Biz of Acq-Brining Out the Dead: The Romance of Change in Librarianship

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Biz of Acq — Bringing Out the Dead: The Romance of Change in Librarianship

by Forrest E. Link (Northeastern Regional Manager, Midwest Library Service) <link@midwestls.com>

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Column Editor's Note: Constant change — technological, administrative, industrial — characterizes the working lives of most acquisitions professionals. Yet how many of these changes are truly innovative, and how many are producing useful results? In this month's column, Forrest Link of Midwest Library Service casts a cold eye on our current environment of change, and offers some provocative warnings and alternatives. — RR

In my role as an itinerant book salesman, one of my chief functions has always been necromancy, literally divining from the dead, or, as Katrina themed an earlier Charleston Conference, "Learning From our Mistakes." It is a part of my job to seek to improve the performance of my company by fixing our shortcomings and avoiding the errors of others. I have noticed along the way that our modern romance with novelty, be it technological or managerial, is so strong that we are willing to accept as new ideas and procedures which are not only not novel, but are, indeed, recycled and, in may cases, failed. The problem these days is that dead ideas, dead procedures, and, yes, even dead companies haven't the decency to stay that way. Now maybe I've spent too much time watching "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" with my fourteen-year-old daughter, but I'm thinking somebody on stake patrol is falling down on the job.

Acquisitions librarians with whom I visit, taxed enough by shrinking support staffs and endless re-engineering of their workflows, are now called upon to abandon professional gains. Serials librarians who invested careers in the one-time ultimate preservation medium, microfilm, are now trafficking in electrons. Catalogers who once prided themselves on tailoring their work to the needs of local patrons are being standardized into oblivion. Publishers who prided themselves on their unique scholarly or regional bent find themselves marginalized or sucked into the maw of giant media conglomerates. Booksellers who have traded on personalized service are becoming either casualties or niche players in a market dominated by dubious technologies and predatory pricing models.

We've seen all of this before: library or university administrators blindly scrambling after the next big thing, otherwise sensible and prudent businesspeople who have sudden and sometimes disastrous epiphanies regarding their business model, governmental bodies that see no difference between bidding on desks and document delivery. Just when we think we've learned a lesson, school starts again.

In the eighties and early nineties, monographic and serials acquisitions librarians

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strengthened their positions as discrete professional specialties, each worthy of the attention of a full-time librarian. Expertise was developed. Materials vendors were viewed as necessary adjuncts to the acquisitions process, but professional acquisitions were in control. Nowadays, particularly in the realm of monographs, we surviving vendors have gotten very good at what we do. So good, in fact, that in larger academic libraries most book buying is done on automatic pilot in the form of comprehensive, sometimes shelf-ready, gathering plans. At the same time, there has been a trend toward redirecting the acquisition of serials and monographs (and even electronic information) into the hands of a single worker, often not even a professional librarian. Progress has been made, then abandoned.

A recent article in the New Yorker, by Nicholson Baker, details the quest by serials and preservation librarians to convert decades, even centuries of aging periodicals and newspapers to microfilm. The promise of this conversion flubbed huge amounts of money to our profession and launched careers. Now some are having second thoughts regarding the collateral damage wrought by the change. As we approach the digitizing of our collections, with its intellectual and commercial implications and promises, capital

and careers are again being mobilized. I wonder if we might pause and reexamine the arguments surrounding the microfilm debate. Or is the allure of the new irresistible?

When I was taught cataloging in library school, much was made of the need to accommodate local peculiarities in subject headings and name authority control. Now, particularly in larger libraries, divergence from LC MARC records is regarded as unnecessary at best, extremely troublesome at worst. The drive toward standardization and economy has left us with a bland, but very flexible vanilla record.

The LC MARC record, sometimes regarded as a frame on which to drape local embellishments, is now, in some settings, an inviolable document.

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gested, may not necessarily be so much among the remaining traditional jobbers, but between the forces of full-service mediation and disintermediation, that is, between price-is-the-only-factor internet suppliers and traditional, relationship-based book sellers. This change is largely unprecedented and our successors will be left to learn from our mistakes.

So we are all in this profession awash in oceans of change. What I propose is a sort of transitional triage. We need to identify the purpose of internal change (beyond its use as an antidote to ennui) and we need to control our love of novelty. Two of the most common justifications for change are to reduce work and to save money. I fear that in many cases neither goal is achieved. And I fear that the glamour of the prospect of fiscal savings or work reduction can blind us to objective historical analysis. Libraries and businesses should be as forthcoming about their failures and near misses as their successes. Maybe then we would recognize the dead — and let them rest.

Endnote

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