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Op Ed — Working with Vendors to Improve their Products

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Before the era of usability studies and ubiquitous emailed surveys, vendors spent little time consulting with their subscribers in order to make their search interfaces “user friendly.” That has all changed. Gone is the corporate attitude so well exemplified by **Henry Ford’s** remark regarding the Model T, “Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black.” Many database vendors not only listen to customer suggestions for improving their products, they actively solicit feedback. Many even enlist libraries as beta-testers. (We’re in the middle of one right now.) Yet, it is common to hear librarians complain that many of the online databases leave something to be desired in terms of searchability, features (limiters, citation tools, links to outside content, etc.), and ease of use. In addition, there often seems to be an adversarial attitude towards vendors which creeps into the discussion. A sort of “us against them” worldview. I remember once calling a librarian at another institution who mistook me for a sales rep and started hollering at me about annoying cold calls. In contrast, our approach is a little different. We have tried to work closely with vendors in order to try to make material improvements in our library e-resources. In general, I believe that we, as librarians, shouldn’t wait for the vendors to knock on our doors or fill our email boxes with surveys that usually end up in the trash bin. There needs to be more cooperation and less finger pointing.

Recently, when I sat down with a sales rep from one of the major players in the industry, we discussed several of the products that we already subscribed to from the vendor and one we had cancelled some years ago. As the rep demonstrated the updated interface for their education database, I expressed

some ideas for improving their product. In particular, I was curious if they could link from an author’s article in the education database to the biographical and book review content (related to the author) that we already received from the vendor through our current subscriptions as well as visa-versa. The representative thought our suggestions had some merit and agreed to forward our recommendations to the main office.

Earlier in the summer I had an opportunity to talk with a representative at a prestigious university publisher after trying unsuccessfully to generate usage reports for their international affairs e-resource. By all measures, the product was being underutilized. I broached the idea of making the MARC records available for all the eBooks, conference proceedings, and other full text material instead of the limited MARC records currently available. In addition, I pointed out certain deficiencies in the e-resource’s Webpage like the absence of a well-defined link to the country reports/profiles which include political and economic outlooks (as well as economic forecasts) and other key data. In order to get to the information, you had to click on a link titled “Atlas” which, true to its word, took you to a map instead of a list of countries. At this point, you had to click on the map to get another map which was more detailed. The maps obscured the easy-to-use mouse over links on the left side of the screen which listed individual countries. I shared my experiences with the representative, who seemed genuinely sympathetic to my plight.

Another similar encounter occurred during a phone conversation with another prominent university publisher

that was introducing a new set of online bibliographies developed by different panels of subject specialists culled from academia. While I was impressed with the product, I was struck by the fact that the bibliographies allowed for little customization. Local library resources (subject guides, databases, etc.) could not be added to each individual bibliography which, in my opinion, would enhance the value of the service. I mentioned these reservations to the sales rep who took note of them.

One overlooked way of providing feedback to vendors is by participating in a beta-test of a new product. Currently, **Montclair State** is beta-testing a global news database which includes full-text from newspapers, news services, and other news related publications. In some ways this is a superior method for influencing the parameters of a research database, since your input is being handled at the developmental stage. It also serves as a way to try the product for an extended period of time without making a financial commitment. When a sales rep mentions that they’re beta-testing a new product, I make it a point to ask them if we can participate.

Based on the above examples, it should be obvious that there are many ways to communicate with vendors in order to attempt to improve the searchability and usability of electronic resources. There is no reason to accept the status quo. The only requirement is to reach out to vendors in some meaningful fashion. Keep that in mind the next time you’re tempted to verbally flog a sales rep after receiving an unexpected (and often unwelcome) phone call. Just try counting to ten to regain your composure and then offer some constructive advice! 🍌



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have we changed processes over the years? Why? Does it matter? Yes, if you don’t want to explore that trail again or juggle the same problem once more. History is good to document/record so that we explore newer and more prospective ways of doing things. I want to scream that people can’t leave before they share those memories

and ideas with us. What about our visions? Each of us has a feeling where the library world is going, but we rarely share that information either. With the reduced workforce and the many experienced people leaving the field for retirement, there may be more stumbling in our attempts to improve the field. I would never say that there would cease to be improvements, but there will be fewer brains jumping into the discussions. And as I remember the people of today who are retiring with

some grief, I think about more of them who will be gone in a few years. Aren’t they the ones saying how these people won’t be missed? Those phrases will be the “left behind folks” words to ponder soon. Our energy has been sapped over the years, but we succeeded in making items available to our patrons. The challenge has been wonderful! Digital things will not be the savior it’s projected to be. The loss of our history and identity is something to think about seriously! 🍌