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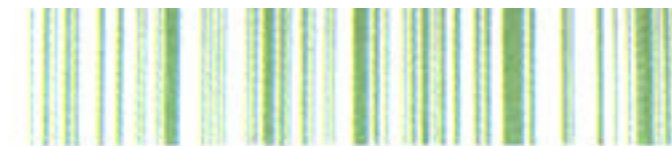*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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ONLINE DATABASES
Working for a Vendor
By Carol Tenopir

A COMBINATION OF CONTENT creators, online vendors, other intermediaries, and librarians work to bring online information sources to end users. Although these interconnected parts are sometimes adversarial, the current information marketplace relies on interaction among them all. Have you ever wondered what it is like on the other side? Recently I interviewed three veterans who started out in libraries.

Karalyn Kavanaugh has been account services manager of EBSCO Information Services for 13 years. Previously, she worked at the University of Cincinnati libraries while pursuing her MLS. Allison Evatt was a middle school teacher before going after her MLS and then was a special librarian until she joined Dialog as an MLIS consultant in the Graduate Education Program several years ago. Anne Caputo had paraprofessional experience and had been a high school teacher, but a job with Lockheed as part of its brand new Dialog project was her best offer after library school. Caputo's work for Dialog stretched into 22 years. For the past seven, she has been director of the knowledge and learning programs at Factiva.

What makes a good rep?

Most MLS-degreed employees at vendors work in either content acquisition or customer service and marketing. In addition to knowing their own products (and the competition's), they need to know how information products are created and the intricacies of library technical procedures. They spend quite a bit of time teaching—about the details of their products and online information retrieval in general—so it is not surprising that many reps have teaching and library experience.

Vendors are liaisons among content providers, the vendor, and librarians—a task that requires diplomacy as well as solid communication skills. All three of my interviewees mention the need for good writing and speaking capabilities, in addition to self-confidence, enthusiasm, and a talent for being self-motivated and organized.

Love to travel

The best part of these jobs might also be considered the worst—all three are on the road a great deal. Evatt now serves as Dialog liaison for all of the LIS schools in North America—visiting many and providing information and learning materials to all. She works from her home in Atlanta and travels several times a month. Kavanaugh also works from home when she isn't traveling—which is about one-third of her time, visiting libraries in Georgia and South Carolina. Both also attend national and regional conferences. In addition, Caputo speaks at SLA chapter meetings, visits regularly with colleagues in both the New Jersey and London Factiva offices, and meets with content providers. None works a regular workday. Many weeks require more than 40 hours, in addition to travel time.

No typical day

One of the most appealing parts of being a rep is that it is hard to pin down a typical workday. They work independently but in close collaboration with the "home" office; they work with librarians but in all types, and sizes, of libraries; they have some routine responsibilities such as preparing learning materials but must fit those into schedules that change. Every week is different.

Corporate librarians know something of the work environment that vendor representatives face—uncertainties from mergers, downsizing, or restructuring—and extreme pressure to develop new products and services that will compete in a changing world. Vendor reps deal with unsettled budgets from multiple sides—within their own organizations, within content provider organizations, and within their client libraries. Although they are shy about mentioning it, this high pressure and somewhat erratic work environment is typically compensated for by salaries higher than those of most librarians.

What to know

Their advice to LIS students? Caputo recommends that "students acquire as much knowledge about how retrieval systems work, about acquisition and content, and, if interested in taxonomies and indexing, take a cataloging class. Reference and marketing/management courses are also valuable." Evatt echoes the importance of information retrieval and database classes, in addition to management expertise. Kavanaugh says consider taking courses in "instructional and presentation methods, library management and collection management, knowledge management, information access and retrieval, and technology." Her advice rings true for those in libraries as well: "The most important element is to have a keen understanding of new technologies and electronic resources; they are always changing, so you never stop learning!"

All report that keeping current with the complex online choices now available is a challenge. These women have seen major changes in information products and user expectations. Vendor reps like these three, who work closely with librarians, feel the same pressures, and excitement, of keeping up with new products and services—just from the "other" side of the information world view.

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