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Changing Glasses: Does Our World Look Different as a Vendor or a Librarian?

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Changing Glasses: Does Our World Look Different as a Vendor or a Librarian?

by **Corey Seeman** (Director, Kresge Business Administration Library, Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) <cseeman@umich.edu>

We knew librarians and the vendors work very closely together to ensure that information flows between the publishers and the users. However, we far too often only know about how life operations on our side of the relationship. We look back on our careers, and we can draw distinct lessons from the different jobs we have had over the years. Each job and position provides a unique set of expectations and perspectives that should make a singular imprint on our occupational psyche. From each job, great or small, we should be able to cull a lesson that will help us develop our work ethos. Through our diversity of work experience, we gain a better understanding of the work life and the different expectations and demands that are placed on people within organizations and companies.

Over the years, I have had a great opportunity during my career to work at different types of libraries and for a company that services libraries. As a young professional, I worked in archival and technical services/systems positions at three wonderful museum libraries: the **Chicago Historical Society**; the **Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania** (Pittsburgh), and the **National Baseball Library** at the **National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, Inc.** in Cooperstown. In these three positions, I moved progressively from archival work to collection management and systems. In both Pittsburgh and Cooperstown, I implemented Integrated Library Systems (ILS) for both print and archival collections. In 1998, I moved from libraries to vendors when I joined **Innovative Interfaces** as a field-based trainer, a position I held for just over two years. My job entailed traveling for half the month and working in my home office for the other half. This seemed like an interesting way to balance life and work with two small boys at home. My job primarily was to guide new customers through the implementation of the system. In addition, we provided training to established customers who purchased it and answered questions to our helpdesk that were training-related in nature.

Working at a vendor presented many interesting and unique work experiences. First, we work with the systems quite differently — primarily for testing and setup — rather

than with real patrons. So we are typically dealing fake holds and hypothetical research topics, not real patrons with deadlines and crises. Second, we develop a basic understanding of how different types of libraries generally operate, picking up standard practices at different library types. Third, we worked with librarians directly — not with the end users. This could be one of the most unique attributes of the vendor work experience.

Through my experience gained learning the system as a training consultant, I was able to obtain a position as the assistant dean for library systems at the **University of Toledo** (Ohio), where I worked for four years. This was my first academic position, but I came in more as an ILS specialist than an academic librarian. Over my four years at Toledo, my position changed to include technical services and collections. This provided me with the experience that allowed me to get the associate director position at the **Kresge Business Administration Library** in 2005. When the director left the following year, I was able to get the position of director at the library and have held that ever since. In my two years at **Innovative Interfaces**, I developed a greater perspective of the role of the employee and our relationships with customers and colleagues. And I believe that through this diversity of positions at different libraries and a company, I have been able to become a better-rounded and understanding library director.

Over the years, I have used my diverse positions to gain a greater understanding of where I stood in the library and what type of library I wanted to provide. Through working at different types of libraries and at a vendor, I have been able to see my position differently. I am not locked into the culture of a particular type of library, but I see a broader picture that enables me to reach out in ways that others might not see. I have been able to draw upon all of my experience to gain a broader understanding of the critical relationship that the library has with its patrons or customers. And to that end, it has enabled and empowered me to consider three questions in everything that we do for the library: where are we?; where is the customer?; and where do we meet? It is through these questions that we challenge the standards of librarianship that see us marching towards a possible obsolescence. It is through these questions that we grow our libraries. And it is through these questions that we appreciate and understand that the view of the world gained through working at different types of organizations and companies can produce the 360-degree outlook that we are all clamoring for.

Where are You?

This might be one of the most glaring differences between working in a library or a vendor. We conceptualize libraries as primarily having three main elements: administration, public services, and technical services. With vendors, we can conceptualize three elements as well: administration, revenue centers, and cost centers. This is not something that really has an equivalent in the library world. In a revenue center, we find the entities that bring in income (sales, new customer sales, etc.) In the cost center, we find the people that create, develop, and support the products. Knowing where you are in an organization goes far in determining what role you might have.

At **Innovative**, the library training consultants were in the Implementation Services Division. While our work was a direct result of a library purchasing a new ILS, a new module or additional training, we are a cost center. The sales to new and existing customers were the primary revenue center for the vendor. In this corporate setting, the importance of income and the units that produce it, cannot be overlooked. At a vendor, there are more distinct dividing lines between the sales side and the development or support side. While I served on the cost side, my goal was to do everything I could to ensure that people felt good about their purchase. I never felt that the fact that my work in the cost side was less valuable than the sales side possibly attributed to a strong culture within the organization. While my work did not directly bring revenue into the company, it was critical for the overall success of the operation and the satisfaction of the customers. Without training consultants, libraries would not be able to implement these products, and, in turn, dissatisfaction would drive down business. The issue of being a cost center is one that many librarians are sensitive to these days as organizations and communities are looking for ways to drive down costs — especially for services rendered and not sold. This concept of being a revenue center or a cost center is somewhat alien to librarians, but could be important in considering the way that outsiders see our work. Even though our work has costs associated with it, we are not typically billing our patrons directly for that work. So knowing where you are in the cost/revenue (or public/technical services), especially during tight times, enables you to have a better understanding about the way that others might perceive your role in the library enterprise.

Where is the Customer?

Another cultural change that exists between the library world and the vendor world is that the vendor knows where the customer is. Vendors are driven here by market needs — to

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ensure that they remain viable and in business. Libraries are driven here by a philosophy of customer service that resonates in the field. However, with libraries, we often find ourselves in virtual monopolies, that can change our relationship with the patrons. While a librarian can move to a different vendor if they are unhappy, a university has but one academic library, and most communities have but one public library system. So the experience from the vendor's point of view can present great opportunities for the library community. At **Innovative**, I felt that it was critically important that I make sure that the customer was happy. And while you can easily make the argument that many companies are more interested in profit than services, a company will fail if they do not understand and annoy the customer. If a company does not take care of their customers, they will lose them. As a library training consultant, my role was focused on ensuring that they were happy with their decision to move to **Innovative** by helping them with the best possible implementation of their system.

In the end, my goal as a vendor was to follow the Golden Rule. My intent has been to be the type of trainer that I would have wanted to have when I moved into a new system. In not every case was I able to provide everything that the library wanted. But in understanding where the customer is and where they needed to go, this became a transformation for me that I have carried forward to my academic librarian positions. Even today, while I am unable to always provide answers, especially to very specific data requests, I try to go about my work with a broader understanding of what the customer needs and how I can support them so that they are best able to utility my service.

Where do you Meet?

This is one of the biggest issues that all organizations face — how do we work with our customers and where do we meet? When money exchanges hands and agreements are signed, it is easier to determine what we should be providing. However, in the library space, things can get tricky when there is no money exchanging hands. When money does not exchange hands, it can be trickier to figure out what we should be doing. This might be one of our biggest challenges in librarianship.

At **Innovative**, I aspired to meet the customer where they needed me to be. So if they needed basic assistance in getting a module rolling, I wanted to be there. If they needed more advanced understanding of a concept or a part of the system, I wanted to be there. While I had this as my goal, the reality was not always so clear. There were instances where I could not get the system to do what they wanted. As the ILS is under continual improvement through enhancements, it only makes sense that libraries have ideas that are not possible yet. There were also instances where I was asked to help them design a system that would enable them to work as their old system had

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BORN & LIVED: Born October 4, 1964 in West Long Branch, NJ. Lived in New Jersey, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Michigan (that is a lot of electoral votes, not that I am counting).

EARLY LIFE: All I can say is this…if someone knew me when I was a kid — and was told that I would grow up to be a librarian — they would never believe it.

FAMILY: Married to **Pam (Holland) Seeman** since 1988. Two sons, **Jeremy** (18 – freshman at **University of Chicago**) and **Chris** (16 – junior at **Saline (MI) High School**).

EDUCATION: A.B., **University of Chicago**, 1986 (European History) & M.A.L.S., **Dominican University**, 1992.

FIRST JOB: First job out of college was three weeks and one day in the **JC Penney** Management Training Program. Just wasn't for me — a good call. First professional job was as an archival assistant at the **Chicago Historical Society**. That started me on my path through libraries and archives.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Been Active with the Innovative Users Group, serving as Steering Committee Member-at-Large and Chair. I have also been active with the Academic Business Library Directors, serving as a board member since 2008. Over the past dozen or so years, I have been active at regional and national conferences.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Cook and take photos. Sometimes I take pictures of food I cooked — so it ties everything together very nicely. I also love dragging my family to lighthouses to (wait for it) take pictures.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Collins's *Not Even Wrong: A Father's Journey into the Lost History of Autism* (2005). **Greene's** *Our Man in Havana* (1958). **Halberstam's** *The Reckoning* (1986). **Hill's** *Stargazing: Memoirs of a Young Lighthouse Keeper* (2005). **Karasik's** *The Ride Together: A Brother and Sister's Memoir of Autism in the Family* (2004). **Mandel's** *Minor Players, Major Dreams* (1987).

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: I have always been annoyed with people who slow things down without contributing to what is being considered. You know who they are — you have been on committees with them.

PHILOSOPHY: Everyday, help build and create the library you would want to use. Bonus Philosophy: Practice the Golden Rule — do onto others as you would have them do onto you.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Coining the phrase "Patron-Driven Services" for libraries (OK — it is something that I am working on — gonna be big).

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Senator **Corey Seeman**…well, maybe not. I want to spread the word about customer service in libraries and how it can change the perceptions about our need and role in campuses, communities, and companies.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I see more and more administrators that see libraries as storage facilities, not service facilities. This is a key concept that will indicate how we will survive and possibly thrive in the future. I also see smaller academic institutions working with aggregators and creating 100% virtual libraries with minimal staff. The fantasy will be driven by the theory that our patrons do not need help in the library.

operated. This is something that wrote about in my article "Invisible Fences."[1]

As I moved from the vendor to academic libraries, I carried this focus with me of getting where the customer is. With my positions at Toledo and Michigan, I have tried to focus my attentions on meeting the needs and the expectations of the customers in the very best way that we could. While we can never get 100% of what our patrons want or need at these positions (even with a far greater financial situation at Michigan than at Toledo), the key thought was to do what we can for our customers and try to meet their needs regardless of where they are and what they are asking for. And certainly not every vendor works like this, but the good ones definitely move in those directions.

Where are My Glasses?
A New View of the World

In many ways, every experience that we have in the workplace adds to our philosophy of work. If we only work in one type of library, year in and year out, we run the risk of not being able to think creatively about our workplace and possible solutions to our problems. This, in turn, makes it harder to envision true change in our libraries. And while working for different types of libraries can be eye-opening in regards to our ability to approach both services and problems creatively, I would argue that working in business (for vendors or otherwise) also has the same value.

While it is very easy today to be skeptical about the commercial landscape and its commitment to service (especially in light of increased fees we are paying for activities that were once considered "bundled" — like baggage fees), the reality is that companies have to perform well to survive. While we might have transactions that fail to meet our desired outcomes with companies, they need to have an overall positive relationship with the customer. Should companies continually disappoint, their customers will "fly away" and leave business with nothing. As an employee of a company working in the information management market, I saw an entirely different part of the library world. Having this exposure has provided me with a different vantage point and perspective that I have carried forth in my positions at the **University of Toledo** and the **University of Michigan**. It is from this perspective that I have come to realize that we must not operate as a virtual monopoly on our campus or our community, but act with the best interests of our patrons and customers in mind. And if we can operate on our campuses and communities as if the "customer is always right," then maybe our future can look brighter than it has been these last few years. ✿

Endnotes
1. **Seeman, Corey**. 2002. "Invisible Fences: a Shocking Theory for Re-Examining Work Flow." *Computers In Libraries* 22, no. 7: 24.

Crossing the Bridge Connecting the Corporate and Academic Library Worlds

by **Valerie Tucci** (Physical Sciences/Engineering Librarian, The College of New Jersey, Ewing, NJ) <vtucci@tcnj.edu>

After almost 40 years as a corporate librarian, I was ready for new challenges, not retirement. When **The College of New Jersey (TCNJ)** offered a position as Assistant Professor, Physical Science and Engineering Librarian I gladly accepted, motivated by twin desires: to share decades of knowledge gained as a special librarian and manager, and to keep learning as an active member of the library world. I have been asked repeatedly to contrast these two environments; this is my attempt to explain what I see as the key differences. These are opinions only, and are meant to guide, not judge.

The most compelling difference between these two library worlds is the emphasis academia places on "publish or perish." From the first interview it was clear that publishing in peer-reviewed journals, within a very narrow and defined time frame, would be a major requirement of the tenure-track position. Until that point, I hadn't fully comprehended the magnitude of this requirement; I hadn't even listed my few publications on my resume! As a corporate librarian, publishing seemed secondary, and, indeed, sometimes company confidentiality discouraged or even prohibited publication. So worried, but determined to give it a try, I accepted the position.

My first agenda item upon arriving at **TCNJ** was to meet the faculty of the many departments I would serve, and determine their information needs and the needs of their students. Fortune smiled on me, and another faculty member who was a trained facilitator offered to conduct a series of focus groups with faculty members so I could gather feedback on their information expectations. I began with the computer science and engineering faculty, since I viewed their information requirements as similar and I had a great deal of industrial experience working with professionals in these fields. The findings were surprising, and before I had time to worry too much I massaged this information into my first article. Yes, there were many steps along the way, including presenting the information at an **ALA/ACRL** Research Forum and receiving very helpful mentoring advice on my research. And, of course, there was the peer-review process with subsequent editing and revisions. The bottom line, however, was that just doing my job, trying to understand what information patrons need and how they obtain it — as I had done in the corporate world — was fundamental scholarly research. A second paper materialized from my collaboration

with the chemistry faculty when I integrated information literacy instruction along with three assessments into the chemistry seminar program.

So my advice to others considering the move to academia is that the publication process is not as onerous as it sounds. Certainly some luck such as being at the right place when an editor is looking for a paper on a specific topic, having contacts in professional organizations, and being flexible and willing to meet deadlines all help. Research is something I have always done, and now I publish to record and organize my findings, get peer review and feedback, and share my thoughts and experiences while striving to achieve tenure!

Another significant difference between the corporate world and academia, at least in the environment in which I am working, is the loss of direct vendor contact. I am bound to academic library protocol dictating that vendor questions must be filtered through the acquisition, serials, inter-library loan, and electronic services librarians. These librarians are the key contacts for vendors and provide efficiency by serving all subject librarians via the same process. The negative side of these middle-man procedures is that subject librarians, who know the players in their fields and their publications and who could offer very insightful comments, have limited access to vendors except at outside meetings. This "separation of powers" limits librarian-vendor collaboration which, I found in the corporate world, often produced new products or product enhancements. Also, in this digital age, the tendency to treat all disciplines equally limits the impact of subject experts in areas such as science and technology, who are often early adopters of new approaches to fulfilling an information need. For example, scientists would prefer pay-per-view document delivery with full-color rendering via a PDF file from the publisher, rather than a traditional academic inter-library loan providing a gray, scanned copy of an article from a printed publication. The one-size-fits-all approach to all the disciplines with a limited gateway to vendors produces some efficiency but limits risk-taking and innovation. Since I have significant management experience and I am used to working with all the processes in a library, the lack of vendor contact may be something that only bothers me. Other subject librarians, who have never managed a large library operation, could be content or even prefer the limited contact.

Academic institutions tend to favor a shared