

There are other ways, however, to increase your understanding of your vendors’ work and environment. Whether by establishing relationships across their organization, learning the flow of information through your own institution so you are better prepared to see where there are chances for improvements in your work together, or by situating your requests within the spectrum of library requirements, in the end the effort will increase the efficiency and value of your work with your vendors.