

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Promises, Promises

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The classic library gripe about vendors is that they overpromise. (Readers might remember an earlier column on the classic vendor gripe about libraries, “Decisions, Decisions.”) What, the release is delayed? That module has a few bugs? That journal isn’t really available? You can’t really do that? Why was it again that order took twelve weeks to fill? Faced with their presentations, their booths, their calls, their emails, their listservs, their ads, their giveaways, their Websites, their mailers, their glossy handouts, before long a wise librarian adopts, to put it gently, a measure of skepticism. If the whole thing were a TV infomercial, on the Library Channel, viewers would wear out the remote.

The funny thing is, vendors would often agree. They’d agree about the inflations of competing vendors, of course. But more often than librarians might think, when it came to their own company they’d, more quietly, nod their heads as well.

If that’s a surprise, think of what it means to refer to “the vendor,” a phrase that in its abstract functional reference can seem very odd to individuals who work as library vendors. Is this some business colossus, brain and brawn programmed toward a single end? It’s a rare day that seems so. Working in a library, does it feel like Library, Inc.? It’s about the same story on the vendor’s side. If the vendor is a colossus, it’s something of a performance, like the people on a gaudy parade float who know their own roles but don’t have the vaguest notion of what anyone else on the float is doing, let alone the ones marching in the rest of the parade.

Does that seem an exaggeration? Well, yes, it is. This is a column, after all, and why be a columnist if you have to stick to all of the proprieties, all of the time? But an exaggeration isn’t a lie, since it starts with a measure of the truth. And the truth is that one of the hardest things for a vendor to do is to keep everyone in the company on the same page.

Why so many promises? It would seem a foolish thing, to say your company can deliver something you know it can’t. Sooner or later, as if trying to game the IRS year after year, you’re bound for a rough ending. In fact, selling to libraries is an honorable business, and vendor reps seldom say anything they know to be out-and-out false. Those that do, don’t last long. Instead, if a library vendor overpromises, it’s likely an act of hope.

Naïve hope, perhaps, but hope even so. In all segments of library vending, it can be news to nobody by now that the consolidation of companies is a fact of life, and that consolidation has been driven by high library expectations. The vendors remaining are left with broad mandates indeed. What this means for the rep in the field is that they usually can’t understand,

let alone master, everything their company offers. It’s the same as in libraries, really. Most librarians know what goes on in their own area, whatever it is, but might not venture too far into others. They become specialists, whether as catalogers, or selectors, or digital resource experts, or acquisitions librarians, or something else.

Vendor reps do this too, just not so formally. They end up knowing all about some of their company’s offerings, the ones they’ve had success in mastering. They can talk about these, at length. They know the questions librarians will ask, and know the right answers. They can perform a demo and hold a room’s attention, maybe hold the room spellbound. They can point out benefits, address finer points, and subtly work in the competition’s shortcomings. It’s great fun to be an expert on something. Who wouldn’t try to move a sales call in their preferred direction?

Then there’s everything else. What if the librarian asks? Well, there are a few recourses. “I don’t know” can work, and “I don’t know, but I’ll find out” is better. But in the heat of action, how easy it is for a hopeful rep to half recall some briefing or memo or meeting at the company on the very topic in question, clouded as the question may seem at that moment, and to put money on the “Yes, we can do that” side of things, or on the craftier reply, “Yes, I think we can do that.” A potentially bad moment is therefore averted and who knows, there’s at least a decent chance the company actually can do that, or will do it in time.

Then again, the rep might not be the one who has overpromised. The company itself speaks directly to customers through its marketing program, the brochures, Website, and other such centrally-produced forms of communication. Here too, rhetoric will sometimes outpace reality. Maybe the language chosen to describe the company’s services was, shall we say, slightly robust. Or, perhaps a new service to libraries was agreed to within the company. Marketing commences. Meanwhile, development of the new service falls behind schedule. But the brochures are out there. What to do, recall them? Can’t do that, it won’t be much longer anyway, will it? This isn’t spoiled food, after all. No risk of spreading botulism in this business.

Delays in development of new services can plague reps as well, of course. Perhaps the rep became enthused about a coming service at a sales meeting, which is a principal purpose of sales meetings, naturally, to inspire the reps. Who wouldn’t want to get right down to the work of spreading the good word? If the promised service falls behind, or is downsized, or cancelled even, what’s a rep to do? The rep might not even know the bad news for some time.

Special sales meetings are not called, after all, to quench the fires lit in prior ones. And reps don’t schedule new sales calls to reverse calls already in the books.

Or maybe, as the rep spoke during the call, the librarian heard what he or she wanted to hear. Maybe the rep chose words quite carefully and was walking the very boundary between “yes” and “no.” Who knows what the next rep in this office, sitting in this very chair, is going to say? That company will say just about anything. Can’t let them put us out of the game. The librarian, for that side, might very much want to hear “yes,” and will gladly overlook or forget or generously interpret the rep’s more carefully crafted words.

Or maybe the rep isn’t the one who has overpromised. Sometimes it’s the librarian who pledges a certain volume of business, say, that by year-end fails to materialize, just as the promises of reps sometimes fall short. Meetings between librarians and their reps are not, after all, scripted events. At their best, meetings between vendors and librarians are not like a reading of the minutes, not like a newscast, not like the night’s TV sports thrills clips, not like a waitperson’s recital of the day’s specials with an obligatory offer to answer “any questions” about the menu.

Instead, they’re negotiations, full of give and take. And price is far from the most interesting topic of negotiation that can occur. Instead, many librarians are entrepreneurs, of ideas. As are many reps. Both, like any other entrepreneur, are looking for a backer of their idea, a partner. Neither can accomplish alone what they have in mind. The librarian might propose an idea to the vendor: “If your company would consider developing [fill in the blank], we would help you test, would give you more of our business, and since this is such a terrific idea, I know that other libraries would call you too.” Or, the rep might say, more or less, “If we developed or offered [whatever], would you help us test and give us more of your business?”


Of course, most of these conversations lead to nothing. A good thing, too, since there’s surely no shortage of bad ideas, or of ideas that are not bad exactly, but not exactly practical either. But, not always. Occasionally, the right librarian and the right rep, at the right moment, realize they are onto something. This might work. Yes, this would interest a lot of libraries. And yes, we might be able to do it. The conversation takes on a certain excitement; this call is going somewhere. Librarian and rep alike want to ride this; they see conference papers, workshops, articles in journals, others talking about this, savings for the library, more business for the company, citations, compliments, commendations, promotions, awards, a measure of glory all around.

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And maybe, in the end, nothing happens. Maybe the rep overpromises, can't get it done after all.

Well, some interesting moments, anyway. And maybe the idea, whomever had it, will rise again, later on. Next time a rep overpromises, think of what libraries can offer patrons today with help from vendors, against what was possible ten years ago, or five, or last year even. Many miracles, for sure, of ingenuity and technology, combined only through considerable persistence and persuasion, and probably a rash promise, and some chance-taking, along the way.

Of course, overpromising reps deserve to be shown the door, sometimes; no doubt most of the time. But everything we take for granted today in this business of vending to libraries, not to mention what causes us all to marvel, began as somebody's idea, and somebody's conversation, and usually, somebody's promise. 

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Publishers, Vendors
and Librarians”*



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