1989

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Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory, Vol. 13, pp. 121–123, 1989
Printed in the USA.
0364-6408/89 $3.00 + .00

CHARLESTON CONFERENCE 1988

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I must assume that I was asked to talk on the topic of "Library Vendors: How Do They Use Us?" because I have spent a portion of my professional career on either side of the issue—12 years as a librarian and 11 years with Abel and then Blackwell North America (B/NA). With that in mind, I think my speech could also be titled, "Librarian at Risk." I came here with many friends, librarians, subscription agents and book sellers, and may leave with few or none.

I am reminded of a story Jim Govan recently told at a conference when he found himself in a similar situation. The story involved an elderly carpenter, who at the age of 80 was still going strong. When asked to what he attributed his longevity, his response was, "When my mouth is full of nails, I don't inhale." I'm about to inhale.

Yes, vendors are worth the money libraries pay them. I will begin with that statement and then both support it and criticize it. Most of my remarks are more appropriate to the book selling end of our business. There are two reasons why this is the case. First, book selling is the business I know best. Second, can there by any doubt that the serials vendor is anything other than invaluable? In an age when subscription lists number in the thousands no library is even going to consider direct ordering of most of their titles, nor should they.

Actually the vendors of books also know this and over the years many have expanded their services to include standing orders i.e., monographs in series. During my years in the business, I always thought standing order fulfillment was the most valuable service Abel and B/NA provided academic libraries. After the development of approval plans, the standing orders became even more important. The phenomenal growth of the Abel approval plan can in large measure be attributed to the Company's success at integrating approvals and standing orders. Also remember that book vendors are fully cognizant that once they have captured a library's standing order business, they have got you.

Vendors occupy a unique position in the book and serial distribution business. In most businesses the wholesaler is the middleman between the producer and the retailer. Most often they serve consumers not served by the retailers. In our business, wholesalers may serve both retail outlets and libraries. Of course, many vendors choose to deal exclusively with libraries, but the retail option is always there for them to consider. Libraries also have a choice available to them; they can buy direct from the producer as well as through the wholesaler. This option provides libraries with leverage of their own and has had a large influence on keeping wholesaler prices down.

Over the years the vendors have strengthened their competitive position by expanding on the services they offer. Initially, fast turn-around in response to firm orders, discounts, accurate reporting and invoicing, high fulfillment rates, and generous return privileges comprised the service mix. Later, cataloging, book processing, approval plans and standing order services were added along with even more generous return privileges. In the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's vendors have extended the carrots of electronic ordering and automated systems. These extended services are offered to entice libraries to place their profitable business with a particular vendor.

Many studies have been made by librarians comparing the relative merits of competing vendors. Most often the comparisons have focused on discounts offered, turn-around times, and fulfillment rates. All very useful, we would hope, but they seem to have little actual impact on the placement of orders. The truth of the latter statement is substantiated by a review of the literature from the past five years. Fewer and fewer studies are showing up. Does this mean all vendors are doing a better job or that they have all floated to the same level of mediocrity? Who knows? To be brutally honest, the greatest influence on order placement appears to be the most recent ranking of ALA cocktail parties.

My main criticism of the relationships between vendors and librarians is that they are seldom carried on in a business-like manner. As librarians, we rarely apply the same standards for performance to book dealers that we do to car dealers and real estate agents. Why not? My guess is that business deals are viewed as being less than professional. Our library schools do not train us to take a business perspective. The best deal is not what we have in mind or what we seek. It is beneath our dignity to haggle over discounts, fulfillment rates, and response times. In fact, what we have done over the past twenty years is to have searched for a way out of the acquisitions business. We have looked to the vendors to take over more and more of the traditional library functions involved with the acquiring of books.

Furthermore, we in acquisitions may well learn our trade from our vendors who must teach us about the bookselling business and fill in a gap in our library school education. We expect the vendor to choose our books and then provide us with order and invoice information in an automated form so we can easily add it to our local systems. As a result, we do not need a large acquisitions staff; rather, we need contract monitors who make sure our funds are spent on time.

In an attempt to illustrate the point I am trying to make, I now want to shift focus. As I indicated earlier, it has been almost 14 years since the Abel Company was forced to close its doors. In the interim surprisingly little has been written about the Company's history. For years, those who knew the Company best were reluctant to discuss their disappointment. More recently, interest in the subject has waned as memories have faded. Lyman Newlin's article, written several months following the demise of the Company, remains the best available[1]. In his article, Lyman emphasized Abel's successes not the failures.

I, too, am more interested in talking about the reasons for the Company's success. The Abel Company was a most vital and stimulating place to work. Even so, there were occasions when one was totally exhausted because we were all busy trying to fulfill the promises of last month's "new program features", while at the same time fine tuning the current month's, and anxiously awaiting the announcement of next month's new services. There is no doubt that Abel was the cutting edge of the book distribution business. Approval plans and standing order services were just the tip of the iceberg. Abel offered all the enhancements I listed earlier, plus more, including out-of-print searching and access to foreign documents. I'm sure there were others even I have forgotten.

All the Abel services were provided because there was an academic library market for them. Unfortunately, that market was frequently limited and unprofitable but the demand was there and it was Abel's intention to fill it. We had a mission. We meant to bridge the critical gap between the publisher and the scholar/educator. We were there to select and to supply. The library and its staff simply served as agents. I want to emphasize at this point that Abel's motives were totally altruistic. The Company mission, as I mentioned earlier, was to expedite the scholarly flow of information.

How did Abel's services support this mission? As an example, let's take a quick look at the approval plan concept. Certainly, approvals were the benchmark of the Abel Company and set a standard which numerous other vendors have attempted to copy. The original approval plans flourished because of an academic library need; actually, two needs: Relief from the ordering function, and faster service. The mid to late 1960's and early 1970's were a period of unmatched growth for academic libraries. Acquisition budgets increased at a rate never experienced before or since. At the same time, personnel budgets didn't keep pace. For many academic libraries it was difficult to spend their budgets within the time-frames established by their parent institutions. Abel had a solution for this problem. Eliminate one of the more labor-intensive aspects of the whole acquisitions cycle, the ordering process, by providing libraries with books in a particular subject area as soon as the books were published. Obviously, this also speeded up the process of getting the book to the scholar. For the Abel Company, if the concept of vendor-based selection could be justified by "selling" the librarians on the idea of selecting with the book in hand, we had a winner. At least, on the surface, it looked like we all came out winners—the vendor, the library, and the scholar/educator.

I hold that over time what we found out is that the vendor was the real winner. Academic libraries allowed vendors to take over not only the ordering function, but also the more important selection function. How? By librarians not monitoring subject profiles, and by paying little more than lip service to the principle of selecting with book in hand and returning unneeded volumes. We librarians allowed collection development and management to be removed from our control. Many of us have never taken them back.

There is evidence that some movement has been made in reversing this trend over the past several years. The application of the RLG conspectus has alerted some libraries to the need to more closely monitor their approval plans. For others, the encroachment of the serial budget on the monograph budget has forced a reexamination of approval profiles. Might I suggest that these are steps that were long overdue and should most definitely continue.

I've come a long way to make a simple point. The vendor has every right to make a dollar. After all, that is why they are in business. If they see a market for a service, they should and will exploit it. Librarians shouldn't expect any less of them. What we should expect and demand is the best product for our dollar, for the institution we represent, and for the patrons we serve. We can only achieve this by improving our business practices and, more importantly, by looking after our own business.

I will close with a rather ancient axiom. The Law of Probable Dispersion: Whatever hits the fan will not be evenly distributed. In other words, despite a best effort, I undoubtedly ended up picking on some of you more than others. Please accept my apology.

REFERENCE

1. Newlin, Lyman W. "The Rise and Fall of Richard Abel and Co., Inc.," *Scholarly Publishing* 7 (October 1975), 55–61.