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Building Library Collections in the 21st Century-
The Finer Points of Being an Acquisitions Librarian/Library Liaison

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The Grass is Often Greener — Newbie

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In July of 2010, after a period of unemployment occasioned by the corporate buyout of my former employer, I had the good fortune to be hired by a college library untroubled by my unconventional resume and imaginative enough to see the advantages of bringing a former sales rep into academia. After nearly thirty years as a commercial traveler for three different book vendors, I had learned a thing or two about the industry and the folks who inhabit it, and I was about to use that experience in the service of The College of New Jersey.

My plan in this series of articles is to reflect on my transition from an itinerant peddler to a stationary buyer, hoping to inform and even reassure others contemplating a move either to or from the commercial sector.

The Learning Curve

Despite occasional claims and experiences to the contrary, the vendor/librarian divide is not Manichean. It’s not predator/prey; it’s not just about buying and selling stuff. Players on both sides of the desk share a common focus and a common goal: to serve their organizations by facilitating the flow of information. But from the start of my involvement with TCNJ, I found the path to that goal decidedly unfamiliar. I was in a new culture.

The interview for my previous job at Blackwell was essentially a conversation with a sales manager in a coffee shop. Colleges, and I suspect public colleges in particular, take a rather different approach. The committee charged with filling my position at TCNJ was scrupulously formal and extraordinarily thorough. The process was carefully scripted and meticulously fair. I was impressed and a bit intimidated. Even more foreign to me, when I was offered the job I was given a contract and put on the tenure track.

The nagging worry of job security, ever present in the vendor world, would soon be replaced by other anxieties.

My first days at TCNJ were a blur of new employee paperwork and logistics. I got a decal to park my car legally; I was issued my college ID. Easy stuff. Then I was introduced to budgets and accounting. Not so easy. I always understood fund accounting in a general way. I knew libraries had budget lines for books and serials and electronics and supplies and such. I knew that finer distinctions sometimes existed and that these distinctions were valuable as a way of approaching approval profiling, but I confess my main interest in budgets as a vendor rep was whether or not a customer had one. In vendor land, we never much cared how our bills were paid. That is, we never much cared what pot of money our payment came from. We were, however, pretty keen on getting these payments in a reasonable amount of time. But here in library land, I’m coming to appreciate the profound concern we have with allocating and tracking funds.

The reasons for this concern are multitude. First, and foremost, is the need for fiscal accountability to the institution and, in my library’s case, to the state. Beyond this, as I’ve long known, but only recently internalized, every dollar allocated and spent represents a decision and usually a tradeoff. Do we buy this journal in electronic format, hard copy or both? Do we subscribe to this database because a professor wants it for her own research instead of another database that’s part of a frequent class project? Do we buy a new fax machine to replace a broken one or do more work if people share the working ones? My role right now in acquisitions is to use my experience and contacts to find the best price for our options and present these dollar costs to those making the decisions.

The mention of decision makers leads inevitably to the topic of office politics. As a vendor rep posted away from corporate headquarters, I was pretty much a non-player in bureaucratic intrigue. I generally had good bosses who kept me out of trouble. But because I spent so much time in so many different libraries, I had occasion to see how destructive a hostile environment can be. In my pursuit of a new job, one factor of importance to me was finding not just a stimulating, but a congenial workplace. I wanted colleagues, not competitors and made a point of investigating the culture of TCNJ. I was told (and have since verified) that TCNJ is a generally happy, very busy, and very productive place. I have found the people here to be not simply supportive, but downright nurturing.

The Commute

A final observation as I begin this new life: commuting is boring! In vendor land, I drove (or flew) some rather long distances. I faced traffic miseries and the usual vicissitudes of that life. But the destinations changed all the time and each stop was a goal, a milestone along the way. I saw beautiful mountains in Vermont from country roads and slums in the Bronx from a jammed expressway — but not everyday. Now it’s pretty much the same time and the same route daily. Some of the other cars are beginning to look familiar. I’m investigating audio books (any recommendations?) and already fantasize about moving.

As I write this, I’ve been a practicing librarian again for just under two months — still a newbie, I’m told. I know there are more revelations to come. Stay tuned.

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — The Finer Points of Being an Acquisitions Librarian/Library Liaison

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First off, I am an Acquisitions Librarian. However, I am one who also has a foot solidly placed in Public Services. I am also a library liaison for two departments — Art History and Art, and Modern Languages and Literatures. I would like to say I wear two hats, but I really get tired of using that metaphor. I think I do a good job in both these areas, Acquisitions and Subject Librarianship, and each helps me do a better job in the other.

I’m sure this is the case at smaller colleges, that is Technical Services people also handling the liaison duties. In fact I know it is so. But I am at a medium-size university where this kind of thing is less common. There was a trend a number of years ago where it was greatly encouraged to get “back room” librarians out on the reference desk and handling collection development for a subject area. I think that trend passed, if I am not mistaken. Being a liaison is not something you can really do as a part-time thing, or conceive of it as that — and I don’t. Many of the Reference/collection development Librarians do several areas, and have special responsibility for a library program, like library instruction, so I feel I’m not very different than that.

How did I get in this situation? First of all, I did have some academic knowledge of both areas, no degree in art history but some academic preparation and ongoing learning. I do have a degree in Germanic Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature which stands me well in good standing in the Modern Languages Department. In the Modern Languages Department and doing collection development. There was a period too when we lost a lot of humanities librarians at the library. Those who had left had handled continued on page 81
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I attend the reference meetings and the collection development meetings at the library. The collection development ones I would attend anyway as the Head of Acquisitions. Another case of wearing two hats — hard to break the habit of using that phrase. The reference meetings keep me up-to-date on new databases and services that might be of use to my faculty, and I can pass all that relevant information along.

I've got to say that the best parts of the job of Library Liaison are the relationships I build with faculty and students. Whatever you can do for them, render a service, get a book or video in on time, help with building the collection in their area of research, or alerting them to new books and databases that come in of relevance to them, you get a good payoff. In Technical Services we are often shielded from that direct contact and the heartwarming praise that is so frequently the reaction of those we help is the greatest benefit of being a Public Services Librarian.

Robin: Steve, for this month's column we wanted to discuss the end user and specifically if and how libraries should aim to make visible the work and cost of providing resources. This has been on my mind recently because of the diverse approaches I see in working with libraries at EBL. I was hoping you could start us off by describing the approach at UF and your particular views.

Steve: I'll use a story that occurred this past summer which might illustrate the problem of visibility for libraries. One of my close colleagues was ailing and I went to visit him at the UF Health Sciences Center hospital. He told me an interesting interaction he had with his cardiologist, who happened to be an avid researcher involved in many grant projects. When the cardiologist found out my colleague was a library professional they got to talking about libraries, online resources, and research; at one point the doctor said something about how much he was paying for journal articles from one of the leading publishers. My colleague replied, "But why are you paying for those articles? You can access that publisher's journals through the library." The doctor was stunned and said something to the effect of "Why didn't they tell me?" When word of this conversation got back to the Health Sciences Center Library the librarians there responded, "But we do tell our faculty and researchers about the resources available through the library — all the time." To be fair, the librarians at UF do meet regularly with faculty at departmental meetings; offer ongoing classroom instruction and Web tutorials; and give presentations at faculty orientations and other campus functions. This story of the cardiologist is hardly an isolated case, so despite all these efforts, clearly the library does not market itself as effectively as it should.

Robin: So, are you saying that marketing and discoverability go hand-in-hand? And, do you mean marketing should focus on the resources or that marketing should focus on the library and the resources it makes available? My apologies for the semantic exercise, but I do think it is an important difference. Your story also brought to mind the Ithaka S&R 2009 Faculty Survey; it found that scientists were the least likely to use library specific discovery portals for research. This was presented in the context of an overall decline in usage of library-specific discovery points across faculty. So, if that's the case, how do you get the resources in front of them and how do you make sure they know the library is the provider?

Steve: Yes, marketing and discoverability must go hand-in-hand, or better still be joined at the hip! Maybe that wasn't true for libraries in the pre-Web days, when walk-in patrons knew who was responsible for providing the library materials — you were in the library, duh! Discoverability then meant finding sources in the card catalog, the vertical files, or shelf browsing. It's all changed now with the online environment. Half the time users are unsure where the resources are coming from or who is providing them, until they have to fork over money to pay for something. Our cardiologist recognized that the journal articles he was paying for came from the publisher, his credit card statement reminded him of that; but library marketing fell through because he didn't realize he could go through the library portal and access those same journals for free. In addition to marketing themselves and the resources they offer, academic libraries must make clear how the library is responsible for providing many of the online journals that users are accessing, and that these online resources require a large budget. Sometimes it seems that the administration and faculty don't really recognize just how much of their university libraries' budgets are spent on paying for online resources and journal packages. Of course, our cardiologist has a better idea, because he has personal experience in paying for articles individually for a long period of time — although I'm sure he can afford it. So my answer to your question is this: the marketing should focus on the library and the resources it makes available but also on the expense. Heck, why not brand each item but also state what every item costs, in big flashing neon lights if that's what it takes: "this journal article is brought to you by the good folks at the UF Library and would have cost you $37.50." You know, like PBS does, only with a price tag.

Robin: Great idea, Steve. Maybe you could also incorporate a couple drives per year. Users could still access resources, but you would have a librarian standing by explaining the ins and outs of obtaining and maintaining that resource; always gets me with NPR. But, seriously, given the importance and the library's role as buyer and organizer of an institution's research materials, what are your thoughts on publishers and content producers skipping the library, marketing and selling directly to faculty and students?

Steve: Jeeze Robin, I feel like I'm at an interview with all the questions you're throwing at me ... just don't ask me to list my strengths and weaknesses. I don't have the slightest problem with content being sold directly to the faculty and students — why would librarians have a problem with that? Let's return to our favorite M.D., the cardiologist and his direct and out-of-pocket purchase of a publisher's content. The only problem I had with that acquisitions model is he was wasting his money when he could have received the content through the library portal for free. But if a UF person wants to purchase content directly from a publisher let him or her do so; I would hope that he or she checked to see that it was content not already available to them via the library. By the way, I love the idea of the NPR telethon. Perhaps we can have a has-been, big name celebrity perform while we beat the drum to “support your local library.”

Robin: I think quite a few librarians would have a problem with that, but let me elaborate and draw from a recent article Rick Anderson of University of Utah contributed to Edacause Review. “If I Were a Scholarly Publisher.” Rick described the four survival options he sees as available to scholarly publishers as they continued on page 83