

Notes of Binge Thinker
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The Responsibility of the Library Vendor

In this column, we will look at the Vendor's role and responsibility in library advocacy, an ebook scenario where ebooks are just "another service" and the latest in happenings at our wonderful organization.

Since it is summer and this is the time of the year to take a break from the routine, I am going to skip the Guideposts this month, and instead focus on hot topic that we all like to write about and discuss over coffee or drinks: The demise of the library in American Society today.

I am going to take a slightly different approach to this topic than most. This month's column is going to explore the role and responsibility of the library vendor in times where the public library has lost some of its luster and value to mainstream America.

Are public libraries in trouble? I would argue that there have been tough times for libraries before so we might be on the upswing of the pendulum at the moment and are posed for times when the pendulum will swing the other direction and times will get better. However, during this downswing, I have noticed something that I never had during other difficult times. The library vendor industry does not do much for libraries when times get bad. I found this peculiar and interesting since they depend so much on the consistent funding of libraries to support their businesses.

So, I did a little research. I found a group within the Texas Library Association, TPals, where library vendors can come together to network and share, but I did not find anything about their efforts to assist libraries to promote themselves. I never did find anything on the national level; although I am sure something like this must exist.

What is my point? My point is that libraries and vendors exist in a symbiotic relationship. Libraries need vendors to provide the services to their communities and many of our vendors need us because we are one of their largest customers (with some vendors we are their only customers). When times get bad for libraries, why do we not see vendors joining together to help the libraries in advocating the library to the community, to the elected officials, or to the voters? What are they afraid of?

I am not saying that library vendors should take on this chore single-handedly. Instead, they should do what other industry groups have done and create a nonprofit (if one does not already exist, but I simply cannot find it, which is a statement in itself) to promote their best interests. Here is the mission statement from the Outdoor Industry Association.

Outdoor Industry Association®

Ensuring the growth and success of the outdoor industry

Founded in 1989, Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) is the premier trade association for companies in the active outdoor recreation business. OIA provides trade services for over 4000 manufacturers, distributors, suppliers, sales representatives and retailers in the outdoor industry. Outdoor Industry Association seeks to ensure a healthy and diverse specialty retail and supply chain based on quality, innovation and service. To this end, OIA works diligently to raise the standards of the industry; **increase participation in outdoor recreation to strengthen business markets; provide support services to improve member profitability; represent member interests in the legislative/regulatory process;** promote professional training and education; support innovation; and offer cost-saving member benefits.

There are other examples of industries promoting themselves through unbiased nonprofit groups. I am not sure why the library vendors have not done the same thing for themselves, or if they have, why it is so silent at this time.

With all this in mind, I want to challenge our library vendor friends to come together and establish a nonprofit group that will promote the industry and at the same time assist libraries in building value in their communities. It does not have to be much, but think about the impact that PR campaigns have had in the conscious minds of Americans today. “What’s for dinner?” Got Milk? These are just two examples of how a well-placed PR campaign can build a brand for an industry and help to elevate that industry to a new level in the minds of our culture. ALA has done something like this with their Read campaign, but I wonder if it is time to come up with something new to spark interest in our libraries.

Next month, I will tackle the guideposts again. It was fun to take a month off and have my little rant.

Ebook Future Scenario 3: Ebooks go the way of DVDs

Here is the scenario again. My proposed strategy follows.

Larry Collins looked the screen again. He still could not believe what he was looking at on the computer screen. The library’s ebook circulation had actually gone down for a third straight month.

“This is amazing,” he muttered out loud to no one in particular.

“What is amazing?” Larry looked up to see his library director Yvonne Davis standing next to his desk. He shook his head at her.

“Really nothing. It is just that our ebook circulation has declined for the third straight month. It seems that our printed books are gaining traction again.”

Yvonne did a little dance when she heard this. She had assigned Larry the job of keeping their Overdrive service afloat two years ago when the library decided to offer the service to the community. At the time, the legal difficulties in offering ebooks had just been overcome so libraries were able to offer the digital format in the same way as printed books. It had been a revelation and seen as a way for libraries to save themselves from their doom of shutting their doors in America.

Larry smiled at his director's little dance. He knew that they had made an offhand bet that printed books would be out of the library by the middle of the decade. Well, it looks like he lost that bet. Printed Materials were as popular as ever and ebooks ended up being just another service offered to patrons like the public computers or DVDs. The digital format did not replace print after all.

"It looks like I am going to have to buy you a diet coke. According to our little wager, we would be comprised mostly of digital books and our printed collection would only make up a small percentage of what we offer. I never would have thought ebooks would have lost its steam like they did." Larry retorted to Yvonne.

"Well, I always thought they would just be a novelty item for the well-to-do. Most of our patrons that need the library never had the resources to get the readers or the ebooks. Plus, many of them simply did not want to learn something new. It was just easier in the long run to read the printed material."

"I realize that now. I feel like we wasted all those hours and money on ebooks when we didn't have to..." Larry said.

"Well, you were partially right. It does look like about 20 percent of circulation comes from ebooks, but not nearly as high as you thought. I think the prep work you did to get ready for the service was good for the library in the long run. It really showed us that we need to do some things differently. Without your work, we would have never known that we needed to redo our long range plan to fit the times. Now, we can just make ebooks part of our many service offerings." Yvonne replied. "Come on. I'll let you buy me that Diet Coke during our break."

The two went off to the break room.

In this scenario, the ebook craze dies down. I personally do not see this happening anytime soon, but at some point it will slow down. I think right now ebook readers are new enough that more people are buying them than will eventually keep using them. I am a good example of this. I really loved reading ebooks for about 18 months. I then realized that I missed the printed word. Many of the tactile advantages to reading a printed volume came back to me when I read a book my father loaned me. I just love the feel of the book as I read it and browsing the stacks in a library or bookstore is impossible when you only read ebooks. I am now reading one ebook for every three printed books.

What does this scenario mean for the library? I really like the library director's approach to ebooks. She was not an early adopter of it, but she did not wait to be the last one to do so either. Her staff gave her enough feedback for her to experiment with it on a limited basis to discover if patrons would take to the service. I think this is a grand approach to introducing any new service that is requested of the library. One does not need to get caught up in the drama often played out in the media when a new technology hits the streets. Instead, you can seek

out opportunities to offer a new service, like ebooks, in a way that fits the community (and budget) and add to it, if necessary.

If this approach is taken, it needs to be outlined clearly in the library's planning documents and patron literature. It should be noted in the documents that ebooks are being introduced gradually to allow for market changes and new developments. Here is an example of a strategy as presented in a technology plan. "Strategy #1: The Anytown Public Library will investigate the options available for offering ebooks to the community. As the ebook industry matures and a clear picture develops on legal matters, the library will change its approach accordingly." This strategy leaves it up to the library to adjust its tactics based on recent developments, but acknowledges the fact that ebooks exist and are becoming a commodity in American society today. If I had to bet, I would say that Yvonne Davis took this approach.

I am always amazed how many libraries do not offer technological services to their communities out of denial or fear. Technology is something that is part of our lives and certain community sectors will expect the library to adjust with the times. I can't recommend that libraries jump blindly into offering ebooks, but the day is fast approaching in which there will be no more excuses. If you haven't already done it, find a way!

National/State News

Latest Texas State Library Budget News

We have heard from the Texas State Library on their decisions when it comes to programs and services to the library community. As you remember, the agency is facing drastic cuts of over 60 percent. The decisions made must have been difficult, but I am relieved that we know so that plans can be made accordingly.

Here is a summary of the changes.

Systems Program – This 40-year program will receive a minimum investment of \$2.5M in FY2012 and be closed out during the year. NTLP is adjusting its governance and structure to continue after the state program ends. All this will be discussed at the July 29th System Assembly meeting at the Bedford Public Library from 9 am to 12 pm.

Loan Star Libraries Program – This program saw all funding cut and will not be active during the next biennial.

Interlibrary Loan – Many people, including myself, see ILL as an integral service of the state library and it will be retained, although at a much reduced level. Libraries will continue to be transitioned over to OCLC Navigator and WorldCat will be available. Reimbursement for net lenders will end.

Texshare – Funding for this program was reduced to \$2.5M. Local fees will increase by 35%. All aspects of the program will continue including the courier service.

Continuing Education – This is being retained, but at a reduced level with more online offerings. A CE panel, made up of CE providers from around the state, will be created to review and revise plans for comprehensive statewide CE coverage.

TANG and Competitive Grants will be kept in FY2012, but everything will be reexamined for FY2013. Finally, the state library will continue to accredit public libraries as always.

Workshops

Register for these workshops at <http://www.ntrls.org/ce/>. If the course is full, let us know if you want to be put on a waiting list.

- **Information Literacy for Library Staff**, 7/11/2011, Haltom City Public Library
- **I Have These Statistics - Now What? Getting Started on the Path of Collection Analysis**, 7/22/2011, Mansfield Public Library
- **TechNet 2011: NTLP Conference for Library Technology**, 8/3/2011, Decatur Civic Center
- **Homebound Services: Lessons Learned**, 8/16/2011, Haltom City Public Library
- **Homebound Services: Lessons Learned**, 8/18/2011, Denton Public Library - South Branch

Conferences

Technet 2011

Time and Location August 3, 2011 at the Decatur Civic Center in Decatur, Texas

Tentative Theme: Quick Response Through Technology.

<http://www.librarytechnetwork.com/conferencenews.html>

This conference is all about technology and is fantastic. We have a full slate of wonderful speakers at this conference along with a ton of gadgets and Geek networking (I can call them Geeks, because I am one!) Make sure to check out the link above for more information.