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In thinking about some cheaper ways that a library could enhance its status as a customer, I drew on my experiences working in customer service for a book vendor, during which I worked with many staffers and librarians on a daily basis and also occasionally accompanied the sales staff on library visits. But most importantly, I asked sales reps for several major vendors what they wished librarians would do differently, or what some of their customers did especially well. I promised not to name names or quote anyone directly so that all could contribute without inhibition, so I want to make it clear at the outset that many of the ideas presented in this article came from others. Special thanks is due to them.

When Issuing an RFP

Make sure that your list of requirements is realistic. By all means, solicit the input of all library staff. But once a wish list is compiled, examine it with a judicious eye. Is the library actually ready (or will it soon be ready) to implement all of the services you’ve listed as “required”? Can they be ranked in importance? Remember: you don’t want to scare off the right vendor by asking for more than anyone can reasonably provide. You may find that those very vendors who say they can give you the world turn out to be the least reliable in the long run.

Make sure you give enough lead time. If you want good, careful responses to your RFP, allow at least a month between the time it’s issued and the due date.

Allow for negotiation of key points, especially discount. Recognize that a vendor will cite a discount in its response if required, but that face-to-face negotiations can sometimes result in adjustments. Don’t ever reject a proposal because of one point — if you’re sticking on one issue, make a phone call and see if it’s negotiable.

When Hosting Vendor Presentations

After the proposals have been analyzed, you’ll select several vendors to come and give presentations in person. When you invite vendors to come to your library and sell their services, you’re embarking on what amounts to a fairly elaborate mating ritual. The vendors come to present themselves, but also to get a sense of who you are and how your library works. It’s true that you have an advantage; if the vendor agrees to present, you can assume that you’re already considered a desirable customer. But that doesn’t mean you can’t blow it by being unprofessional. Here are a few tips: Only invite serious candidates. Don’t invite a vendor out of politeness. It does the vendor no good to go to the significant expense of a library presentation if there’s no real chance of winning the business. You might be required to invite a certain number of vendors, meaning that you have to bring in some who are less interesting, but insofar as it’s possible, limit your presentations to those being considered seriously.

Make sure that all of the library’s decision-makers are present. This is obvious. You can’t compare the candidates if you don’t attend all the presentations.

Allow some flexibility in presentation format and time allotted. You’ll need to impose some limits, of course, but make sure they’re reasonable and be willing to work with the people presenting. If they have special equipment needs they should let you know ahead of time; likewise if they want to take more time than you’ve indicated. But it wouldn’t hurt for you to call beforehand and make sure everyone’s expectations are still in sync, either.

Make sure there is adequate technical support on hand. Establish the presenters’ technical needs ahead of time. If you can’t meet those needs, make sure they know in advance so that they can make other arrangements. Once the technical parameters of the presentation have been established, make sure someone will be available to take care of the inevitable problems. No one — not you, not the vendor — wants to sit around in a conference room for half an hour while someone goes looking for help with the overhead projector.

After the Presentation

Once your decision is made, report it promptly to all contending vendors. This is a continued on page 69
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ing the same cities at approximately the same times and frequencies, are indistinguishable from each other. So airfares are the same from carrier to carrier, and the moment a low fare upstart airline enters a market, all the other airlines meet that lower fare. Passengers, sitting in a tube hurtling through the sky, care less whether they are on United or Ernie’s Airline, assuming the government is doing its job to monitor safety standards. Only frequent flyer programs make one airline more attractive than another, and that is why they are such powerful marketing tools. When the service is the same, the price will be as low as possible to produce a profit, which itself will be as low as the service supplier can bear. When frequent flyer programs differentiate these service suppliers, they exert enormous influence over both price and product loyalty because they provide a single, and valuable, buying focus to the service users.

Historically booksellers have offered relatively undifferentiated services to libraries. Service quality centered on fast delivery and low error rates. Once a bookseller achieved this quality, it joined the ranks of other high quality vendors and became indistinguishable. So price became the only measurable distinguishing characteristic, and price (discount) exerted a powerful influence because it was easily measured and easily justified as the determining factor in vendor choice. Discounts rose over time as vendors became more efficient, because price continued to be the most significant enticement for increased revenue. We have now reached a point where discounts are probably as high as they can go. Further significant increases can occur if efficiency makes another leap, but that seems unlikely. In fact, two factors may cause discounts to fall. These two factors are in a cause/effect relationship, so they seem to be fairly certain.

The cause factor is an increasing demand by libraries for vendors to supply a variety of new, non-traditional and valuable services, such as more sophisticated approval plans, more sophisticated standing order programs, more technical services and book processing options, a desire for more centralized supply sources (meaning more books from foreign countries), technology support both in the form of Websites and seamless integration with library systems, EDI, and the ability to support cooperative collection management within library consortia or among other variations of cooperating libraries. Any and all of these new services have the effect of reducing vendor efficiency. They require research and development by highly paid people, both professional librarians and systems development gurus. Some of the services, like book processing, have fixed per book labor costs. Others, like ILS integration and EDI, have high development costs. So it seems unlikely that vendors will be spending less on a per book basis over the next few years, which implies that the rise in discounts will end.

The effect factor is that the development of these new services will differentiate vendors, changing the perception among buyers of these services that all high quality vendors are essentially the same. This signals the end of book supply services as commodities. Now vendor services will be judged by a variety of measurable qualitative factors, all of which have real intrinsic value and will, therefore, result in different pricing. The supply of cataloging records will be judged and valued by catalogers; the integration of vendor-supplied data with the ILS will be judged and valued by systems librarians; the interactive usefulness of vendor databases mounted on Websites will be judged and valued by book selectors; the elegance of EDI will be judged and valued by acquisitions librarians; the ability to support cooperative collection management among collaborating libraries, inside and outside consortia, will be judged and valued by library administrators. Different value judgments, placed on different services, will result in different pricing. Librarians will pay more for certain new services that have real value to them, or that save them more than the cost of providing these services themselves. So the need for vendors to develop and supply new services for libraries will raise vendor costs, and the differentiated value of those services will either cost something themselves, or be sold to libraries in the form of lower discounts.

Fear of losing substantial revenue through the loss of a consortium-wide purchasing agreement, may, in the short term, result in higher discounts.

We have now reached a point where discounts are probably as high as they can go.

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