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What Collaboration Means to Me

Perspectives on Library/Vendor Collaboration

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Abstract

There is much librarians and content providers can do to challenge the narrative that we are constantly at odds, both within the legacy relationship of buyer and seller and within new opportunities for collaboration. This column offers insights and practical suggestions for enriched relationships and future collaboration from the unique perspective of working for and with both vendors and libraries.

Keywords: vendors, publishers, librarians, working relationships

I will begin with an embarrassing anecdote and get that out of the way. I was fortunate to land a job with a large book vendor after completing my Master of Science in Library and Information Studies (MLIS) in 2010. My role was in collection development consulting; once sales were made, I assisted librarians in crafting and maintaining acquisitions plans. I traveled to dozens of libraries in the United States and Canada and, though the pressures were significant, I enjoyed it. One of my favorite parts of the job in that first year was hosting dinners at conferences. Not only did the whole thing feel grand and lavish after my salad days in college, but it was heartening to share a meal with information professionals I held in high regard.

Approximately six months into the job, I had co-hosted a dinner with one of my supervisors at a major library conference. One guest, a librarian from a college I had visited and with whom I had had a positive working relationship, spent the dinner berating my supervisor about everything that was wrong with our company. This librarian made it clear that they did not feel valued and that, because I was a representative of this company, I was part of the problem. No other conversation was had and the other guests

sat in awkward unease. For my part, I did what any sturdy, self-possessed young professional would do: I cried at the dinner table in front of my superior and at least ten librarians. I tried to keep it discreet, but I will never forget that feeling of shame, mortification and anger. Who did they think they were, ambushing me like that at a nice dinner? Why had they never brought up these issues when I visited? I thought they liked me! Was this the end of my career?

Nearly eight years later, I know the answer to the last question. My career did not end. In fact, my superior and I received an outpouring of encouragement from our dinner guests and apologies for the berating librarian. I can now tell this story without (well, almost) embarrassment.

What does this story have to do with librarian and vendor collaboration? A modest amount of research has been conducted into what makes for a fruitful vendor/library relationship. Some publications, like *Collaborative Librarianship* and *Against the Grain*, encourage articles that highlight collaboration across industries; conferences like the [Charleston Conference](#) intentionally create room for librarians and content providers to



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converse as colleagues and peers. In 2017, the North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) conference included a session on librarian and vendor relationships in the serials business, focusing on the practicalities we are not taught in library school. Also in 2017, the Electronic Resources and Libraries (ER&L) conference included a gamified session in the style of Family Feud that addressed biases and assumptions that affect the librarian/vendor relationship. Unfortunately, a real-world treatment of successful library/vendor does not exist. Vendors and librarians tend to operate comfortably in our roles as seller and buyer, guessing at each other's motives and goals and hoping we are making the right decisions at the right times.

Assumptions

I have drawn these assumptions from my own experiences and real conversations. They are not pretty, but they exist, and on some level, they drive our interactions.

Assumptions librarians make in regard to vendors: Vendors only care about making money. They are motivated by greed. They do not invest time/money/energy into developing good products and services. They develop products without real user input. Once they have made a sale, they no longer care about us. They are out of touch with what libraries really need and want. They do not know anything about our collections or how libraries work. They do not know anything about our jobs.

Assumptions vendors make in regard to librarians: Librarians expect to get everything they want for cheap or for free. They are out of touch with modern market forces. They do not understand what goes into maintaining our business model and the pressures we are under. They are not willing to take risks and innovate. They have money to spend but they do not know how to spend it strategically. They do not know anything about how publishing and sales really

work. They do not know anything about our jobs.

The parallels are obvious. Vendors and librarians fill in the blanks about each other, because they do not know the other's point of view. We interact with each other based on these assumptions and we set the stage for opposition. The popular – though mostly inaccurate – narrative is that we are constantly at odds. We librarians working in collection development and acquisitions are the severest disseminators of this tale. We must commit to a narrative that more accurately and fairly represents our real experiences. We must revise the story so that it is clear we work within different spheres of the same industry, both leveraging partnerships in order to succeed, thrive, and pay our bills.

We can achieve a revised narrative, both within the legacy relationship of buyer and seller and within new opportunities for collaboration. I offer insights and practical suggestions for enriched relationships and future collaboration from the unique perspective of working for and with both vendors and libraries.

Librarian/Vendor Relationships

To clarify, I refer to relationships in the traditional sense, through which librarians pay vendors in exchange for products and services. Here are ways librarians and vendors can cultivate a successful relationship:

- Share expectations as soon as possible, preferably before your first in-person meeting. Communication preferences are crucial. Do you prefer phone calls or emails, or a blend of both depending on the nature of the information? How often do you want to hear about new offers and products (if at all)? I recently went through the lengthy process of dismantling a “big deal” journal package with a major publisher. A myriad of moving parts exist to this negotiation that required



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frequent contact between myself, and the publisher representative. Frustration arose over the lack of response to my email questions, but after talking with my publisher representative, I discovered that he was not responding because he was awaiting answers to my questions and did not want to bother me. The story I told myself was that he was ignoring me. I asserted that I would like to receive brief status update emails frequently during the negotiation process, even if nothing had changed. As the result of communicating my preferences, our relationship improved greatly.

- If librarians have the resources, they should, create a web page with basic institutional information to share with vendors. See these examples from [Columbia University](#) and [Stanford University](#). At Reed College, we have created a page on our internal wiki with a template for emailing vendors prior to on-campus visits. The wiki includes detailed instructions: parking, directions to campus, and where we will meet in the library. Vendors can create a wiki as well. Your target sales audience may not only include librarians; therefore, offer information on your website tailored to an academic library audience.
- Before your (vendors or librarians) first meeting, whether on campus, at a conference, or elsewhere, agree on an agenda and expectations and *stick to them* within reason. Librarians, do not tell your vendor representative that you want to learn about new products if you only need to discuss complex problems with your account. Vendors, do not set up a casual visit and then arrive with a pantheon of executives who want to talk sales. Librarians, let your vendor know who will be joining your meeting so they can plan for their audience. If plans change, notify

each other. No one appreciates an ambush.

- At the meeting, share your goals and be honest. Librarians and vendors both should be candid about what they want to achieve with this relationship. Librarians, are you making collection development decisions with an eye toward a strategic plan, either at the library or institution level? Vendors, does your company operate under a driving mission or strategic focus?
- Do your homework. Vendors, research the institution and the library you are visiting. Imagine you are going to a job interview at the library and familiarize yourself with their guiding principles and organizational structure. Librarians, know your own collections. Unless you are very new to your position when meeting with a vendor, you should know more about the gaps in and contents of your collections than your vendor representative does.
- Vendors, be prepared to explain your corporate structure. Is there a parent company that owns yours? How does your company fit into the bigger picture? If your library clients will need to contact different people within your company for different needs, provide a contact sheet. Librarians, share the details of your organizational structure and your acquisitions timeline. What is your preferred process for conducting trials? How does the timeline of your fiscal year affect ordering decisions?
- Librarians, do not be afraid to ask how your vendors arrive at pricing structures. Do they calculate full time enrollment? Is it based on Carnegie Classification? What about discounts for current spend? Vendors, be open with this information. Do not be afraid to ask questions.
- Librarians, do not use vendor meetings as an opportunity to air dirty library laundry



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or to have passive-aggressive arguments with each other. Save that for the conference dinners (I jest).

- Be willing to have difficult conversations. If the relationship is not working as well as expected, address it as quickly as possible. While some issues are best resolved through in-person meetings, do not save up a year's worth of grievances and then unload them all at once. Conversely, do not forget that the ongoing librarian/vendor relationship is not only in operation during times of crisis. Assess products and services regularly, and share positive feedback and success stories.
- Vendors, make use of social and emotional intelligence to gauge how best to communicate with each library partner. One librarian might benefit from several minutes of small talk before getting down to business, while another might respond best by avoiding small talk entirely.
- Set clear expectations for post-meeting follow up. Determine who is responsible for action items and follow up with them in a timely manner. Librarians, recognize that the vendor representative who visits your library and develops a relationship with you may not be the person with all the answers.
- Work together to modernize license agreements. Attitudes toward price confidentiality, interlibrary loan allowance, and perpetual archiving are changing as the nature of information sharing changes, therefore, license agreements must evolve with the times. Librarians, honor your license agreements. Negotiate for optimal terms, but once you have signed it, respect it.
- Enrich your relationship by evaluating it regularly. Look beyond evaluating products and services to evaluate the librarian/vendor partnership itself. Have you hired new staff recently? Do you have a

new strategic focus? Does it make sense to review your account structure?

- Even satisfying relationships can end, and we should all strive for amicable partings. Librarians, be honest and clear in explaining why your relationship with a vendor is ending and part on a positive note. Vendors, do not take it personally. Always leave the door open. Career paths can diverge in unexpected ways; you never know who you will be working with (and for) in the future.
- Keep in mind that you do not have to like each other to have a successful relationship. I value my vendor relationships and am honored to count vendors among my friends, but friendship is not a vital ingredient in the vendor/librarian partnership. Do not let personal distaste drive professional decisions. Positive working relationships are not always feasible or even necessary. What is necessary is that everyone sets realistic expectations and then delivers on those expectations in a respectful way.

Librarian/Vendor Collaboration

Librarians and vendors have opportunities to collaborate beyond the traditional sales relationship, working together to achieve shared goals and outcomes. Here are ways we can collaborate intentionally as peers and as development partners:

- Expand our hiring pools. Librarians, be open to hiring vendors; vendors, be open to hiring librarians. When I was offered my first position with the large book vendor, I was counseled against accepting it by well-meaning colleagues in my MLIS program. They thought it would be near-impossible for me to find a position in a library after working on the vendor side. Fortunately, this was not the reality. Libraries and vendors are both casting



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wider nets and are discovering the value of hiring from the “other side”.

- Vendors, look for opportunities to collaborate with MLIS programs. Offer to present to student library association chapters. Many library and information studies students have no idea that they can pursue careers outside a physical library. Offer paid internships or paid fellowships for early-career librarians and library students beyond travel grants to conferences. These actions will help to cultivate a positive image of vendors and publishers before a working relationship begins.
- We must look outside of our immediate communities for professional development opportunities. Consider adding a blend of librarian and vendor perspectives when developing conference presentations and panel discussions. Say yes to invited panels that include a mix of librarians and vendors. Collaborate on articles and whitepapers. Edit each other’s work. Vendors, provide librarians opportunities to speak at your general sales meetings and offer honorarium for opinions and input. Establish librarian boards where the librarians are not “sold” new products but allowed to present topics relevant to your product base. Librarians, if you author an article or book chapter in which you mention a specific product or service, ask a trusted vendor partner to look it over and share their thoughts.
- Serve on professional committees together or propose a new committee that includes both librarians and vendors. For example, the Science and Technology Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL/STS) supports a [Publisher/Vendor Relations Discussion Group](#) comprised of both librarians and vendors who work in science and technology. ALCTS also has a publisher/vendor/library relations interest group.
- Allow yourself to be open to new opportunities. Librarians, we are all busy, but if we delete those vendor emails without reading them or say no to requests for meetings, we are sending the message that we do not want to be part of the conversation. Did your vendor tell you about a new product or service? Volunteer to beta test for a small fee. Is a primary source vendor developing new archival collections in your areas of expertise? Provide consultation in exchange for an extended trial. Say yes to serving on vendor advisory boards and user groups but encourage compensation for your expertise. Librarians, if your institution does not allow you to accept honoraria or payment for such services, ask for the donation of funds to your charity or nonprofit of choice. You will undoubtedly learn more about the inner workings of the company and what goes into developing and maintaining functional resources. As a result, you may feel more invested in your mutual success.
- If you are able to travel to conferences, attend sessions presented by organizations like the National Information Standards Organization (NISO) and ask how you can get involved. NISO’s [standards committees](#) are an excellent example of how librarians and content providers collaborate to achieve mutually-beneficial professional standards and recommendations.
- Librarians, take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with systems providers on enhancement work within your ILS and other library systems. Systems providers rely on libraries to test enhancements in their live environments, both locally and at the consortia level. Ask your systems provider or consortium manager how you can get involved. Not only will you benefit from knowing what kinds of



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enhancements are coming down the pipeline, you will also strengthen your role as an active systems development partner and not just a passive end-user.

- Vendors, do not let the sale signal the end of the relationship. If you offer post-sales services like curricular alignment and collections analysis, make sure librarians are aware of them and be able to articulate their benefit. Achieving success in curricular alignment can lead to opportunities for collaboration through conference presentations and publications.
- Vendors and librarians, look to your consortia. Library consortia are increasingly reaching beyond the legacy practices of acquiring shared content toward opportunities for innovative collaboration through shared print storage, digital preservation, networked systems, and dissemination of unique and local content. The ability to collaborate with vendors who have product development experience can make all the difference.

Concluding Thoughts

Although the nature of the librarian/vendor relationship is professional, it is important to remember that emotions are involved, particularly those spurred by the knowledge of no job is secure. Librarians increasingly do the work of publishers and content providers by managing and hosting their own publications and local digital collections and repositories. Some vendors are experimenting with going straight to the source—faculty and researchers—to develop sales relationships. We believe we each provide a service that cannot be fulfilled otherwise, but this will not always be the case. This knowledge can unearth emotions that affect the vendor/librarian relationship in overt and covert ways.

Librarians and vendors will not work better together unless we work together in the first place. This partnership requires intent and action.

Communication and experience are effective remedies against erroneous assumptions. This does not mean that the narrative of polarization will disappear anytime soon. Personal elements are inherent in business relationships, particularly when non-profit and for-profit worlds converge. Feelings are involved and they can be hurt. Sometimes this means you damage a professional relationship. Sometimes you cry at a conference dinner. But, what you start to learn through partnership and collaboration is that vendors and librarians want the same thing: for libraries to succeed. We just have different ways of telling our story.

