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Public Prayers — The Reverent Wishes and Desires of a Public Library Collection Development Librarian

by Rodger Smith (Collection Development Librarian, Charleston County Public Library) <smithr@ecpl.org>

It’s spring and I too have been overtaken by a desire to clean, straighten, and organize. I’m responsible for all materials, all formats, all levels, all branches, at our library which serves 300,000 citizens, stretched along ninety miles of the Atlantic coast. From board books for the infant to large print for the seniors, from learn-to-read book and audio kits to GRE preparation cedroms, from the World Almanac to the newest online database, it all passes through my door, leaving behind physical debris, confusion, chaos, and occasional despair. My office is a regular stop for staff looking for a good laugh, some comic relief. “Let’s go look at Rodger’s boxes. Let’s go see if any of Rodger’s piles have collapsed.” Sometimes I can laugh along. Sometimes I just snarl politely. (We Southerners are always polite.)

I have to admit, however, that it’s more than just sunshine and the scent of magnolias that has motivated me to get organized. Its time to plan next fiscal year’s materials budget. July 1 is fast approaching and our administration expects to see some orderly plans for spending the $2,000,000 allocated for materials. Most of the budget lines are easy calculations: an adjustment for inflation here, a minor readjustment of priorities there.

Over the past decade our materials budget has seen significant growth. Almost all budget lines have seen increases, even after adjustments for inflation. And while the percentage of our overall budget devoted to print materials has decreased to 77% this last year, even those lines have seen healthy increases. The lines for juvenile, young adult, and adult non-fiction have all received substantial increases.

The budget lines for audio-visual materials present more challenges. In the past year we have added both circulating DVDs and books on compact discs. I have bad dreams, not quite nightmares, about the future of all our a-v formats. Currently we have video users complaining about new feature films being available in DVD but not VHS. I worry that all our current format a-v collections will be made obsolete by Internet developments. Until then, I worry about the money! Where will we get the funds to support comprehensive spoken word collections in both audio-cassette and compact disc?

But it’s the electronic resources line that causes me to turn to prayer. Last year we spent 8% of our total materials budget on online products and CD-ROMs. Next year it will be no more than 10%. How can budgeting and spending only $166,000 to $200,000 be so difficult? The process leaves me feeling as if I’m trapped in a game of blind man’s bluff. I’m blindfolded and being taunted by our administration, the reference librarians, assisted vendors, and the occasional irate patron who finds her way to my door. Our administration wants a well-defined array of electronic resources that will demonstrate to the community our commitment to the future. They also want a fixed budget with no surprises. Our reference librarians want products that are easy to use and won’t add to their sense of electronic overload and Internet fatigue. Vendors not only our money, but our precious TIME: time to listen when they call, time to set-up trials, time to communicate URLs, usernames and passwords, time to try and explain why I don’t have the time to do it all. And our diverse patrons want to know why we can’t offer ready access to the specific electronic products they want NOW.

So, as I organize my office, eliminate some debris, re-organize my piles, and draw up a product specific electronic resource budget, these are my prayers:

1. Vendors, please be consistent and upfront about your pricing. If you’re offering introductory pricing, we need to know what the renewal cost will be. Please don’t cut prices just to get us to sign up. An unexpected substantial price increase can result in a cancellation no matter how valuable the product.

2. Vendors, please make online trials as easy as possible. Please use short, simple, reliable URLs. Please use simple username and password access as often as possible. I have sixteen facilities with sixteen managers and lots of interested reference librarians to inform every trial.

3. Baker & Taylor, Ingram, Brodart, and other vendors, please consider offering electronic products, as you do print and other media, in a convenient one-stop selection environment. I simply do not have the time to deal with so many separate vendors and publishers.

4. Administration, please realize that the electronic resource market is incredibly dynamic, with new technologies and products appearing every day. Committing every cent of our electronic budget the first of the fiscal year leaves us unable to respond to developments as the year progresses.

5. Reference librarians, please look beyond the homeless person demanding another 30 minutes of Internet chat and the irate entrepreneur desiring to print address labels for every business in the county. Help us develop an information strategy that effectively bridges traditional print sources and these new electronic sources.

6. Patrons, please be patient. This is all so new to us. And we simply do not have the resources to offer you every electronic resource available.

7. South Carolina State Legislature, please find the money to continue DISCUS, which provides every citizen of the state with access to key Gale, Grolier, and SIRS databases through state college, school and public libraries.

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