

## **Beyond the Stereotype of Library Vendors – we are not scary people!**

**Natalie Blanchard**

For those of you who attended NLS 1.5, you may remember that I was part of a panel session about careers in the library industry that are outside the square of traditional librarianship. I referred to a book that has helped me enormously throughout my career. It was called, 'Oh the places you'll go!', by Dr. Seus.

Now at NLS 2, I am back on a new panel to talk about library careers, but in this situation, I am here to talk about stereotypes. Specifically, the stereotype of a library industry vendor, the direction the industry is heading and the impacts this direction will have on librarians and their relationships with vendors.

As a trained librarian, I fit the stereotype! I own a twin set (and I love it!), I have an overflowing room full of books that have all been read at least twice, I strive to streamline information processes at work, and I gain enormous pleasure in helping people find relevant and timely information.

Where I move beyond the librarian stereotype is the direction I have taken with my job, but I still maintain these librarian 'features'. I work for Swets Information Services which is a global journal subscription agent. In fact I have only worked in one library and the remainder of my jobs have been with publishers or distribution agents in the library industry.

The question is, am I the stereotype of a library industry vendor? Before answering this question, perhaps I should explore examples of what some librarians consider is a vendor stereotype.

'A library vendor can be greedy, lacking in flexibility and out for their own gains'.

'I find library vendors to be arrogant and like used car sales people or a real estate agent'.

'A library vendor doesn't listen to us. They just want our money'.

Personally, I don't think I really fit this description or ever want to! Sure there are some exceptions to the rule, I think it is a good time to look beyond this rather negative stereotype of the library vendor.

I am here to change that perspective and generalised perception of library industry vendors. I want to show you that we are not all from the school of used car sales and real estate agency, and there I am using more stereotypes!

To demonstrate how library vendors are not out just to get your library budgets, I would like to explore the future direction of the library vendor world.

You would be amazed at the number of vendors who have been librarians in the past. In our Swets office alone, there are four librarians who have moved from special, academic and public libraries into the library vendor world. It can be a natural progression from traditional librarianship and a transfer of skills and knowledge. What is really required in this job other than business acumen is excellent communication skills, listening skills and organisational skills – everything a good librarian needs!

Like the libraries and librarianship, library vendorship is a constantly changing and evolving environment. Vendors are constantly working to improve services and products to meet librarian and library user needs. We are also constantly working to keep up or just ahead of our competitors!

You may be surprised to hear that in the same way that libraries struggle to maintain their importance and necessity in a corporate environment, or battle to sustain or increase budgets minimally, library vendors have the same problems too. What librarians may not realise is that library vendors have similar struggles in terms of justification of their existence to publishing boards and have shrinking budgets too! We also experience staff freezes like academic libraries!

From a publishing perspective, the last five or so years librarians and library vendors have watched the stable print environment rapidly transform into an online only world.

This change has not only impacted on libraries, but vendors too. Despite the large publishers like Blackwell Publishing, Elsevier and RMIT Publishing moving with technology in seemingly consummate ease, there are still so many other publishers struggling to come to terms with transferring their content into electronic formats, the need for license agreements, providing archive access for online content, and these issues are only a few that need considering.

The move to online resources is only going to continue and in studies conducted by industry bodies it has been predicted that more than 80% of publishing content will only be available online in the next five years.

In addition to this, the number of publishers is getting smaller and will continue to do so as the large publishers buy up content or take on society publications or small publishers cease to exist as a result of being unable to keep up with the constant changes in technology and online accessibility.

So what does this mean for libraries and for vendors? How is it impacting now and how will it continue to impact?

In reality, librarians and vendors cannot do it on their own, they need to work together. Librarians can't get what they need to assist their users without continuing development of industry products and services, and vendors can't improve those products and services without genuine and constructive feedback from librarians.

I was delighted to speak to Simone Friend last night. What a breath of fresh air for a vendor! She spoke openly and enthusiastically about how she liked specific products, why she liked the products and how they were useful for her work. This sort of feedback is gold, in fact, it is really like a pink diamond. Pink diamonds are rare and precious.

Without this sort of feedback, and it does not have to be all positive, vendors cannot work to their maximum potential in providing a product or service to librarians and libraries. Vendors invest huge amounts of funding into acquiring content, building new online products or improving them, and also spend a lot of money on sponsorship of library events and conferences. This pot of money is not endless and it varies from vendor to vendor. Vendors have to justify where they spend money and rely on constructive and forward thinking advice from libraries to invest wisely in developments.

I encourage you to look beyond the seemingly scary or inhibiting looking library vendor and go up to them at conferences, like this one, and tell them what you like or don't like about their product or service. Talk to them about your library and your library and your need, and I assure you that they will listen. Library vendors need to listen because without you, they can't progress. Remember, vendors are really like librarians, trying to make a difference in the information world.

An article in the Nov/Dec 2003 issue of Educause Review it stated that "The real heroes of the digital revolution are librarians; they are the people who have seen the farthest, done the most, accepted the hardest challenges, and demonstrated most clearly the benefits of digital information. In the process, they have turned their own field upside down and have revolutionized their own professional training. It is a testimony to their success that we take their achievement for granted."

Quite frankly, this can be said of library vendors too!