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Incoming!: Surviving the Barrage of Vendor Communications

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Incoming!: Surviving the Barrage of Vendor Communications

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Abstract

For those in collection management, dealing with vendors is an integral part of the job. Yet the sheer volume of e-mails, phone calls, and other communications can sometimes leave one feeling as though under assault. This paper analyzes real-world examples of vendor communications and assesses their relevance and usefulness. It also provides tips and strategies for managing such communications effectively. Conveying library needs and expectations back to vendors, for example, is a critical step. For their part, vendors will have an opportunity to see what works and what doesn't from a librarian's perspective so that they may in turn learn how to communicate more efficiently with their customers.

Background

One of the challenges all libraries face is how to communicate effectively with library vendors. All too often such communications are untargeted in nature and of marginal relevance at best. This paper analyzes vendor communications during a four-week period in the summer of 2019. It also outlines some strategies and approaches to help reduce unnecessary communications so that those items that are truly important can be more readily found and acted upon.

Virginia Tech is a comprehensive research university with over 280 undergraduate and graduate degree programs and some 35,000 students. To meet the diverse needs of the academy, the University Libraries must work with a broad spectrum of publishers, vendors, and suppliers.

About the Author

I have served as associate director for Collection Management in the University Libraries at Virginia Tech since 2008. In that role I manage our materials budget, oversee the library's approval plans, and help coordinate the collection development efforts of some 20 subject liaisons. I lead periodic reviews of new resources and coordinate most of our vendor visits, including our annual VT Library Vendor Week event (Lener & Blackwood, 2018). The nature of my position and professional responsibilities are such that throughout the year I receive numerous communications of all sorts relating to our collections.

Analyzing the Issue

With so many library vendors and products all competing for time, attention, and let's face it, money, it

can be easy for those working in collection management to feel a case of information overload. Vendor communications of all kinds come in throughout the day. The key is to be able to rapidly assess these messages and determine when further action is needed or warranted.

To better gauge the scope and nature of vendor communications, I compiled a spreadsheet to log all incoming and outgoing vendor messages. It sought to classify communications by type and assign a rank based on their perceived relevance. The data was collected over a four-week period extending from Monday, July 29 to Sunday, August 25. This period was deliberately chosen to be "off-season" for our library. That is to say, the time frame did not correspond to any especially busy times such as the end of a fiscal year or right before or after a major conference. A longer study period would have allowed a larger number of communications to be captured but the data from even this comparatively short period was quite informative.

Data points collected included the following elements:

- Date and time
- Vendor name
- Who initiated?—library or vendor
- Type of message—targeted or generic
- Category
- Details/notes
- Format—e-mail, phone, or print
- Forwarded or direct
- Relevance rating

A total of 165 communications were logged in the spreadsheet. While still sizeable, this number was smaller than expected as it sometimes can feel as if they just never stop! (Note—this figure did not include subsequent “back and forth” exchanges on the same thread but it did seek to capture all initial contacts made during the four-week period.) The strategies and tips section below will discuss some of the possible reasons for this unanticipated finding as well as ways to potentially lower the overall number of incoming communications even further.

E-mail was the dominant form of communication by a significant margin (155 out of 165). Phone and print communications were relatively minor by comparison (at 4 and 6 out of 165, respectively). E-mail allows considerable flexibility in terms of when a message is read and has the advantage of providing documentation. For items that are not time-sensitive, print offers similar advantages to e-mail and the low volume can mean a message sent this way may stand out more. Phone calls can be quite helpful in resolving specific questions or concerns. However, “cold calls” that have not been set up in advance are often inconvenient and tend to be unproductive since there is no opportunity to prepare in advance.

By a large margin, most communications in the study period were initiated by a vendor (161 out of 165). Most messages from vendors were also generic or untargeted in nature (136 out of 161). Only a modest

number made any sort of reference or connection either to our institution or to specific individuals at our library. This “shotgun” approach to communication may be quick and easy for vendors but it tends to make for low relevance on the receiving end.

Categorizing all the communications by type also showed that less important types of communication tended to be among the most frequent. The greatest number were general sales pitches concerning a product or service. These were followed by announcements of new video or book releases. As just-in-case purchasing has largely been supplanted by just-in-time models, these types of communication do not have the significance they once did. The full range and frequency of communication types observed is shown in Figure 1.

Strategies and Tips

First, it may be useful to consider a few basic principles. These can help in better managing time spent on reviewing incoming vendor communications.

- Principle 1—Everything does not warrant your full attention!
- Principle 2—Deal right away with any items that can be handled quickly.
- Principle 3—Take active steps to reduce or eliminate unwanted communications.

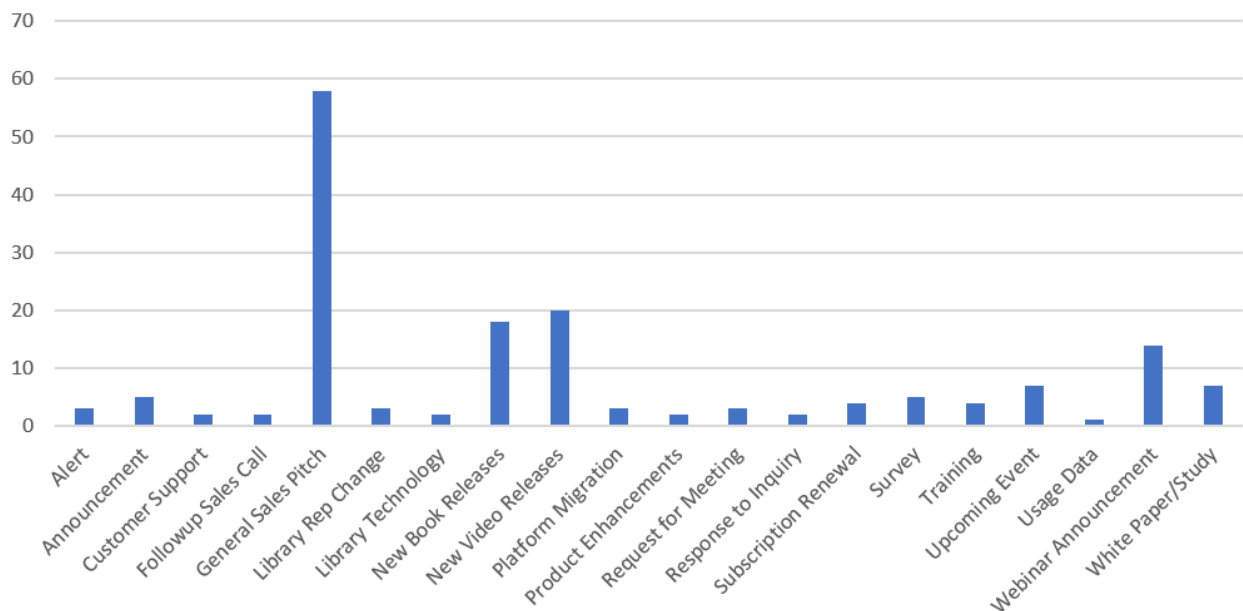


Figure 1. Communications by category type.

When given the option, using an unsubscribe link can help reduce unwanted types of messages. In most cases such links do actually work. If problems persist with a particular vendor, spam filters can then be used to help cut the clutter. In addition, vendor webpages may provide an opportunity to select just the specific kinds of communications you find most useful.

Also consider how you may have gotten on a vendor's mailing list in the first place. For example, when registering for a conference you may be given the option to opt out of many communications. Doing so will help avoid your contact information being widely shared with vendors. Similarly, avoiding raffles and drawings at the exhibit hall or getting your badge repeatedly scanned can help reduce the number of unwanted messages afterward.

Telling vendors what you want from them is also important. Let them know your own communication preferences. You should let them know what products are of most interest to you and which are not. That can be beneficial for both parties by avoiding repeated communications on products or services

that are unlikely to move forward. In addition to the what, it can also be helpful to let vendors know when you would most like to hear from them. For example, let them know when you typically make new subscription decisions and when your fiscal year ends. Our library also has well-established procedures for when and how we conduct product trials (Lener & Gilmore, 2019). A good vendor representative will take these factors into account and adjust their practices accordingly.

Earlier it was mentioned that while the amount of vendor communications was high, the total number logged was still lower than anticipated. Part of this difference was likely due to various other kinds of communication that can contribute to a feeling of "information overload." These include e-mail lists, listservs, Google Groups, automatic notifications, and the like. Taking a hard look at which of these are most useful to you and adjusting settings accordingly can also help reduce the daily number of incoming messages, possibly substantially. Reviewing your communications and determining what approach works best for you and your library can help you "Keep calm and carry on."

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