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iPod Shuffle Winners from the ERM Systems Usage Trends Survey

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eBooks are an example of this. netLibrary had some initial, enthusiastic adopters, but many libraries were unsure of how to integrate eBooks into their collections (many still are). Early reader devices also met with a tepid response (remember the RocketBook?). Although electronic resources now represent a significant part of collections, formats are not yet mature. Whether or not librarians embrace the current generation of readers, e.g., the Kindle or the Sony eBook Reader, remains to be seen. It’s also unclear how the eBook providers will fare — inconsistent publisher coverage, awkward user interfaces, limits on simultaneous use and pricing issues may well prevent their sustainability.

This brings me to another point: vendors to no small degree must compete with their suppliers (there are many, many industries where this is not true). Hence another challenge for providers of digital content (e-journals, databases, etc.) is how to deal with publishers. If enough major publishers, say, the top 15 or 20 STM houses and university presses, aggressively and successfully market their own packages directly to libraries, the remaining content, be it from smaller academic presses or grey literature in general may be too expensive or too impractical to handle. Margin erosion can be dramatic indeed.

After the demise of the Richard Abel Company there was a tendency among libraries to avoid consolidating too much business with any single book vendor. Librarians would often say they didn’t want “all the eggs in one basket.” This gradually changed, and consolidation with fewer suppliers became more common, particularly as integration of workflows with vendor systems, and consortial buying became more widespread.

This began to swing back in the 90s. The emergence of Web-based companies like Amazon and Alibris provided libraries with alternatives, offering greater speed and more choices of condition and price. The result for the “traditional,” brick-and-mortar wholesalers was loss of market share, quite often of mainstream trade publishers. Also, as budgets continued to decline, many libraries scaled back their approval plans and re-visited their firm order procedures.

On the other hand, the evolution of digital content and cheaper storage offered opportunities for new ventures, such as the “solutions” folks — by whom I mean Serials Solutions and Syndetics, as a couple of examples. Moving forward, we can expect cloud computing and open source to have an increasing impact in the market.

Another shift is demographic. A lot of people were drawn to librarianship and to the vendor world during the expansion of the 1960s. Many of us are retiring or changing direction in our careers.

What might we conclude from this? Vendors come and vendors go; while some known companies will endure, others will be absorbed or simply go out of business. Hence the title of this month’s column: the dinosaurs will disappear. Those life forms capable of adaptation or migration will live on. New products, new constituencies, and new librarians and vendors will shape the new and emerging opportunities to come. Stay tuned!