

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Decisions, Decisions

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The classic vendor gripe about libraries is that they take too long to make decisions. Why, vendors ask, must it take weeks, months, years to move on anything? Is there a library in the world, they wonder, without a host of committees and sub-committees, councils, circles, groups, task forces, teams, and who knows what else to study and usually stymie any proposal put to them, small or large? Not in my territory there isn't, every vendor rep has sometimes muttered. Why can't libraries make decisions like we do?

Of course, this griping is highly selective, always focused on un-made vendoring decisions where the rep's company has something to gain. And on made decisions going the wrong way. Clear opportunity, these instances, to cite flawed process. When they gain or hold business, on the other hand, reps are always forgiving on process, no matter how long a library took to decide. Likewise, quick library decisions that went badly are immediately forgotten. It's the hangers, instead, that haunt the minds of reps.

Librarians might forgive reps their impatience here, because a long-hanging decision is a truly painful experience. For those old enough to remember a past era in social behavior, it's not unlike asking for a date ... and then waiting, and waiting some more, and then longer again, for the word yes or no and maybe a little reciprocal interest from someone who held every card. "I'm not sure I'll be here that day." "My cousin might be visiting." You know how it was. "The task force just scheduled its first meeting," feels about the same.

Naturally, it's none of a rep's business how long a library takes to make a decision. The task force has every right to hold whatever meetings it wants, whenever it wants, for as long as it wants. Anyone who needs to get an A on every test should find another line of work than selling to libraries. In this course they give out only two grades—A and F. Strictly pass-fail. Even a very good library sales rep, used to straight As on the other report cards of life, will see some Fs on this one, and even harder to bear, some incompletes.

Reps always believe that a library's decision ought to be easy. "They should choose me. Why wouldn't they?" is the way it looks to any rep worth anything. Despite whatever degree of corporate effort went into an offer, a proposal, or a presentation, the rep's name is the one attached to it. When a rep asks for business, the moment may well have been preceded by a cycle of personal relationship-building, emails and calls, lunches, dinners, gossip, find out where they went to school, find out what kinds of books or films or sports the customer likes. This is not strictly mercenary. Reps enjoy all this. It's what appeals to them about their job. When they succeed in infusing a business relationship with an

element of the personal, as a good rep will, implicitly they've opened the question of a new or larger business relationship. And in the bargain they've also, a predictable percentage of the time, lined themselves up for a disappointment.

Meanwhile, aside from any personal investment by the rep in a library's decision, there's always the business side of the question. The rep's job is to hold business and bring in new business. There's not much else they need to think about, beyond this pair of clauses in the job description. The company's future depends upon reps who will nudge or push enough library decisions in the right direction. Companies pour resources into written proposals and formal presentations. A price tag in the thousands of dollars for time, travel, and materials is entirely typical. Orally and in writing, rep and company step up to assert and explain why they're the best. If a formal onsite presentation is called, it's time for butterflies in the stomach, cold palms, take a deep breath, comb your hair a third time, walk in like you own the place. It's the SATs, Game 7, sudden death overtime, audition for the play, bottom of the ninth, driver's test, job interview, Final Jeopardy, Academy Awards, Christmas Eve, Election Night, all at once.

Then it's over. And why can't they make up their minds?

Reps forget that the decision they have their eye on isn't the only one on the table at the library. Even if the committee hasn't met as yet, the members possibly have, but convened as some other committee. No movement on the RFP for Serials? Maybe that's because the committees looking after the four vacant positions have their own problems. Or maybe the group working with the architect for a new wing is in a phase of deep study of drawings and models and coffee bar concepts. Then there's the tenure committee, almost done with reading through its own pile of letters and *vitae* and articles and forms. And isn't it great that the Head of Public Services was just named to the Athletic committee? Gathering a quorum might be the hardest part of the Serials decision.

Or, maybe not. When the committee does at last meet, the decision before them is probably not as simple as the rep would like to think it is. First of all, even if areas of responsibility within a library are clearly defined, today, when there's less hierarchy in libraries than ever before, it's rare to find a decision of any consequence that fits cleanly within those boundaries. Does the Head of Serials lean toward the company with a rep who's worked well with the library for years? Well, the Head of Public Services isn't thrilled with that company's search interface for its e-journals. The Head of Collections has some questions about that company's discounts and service fees. And don't

forget that the Director worked for years on an ALA committee with that Vice President from the other company.

Other than the carpeting committee, it's hard to find a decision that doesn't require a look at some new hardware platform, or file structure, or Web interface, or data transfer method. And then to consider all of the implications that any of those changes would have on several library departments. Not to forget to ask, what will the Systems office say? These questions were easier, in a way, in the early days of our technological age when barely anyone understood any of this. Find someone who did, either on or off staff, and do what they said. Today, now that most staff members have at least some idea of what's going on, and now that most libraries have developed some genuine in-house experts, the committee hears everyone. Maybe all the experts agree. Maybe they don't agree. Either way, bad news here for reps, since it will take time to sort through all the nearby advice.

But decisions are harder today, most of all, because decisions are bigger. Most give one firm all or nearly all of a library's business in an area. There's real money on the table. And the library has little choice on where to spend it, because there are few companies left to choose from. With fewer companies to look at, all of them look pretty good. In fact, they are pretty good—they were the ones, after all, who put the weaker companies out of business. And in the process of doing that, each of the survivors developed the services libraries wanted—the reason they survived—and in the process of doing *that*, began to resemble one another. Are the proposals awfully similar? Better have the committee members read them again, and meet some more. This decision will be it for years. Let's get it right. No second chance. (Who would want one?)


Easy enough for paralysis to set in, since there's always a constituency to do nothing, to leave things quite the way they are. The always extendable work of decisionmaking can be a way of putting off the work that would follow a decision, especially one to change vendors. Do we really want to take on all the work of that, what with everything else going on here? Change processes, review procedures, build new accounts, learn a new jargon, that all takes time. Is it really worth it? Let's take another look. The vendor status quo is like a Congressional incumbent. It's tough to move them out of that seat, whether a good or a bad job they're doing. Maybe term limits would be a good idea in this business too, a rep might daydream.

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This is a deadlock so easy to forecast, in fact, that the road not taken usually is this one. Why launch a process that's bound to make some people unhappy? Why invite disagreement out into the open? Why test the organizational structure by trying to coax a decision out of it? Why risk a bad decision? Why put pleasant personal relationships on hold while all this business gets sorted out? Why raise questions that don't need to be raised?

For better or for worse, a good rep might find a way to help raise them, or certainly to help things along once they have been raised by others, and so, deserves no sympathy at all if there's a long wait in store. Why can't they make up their minds? reps might say to themselves, but their only job, once presentations are over, goodbyes said, proposals submitted, questions answered, is to sit down. If it's going to be awhile, that's the business and the right of the library.

And if it doesn't seem clear how the decision is being made, when it will be made, who'll be making it, and under what criteria, the rep will just need to learn some patience. Which they do, having little choice in the matter ... although it can be hard for some reps to get past the suspicion that what's taking all the time isn't the decision itself, but a library deciding how to decide in the first place. 

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