December 2014

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Not Good at What They Do

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**Recommended Citation**

Nardini, Bob (2011) "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Not Good at What They Do," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 44. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5821](https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5821)

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he other day while minding my business walking down one of the long white hall-
ways of Ingram’s “Building 14” where I work in La Vergne, Tennessee, I overheard a
conversation in one of the offices as I passed by. Someone was describing someone else as
being “good at what they do.”

That common phrase has always struck me as a little odd. Mainly since you can’t be good
at what you don’t do. Sometimes I’ve heard the phrase used as a kind of backhand semi-
compliment, to mean that someone is indeed good at something they do, but according to
tone and context, the unspoken message is that they are not so good at other things they
do. But other times it’s meant as an out-and-
out compliment, possibly expressed as “good
at what they do,” with the emphasis, meaning
either that someone is good at everything they
do, or a notch down, that they are only good
at part of what they do.

So to one degree or another, my Ingram
colleagues were saying something at least
mildly positive.

All this reminded me of a program I attended
at this past ALA conference in San Diego. There
were four well-known speakers. Their topic was
“Is Selection Dead?” A lot of people must have
wanted to find out, since the program drew a
full house in a large room, SRO in fact. Speaker
after speaker said that the prognosis isn’t good
for selection in academic libraries, that the pulse
is weak. Selection is in its “twilight,” the job of
selectors has “morphed” — those were among
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to fields like sociology, and her emphasis on
mixed-income housing influences economic
study. Academic libraries may very well
retain multiple copies of this canonical work.
It has remained relevant to the undergraduate
curriculum, as well as to the general public,
for the last fifty years and will likely remain
fundamental for the next fifty.

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Endnotes

1. Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of
Great American Cities. New York: Random
House, 1961.*

Jacobs Already.” Wall Street Journal. 29
*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a
title selected for Resources for College
Libraries.

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Issues in Vendor/Library Relations —
Not Good at What They Do

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...ago, the most

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Against the Grain / April 2011

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appointment that day. Some could be arrogant, obtuse, dismissive. Some would have as little as possible to do with you, as the vendor rep. Others would launch impromptu lectures on some point of minutiae that would carry on and on and leave you, or leave an entire roomful, weary with boredom.

But more often these selectors were delightful, engaged with their subject, engaged with the library and the university, and engaged with you as the vendor making rounds. You could learn a lot from them, about subject areas, about publishers, about the book trade. They might wear their learning lightly or they might be bombastic about it, they might be businesslike or they might be witty and sarcastic, they might be charming or they might be peculiar, they might be organized or they might be in perpetual disarray, but they knew their stuff. These selectors were good at what they did.

Then book selection changed into a part-time job, for selectors who might have little or no background in their assigned areas and whose real focus at work was somewhere else than collection development. Their job was not to build great collections, but to spend the book money they had — which was often a small amount — as wisely as they could manage to, while engaging more of themselves with the world developing so quickly around them. The selectors who remained book-oriented began to seem out-of-step. When administrators began to look at how often books circulated, a page had certainly turned.

Today may libraries are focused on turning over some selection duties, at least, to their patrons. Occasionally in these earlier days members of the teaching faculty were involved closely enough in book selection that you encountered these patrons face-to-face. There was one fast-growing new state university where I went every year. It was not well known nationally, but even so was an up-and-coming institution, already a large one, with faculty who came from everywhere. At this school there was a member of the philosophy department who had the librarians more or less terrorized. I would meet with her alone, since everyone else would clear out when her session came around on the agenda.

Her Ph.D. was from an elite national university and her mission at this new institution seemed to be to do everything in her power to transform what she could at her sprawling new campus into a respectable home. The library was within her reach, and she was so controlling there that for several years, I had things set up so that we mailed weekly paper selection slips to her house in a nearby suburb.

One year the budget news looked grim, and the focus of my visit was to cut the size of the approval plan. She and I sat across from one another at one end of a long rectangular table in a conference room which of course we had to ourselves. At one point I suggested that books from a certain publisher, one which I knew was prestigious, were of consistent enough quality that they might remain in the approval plan without any change.

She stiffened, sat up, dropped whatever thought she’d had, and looked straight at me, more engaged with me at that moment in fact than I’d ever seen. “I’m one of the leading philosophers in the country,” she told me, “and I know which publishers are appropriate for this library.” Of course I backed off, but wondered to myself why it was, if she was one of the leading philosophers in the country, that she was spending her time to meet with me.

When I returned to the office — this was the pre-Web era — from curiosity I looked her up in the “Author” volumes of Books in Print. To my surprise, she had two or three books to her credit, including one from an Ivy League university press. If that meant anything at all, she was one of the leading philosophers in the country.

If it had been up to me to pick selectors, I’d have taken Kurtz any day. 🙁