Leading from Below: Influencing Vendors and Collection Budget Decisions as a Subject Liaison

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Abstract

Subject liaisons are responsible to their facility and students for subject-specific research tools funded by the library, but most subject liaisons don't make the final decisions on subscriptions and other big-ticket items. How can we make effective recommendations to the decision makers? And how can we influence vendors about product development, pricing, and licensing issues as subject specialists but not budget controllers? In this lively discussion, the authors facilitated discussions of these questions with a group of librarians and vendors. After presenting one common model of a budget decision-making process involving liaisons, budget decision makers, and vendors, we discussed how liaisons can best pitch a new resource to decision makers regarding content, pricing, and licensing issues. Participants next considered how to influence vendors though building relationships, explaining liaisons' roles in the budget process, and describing the financial situation and research needs on our campuses. Finally, we concluded with best practices on how to influence as a liaison.

Introduction

Subject liaisons are responsible to their facility and students for subject-specific research tools funded by the library, but most subject liaisons don't make the final decisions on subscriptions and other big-ticket items. How can we make effective recommendations to the decision makers? And how can we influence vendors about product development, pricing, and licensing issues as subject specialists but not budget controllers? In this lively discussion, the authors facilitated discussions of these questions with a large group of librarians and vendors.

This article will begin with a description of a typical decision-making process involving liaisons, budget decision makers, and vendors. Describing this process helps all the parties involved understand the timing issues that are not always evident. The authors then discuss best practices for liaisons pitching a new resource to decision makers. An effective pitch usually addresses content, pricing, and licensing issues with the new resource, especially with specialized content such as data sets.

Liaisons need to work with and influence vendors as well as library budget decision makers. Vendors need to understand the decision processes used in librarians, the financial situation on campus, and the research needs on campus. Meanwhile vendors should be explaining their situation with librarians. For example, some vendor representatives consider themselves to be leaders from below, influencing their supervisors on the needs and limitations of the library liaisons and their libraries.

This article concludes with best practices on how to influence as a liaison.

Typical Decision-Making Flowchart

Subscribing to a new database can take a significant amount of time. Typically the liaison is involved in the initial stages of this process and then decision makers and vendors take over the process. The graph in Figure 1 demonstrates the steps taken when acquiring a new database, the active players at any given time in the process, and a rough timeline.

Liaisons typically hear about database needs from faculty and students as they pursue research and new areas of interest arise in their field. Liaisons also hear about new databases from vendors. If the database is of interest, there is usually a demonstration arranged and possibly a trial to determine if this product meets with collection development goals
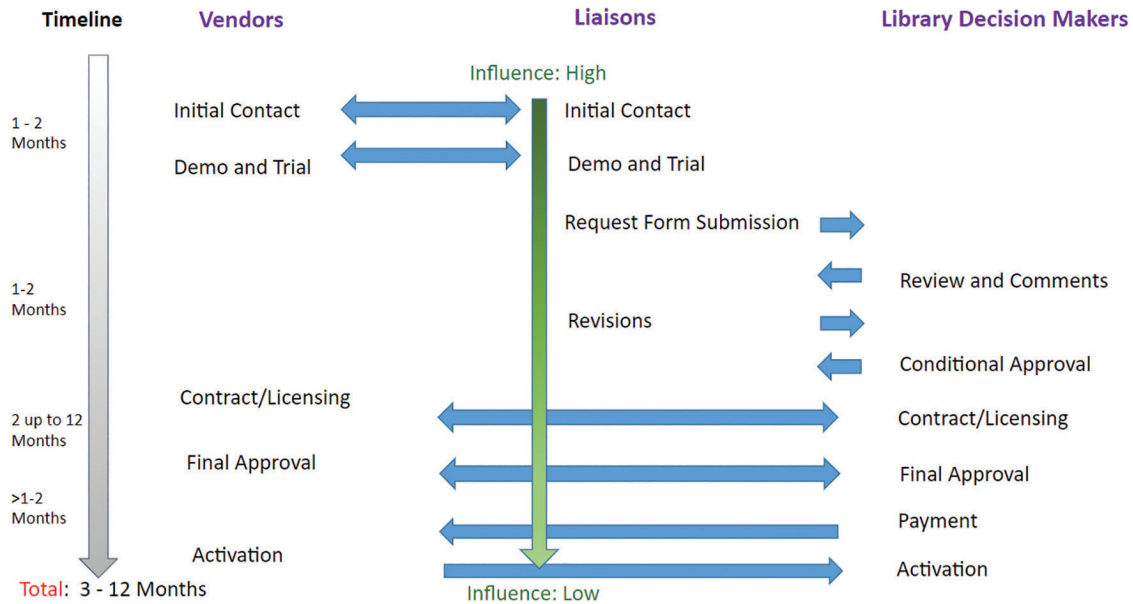
Figure 1. Typical decision-making flowchart.

and fills a void in the current library offerings. Initial pricing is also discussed. At this point in the process, the liaison approaches the decision makers (who handle budgets and licensing) and presents the case for the acquisition.

The decision makers take over the process of reviewing the product and discovering any problems with access or licensing terms. While there may be some clarification needed from the liaison, decision makers are primarily engaged with vendors through the remaining process. There can be conflicts on terms and licensing, which need to be worked through. This generally takes quite a long time as vendors go back to their management and library decision makers review changes.

Decision makers inform the liaison on the final decision that has been made. Finally, contracts are signed, and billing arrangements are established.

This process has inherent tensions. Liaisons are engaged with users who need the database for research. The decision makers are concerned with licensing requirements, contracts, and liability of the library and school. But both liaisons and decision makers are concerned with budget restraints.

Pitching to the Decision Makers: Content

When addressing the content of new resources, subject liaisons need to take notice of the following practices in order to make an effective recommendations to decision makers.

Refrain from using too much subject jargon. Bear in mind that your decision makers are not likely familiar with the terminologies and jargons in your subject fields. Instead of trying to provide a long list of subject headings/terms covered in the new resource, try to explain the resource, its content, and its expected application by faculty and students using plain language.

Match the content with program/degree specifics. Rather than commenting broadly on how the new resource would support your subject liaison areas, try to match the content of the product with program degree specifics. Address how the content meets the research needs of the degree completion requirements.

Name peer institutions that are using the product. Find out which peer or inspirational institutions have the product and make sure to list them in your recommendations to your decision makers. The keyword here is "peer" or "inspirational." Listing only "big name" schools may not work to your advantage.

Explain how the product supplements your existing resources. Do your homework and know your current collection well. Identify the gap areas in your collection to support your subject liaison programs

and demonstrate how the new resource can fill that gap.

Pitching to the Decision Makers: Pricing Models

In business research, the databases are often non-traditional, commercial products that are expensive. Vendors are not always aware of academic budget constraints. Meanwhile, decision makers ask liaisons, "How can we afford this?"

When talking with decision makers, several options are available to work with budget limitations:

1. Multiyear contracts to reduce costs.

2. "On-site only" access or other alternative access options.

3. Unlimited or limited concurrent users.

4. Partnering with departments or schools to share the cost.

Liaisons can also use the time spent with vendors to educate them about academic challenges:

1. Explain the limitations of academic budgets.

2. Recommend alternative access options.

Pitching to the Decision Makers: Licensing

Closely related to pricing issues are licensing issues. Licensing has long been a vital aspect of providing subscription content on campus. With increasing emphasis on community engagement, experiential learning, and technology transfer and commercialization, licensing of proprietary content on campuses is becoming more complex. Liaisons need to be aware of the many options available and compare the options to the needs on campus. The literature on licensing issues (like the number of Charleston Conference programs on licensing each year) is large and doesn't need to be fully summarized here, but there are some core issues.

Campus-wide, IP-authentication remains the standard for subscription content on campus. However, for very specialized content of value to only a small number of campus users, licensing for a small number of specific users (using dedicated machines and/or passwords) might be an option to also consider. Pricing is normally much less for limited access in comparison to campus-wide, IP-authentication. However, the budget decision makers in the library might choose not to fund content with very limited access, even if the likely user base would be small even with campus-wide, IP-authenticated access.

Academic researchers often need to download a large data set to run their own analysis. Therefore, downloading options and limits need to be addressed in the licensing process. The cost might be higher for larger downloads of data or records. Or large downloads might not be allowed under any circumstances. Some vendors don't allow any publishing of research based on their data or demand the right to review manuscripts of research articles using their data. Liaisons need to ask about such restrictions before recommending the subscription; vendors need to be aware that some of their licensing policies might be in conflict with academic research practices.

Restricting database usage to "educational use only" or "noncommercial use" can be problematic in an era of community engagement, experiential learning, technology transfer, and entrepreneurship incubators on campus. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the main accrediting organization for U.S. business schools, increasingly emphasizes experiential learning in its guidelines. There is much ongoing discussion from entrepreneurship librarians concerning under what circumstances databases with "educational use only" licensing can be utilized. Some vendors also prohibit "walk-in" traffic.

A final common licensing issues is which state has legal jurisdiction, the vendor's home state or the library. In most libraries, the librarian or councilors who normally approve licensing will know to discuss this issue with the vendor as needed.

Group Discussion Questions

In the first round of small group discussion in our session, we posed the following questions to the attendees:

- What are your biggest challenges in terms of content, pricing, and licensing when pitching a new subscription?

- If you are a subject/liaison librarian, what other strategies do you use when you are pitching to your decision makers?

- If you are a decision maker, how can your subject librarians better communicate and work with you?

- If you are a vendor, how can you better assist the subject librarian with making their case to the decision maker?

In the second round of small group discussion, we focused on liaison/vendor relations, asking these two questions:

- How can we influence vendors about product development, pricing, and licensing as subject librarians but not budget controllers?

- How else can librarians and vendors work together?

Small Group Thoughts

What follows is a summary of the small groups sharing their main topics of discussion and recommendations with the full group, based on the above questions.

- Translate library language for vendors. Likewise, business librarians advocating for business content should translate business language for other librarians.

- Vendors should share their list of academic customers. Such a list helps liaisons show that the desired product is in demand at other campuses, and that the licensing has worked for other campuses.

- Vendors should not cold-call faculty concerning a product the library would normally provide. Vendors should work through the library liaison instead.

- There can be tension between the demands and needs of social science, humanities, and natural science liaisons. It's useful to have collection development heads who aren't liaisons and therefore can be more neutral.

- The lack of standard usage statistics (like COUNTER) for specialized products can be challenging to both vendors and libraries.

- Vendor webinars during a trial period make the trial more useful.

- Vendors often "lead from below" in their organizations as well. As with liaisons,

leading from below can be challenging. Sometimes librarians don't realize that vendors can face challenges in getting their companies to support the academic market.

- Looking at the licensing before negotiating the access and pricing options can be more efficient.

- Vendors often don't understand the workflows and processes libraries use, and how many and which librarians are involved. Liaisons should offer to explain the process when needed.

- Librarians should value the subject expertise and experience of vendors.

- Liaisons should be generous with feedback to the vendor regarding product development, licensing terms, and the vendor's communication practices.

- Therefore, make sure communication between the liaisons and vendors goes in both directions.

- Some vendors have business librarian advisory boards. Those boards are useful to both vendors and liaisons.

- Some vendors don't have a dedicated academic sales representative. Liaisons can tell when a vendor either understands or doesn't understand the academic market.

- If vendor recognizes a problem and reports that problem to their supervisor, the message may have little impact. But if a librarian liaison reports a problem, the impact on higher-ups in the vendor's company is usually much greater.

Conclusion and Best Practices

While this lively discussion generated many good ideas and suggestions, the authors conclude with a small number of suggested best practices on how liaisons can lead from below. First, we recommend making a clear and concise problem statement regarding the need for the new resource. Here is an example: "Our current collection includes no industry ratios and financial benchmarks at local levels, which is instrumental for entrepreneurship students to develop the financial projections required in their business plans in their capstone course." Notice how that statement identifies the missing content (ratios

and benchmarks), the target users (entrepreneurship students), and their needs (a required business plan). Details on the number of such students and classes each school year and testimonials of the need from the relevant faculty and program leaders could also be included in the problem statement. Growth in the number of relevant students and classes is certainly worth including too.

Second, tie a resource request to campus-wide initiatives and goals. Is interdisciplinary and cross-campus entrepreneurship a priority on your campus? Or data literacy and data visualization? Engagement with community nonprofits and small business owners? Then the liaison's messaging to the budget decision makers should cite these campus initiatives and perhaps even quote the campus leaders promoting these programs. Include in your message any enrollment goals, such as "one-third of all students

are expected to take at least one entrepreneurship course."

Third, a liaison should consider making alliances with other subject liaisons for related needs and then submit a group request. Consider how certain types of content can be useful across the social sciences, for example, or even across all of campus (such as with some streaming video products). A group of liaisons pitching for resources can be more effective and convincing than a single liaison providing a solo pitch.

Finally, build relationships with vendors as fellow partners in the information ecosystem. Such partnerships result in better service to the liaison and the campus than a more adversarial relationship with the vendor would provide. Vendors and liaisons need to share their situations, practices, and feedback as they collaborate to help solve information needs on campus.