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Both Sides Now: Vendors and Librarians — It's all About "The Relationship"

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Some Information Professionals and some Vendors continue to struggle to find common ground in their quest to work effectively together in the buying and selling of information. Recently, I participated in a panel discussion at the annual meeting of **Special Libraries Association (SLA)** held in Baltimore. The title of the session was "Best Practices and Strategies for Vendor Negotiation." Over the last three out of four years, I have been privileged to speak about this topic at the annual SLA meetings. Much like the previous sessions when I spoke at the Boston and Philadelphia meetings, this one in Baltimore attracted a wide array of librarians and vendors. As was the case at all the previous sessions, the room was once again filled to capacity.

Joining me on the panel was **Laura Walesby**, Head, Gast Business Library, **Michigan State University** and **Nick Collison**, Director, Content & Library Support for **cSubs – Information Services Management Company**. The format for the session was for the three of us to make brief opening statements and then devote the rest of the meeting to questions from the audience. The 1-1/2 hour session flew by quickly because not only were the questions so good, but also because the audience (both librarians AND vendors) was fully engaged in finding ways to be more productive in their dealings with one another.

We heard from legal librarians who were frustrated that their three primary vendors were unwilling to negotiate on price. Yes, we all know who those vendors are and yes, we all know that law libraries absolutely need the vendors' content, but why can't those vendors negotiate in good faith rather than present the library with a "take it or leave it" stance when it comes to negotiating? That non-negotiation tactic will someday come to an end due to changes in the way in which information is disseminated in that marketplace.

How incredibly forward-thinking would it be if one or all of those three vendors reversed their stance and negotiated in good faith and maybe dropped their price by a percent or two? I know there would be a lot of legal librarians whose disdain towards those vendors would immediately turn into support and good will and probably result in more business for those vendors for future product offerings. It is impossible to foster a relationship of cooperation if one side refuses to honestly negotiate. It's all about the relationship between the two.

Some questions were asked as to what to do with sales reps that didn't know the intricacies of products they were

supposedly representing. We were also questioned about what to do about sales reps that were simply not to the liking of the librarian. It was clear to everyone that the first step in a working relationship is to be able to work with the person sitting across the table from you. That's tough to do if the sales rep is not a person that cannot be respected or trusted.

Also, in relation to working with the sales team, librarians asked why current information industry companies seem intent on frequently changing the structure of their sales teams. It is preferred by the librarians to deal with one proven salesperson over a number of years rather than a succession of reps, some of whom are knowledgeable and others who may not be as adept in knowing about the company's products.

The bottom line is that for any serious negotiations to begin, a positive relationship needs to be established. And by the way, that relationship may take some time to be established. Sometimes that relationship takes root by the salesperson following up on an issue previously unresolved and finally gaining resolution. Or perhaps, it may be some special unadvertised pricing discounts that the rep can apply to the current subscription. Or maybe a better working relationship could be established over a cup of coffee. The reality is that in any industry, more sales are made to satisfied customers than to those customers who are upset.

When I finally got to the point in my career that I could actually buy a new car, I dutifully researched the brand and model that I was interested in and then went shopping for the car dealer. At the time, **Lexus** was upending the automobile industry by not only offering excellent cars, but also offering incredible service, as well. For example, if your **Lexus** needed servicing, the dealership would pick the car up at your place of work and then deliver it back to you when you were ready to go home at the end of the business day. This was unheard of prior to **Lexus** entering the U.S. car market. The **Lexus** people knew that their role was to sell and service a superior automobile and also make it as easy as possible for the customer to have a positive experience in dealing with all aspects associated with buying and servicing an automobile.

My first new car was not a **Lexus**, but the dealership that I chose must have been quite aware of what was being offered by the competition, both on price and depth of service. I can only say that I was treated very well when I bought that first

car, became friendly with the car salesman and as a result over a fifteen year span, bought four cars from that dealership, all from the same salesperson.

Guy St. Clair, noted library guru in his book, *Change Management in Action* published in 1998 compiled his "InfoManage" interviews of information industry leaders in describing how they manage change in the services they provide to libraries. Here's a quote from an interview of a VP of Sales that appeared in the book that holds true even today 25 years later.

"Sales to the library and information services community only work when we get to know our customers, and get to know them so well that we understand what they are looking for and can provide them with exactly what they need in order to do their jobs....we're doing what we're supposed to be doing; we're giving the librarians the tools they need to help them service their internal customers." I was the one who said it then; I lived it throughout my years in the field as a sales leader and I still believe it today.

The key element here is communication which leads to a strong relationship between the two parties. At one of the companies that I had the pleasure to work for, I was given a territory that consisted of key accounts to service, renew and upsell. Each of those accounts spent \$100K or more each year. I was required to visit each account every 90 days. At the conclusion of each meeting with the library, I was expected to set up the next appointment to be completed in no less than 90 days going forward. This scheduling requirement assured all parties concerned with this account that I would be back in 90 days and that any issues within that time span would be handled because we were also required to call the account every 30 days, as well. In essence, by adhering to these scheduling requirements, the company was assured that their sales representatives were in constant contact with the customer. By doing so, a relationship/bond was inevitably being established.

The technology that is used today in communication between vendor and information professional is quite efficient. However, I feel that efficiency cannot replace the human touch. While writing an email is appropriate in certain instances, making a site visit can do more to establish and strengthen the relationship than an e-mail that might or might not be read.

The premise of my book, *Buying and Selling Information...* is that "people do business with people, they do not do business with companies." It's all about the relationship.

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Clearly, gamification is far from simply game night at the library. While many of your patrons are playing board games, others are having their library experience enlivened by racking up points on the online catalog, getting badges for summer reading, and vying to be the patron with the highest number of librarians on their “friends” list. Who knows, perhaps the day will come when the number of books one checks out of the library will be at least as important as the number of “likes” received on a Facebook post. Okay, that is crazy talk, I know. But, what a wonderful virtual world that would be. 🌳

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In thinking about what song titles best exemplify the topic of creating a strong vendor/librarian relationship, the answer came immediately to me. *Get Together*, also known as *Let's Get Together*, is a song written in the mid-1960s by American singer-songwriter **Chet Powers**, also known as **Dino Valenti** performed by **Jesse Colin Young & The Youngbloods**. 🌳

Mike is currently the Managing Partner of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, “Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success” has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. www.gruenbergconsulting.com



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