NASIGuide: A Beginner's Guide to Working with Vendors

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This guide will provide an overview of the varieties of relationships with vendors, issues with communication, product knowledge, licensing and negotiating, ongoing service responsibilities by both librarian and vendor, and ethics. Many of the principles in this guide may be applied to a variety of people from whom libraries purchase resources, and may refer to serials subscription agents, database providers, consortium partners who negotiate with resource providers, even at times publishers' agents. This guide is focused rather on librarians' and vendors' "mutually beneficial goals and aspirations" to provide resources to library users, and will not explicitly address evaluating vendors.[1]

The Varieties of Relationships with Vendors

Librarians who work to acquire and provide access to information resources for their patrons must work with the vendors of those resources, whether they are serials, journals packages, databases, or some other type. Librarians can work most effectively with those vendors when they create and maintain healthy working relationships. The librarian/vendor relationship takes many forms, due in part to the fact that the library is most often not the end-user of the content, but rather is providing that content as a service to its patrons.[2] Here are some of the basic forms of librarian/vendor relationships:

- <u>Buyer and Seller</u>: This connection between librarian and vendor includes the need for the library to purchase content from an outside provider, whether directly from the publisher or indirectly from a third party. However, this form is by no means the only type of relationship.

- <u>Development Partners</u>: Products and standards are just two arenas where librarian and vendor collaborate to improve service to the library's patrons. Their collaboration is both formal, including such arrangements as focus groups or beta testing agreements, and informal, through sales conversations or in exhibit hall feedback.

- <u>Professionals with overlapping clients</u>: In his introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Library Administration* treating Library/Vendor Relationships, Sam Brooks describes how the difference from normal customer/vendor relations creates a system of mutual dependence for library and vendor.[3] He points out the qualities of reliance and trust both must evince on entering that system. As the librarian and vendor begin to work together, they will discover a variety of relationships, each one with the potential to change their interactions.

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[1] Keith Courtney "Library/Vendor Relations: An Academic Publisher's Perspective," Journal of Library Administration 44, nos. 3-4 (2006): 58.
[2] Sam Brooks, "Introduction: The Importance of Open Communication Between Libraries and Vendors," *Journal of Library Administration* 44, nos. 3-4 (2006): 1.
[3] Ibid.

Make Sure Librarian and Vendor Understand Each Other

This section refers not only to checking for clear communication, but also to making sure that the librarian and the vendor understand each other's needs so they can meet them.

Make sure the vendor understand the following areas of the library:

- Collection strengths and research areas: It is to the vendor's benefit to be aware of the research foci, program and collection strengths of the library before contact. However, if the vendor does not, the librarian should acquaint the vendor with these contexts.
- Political climate: The librarian's political climate may include pressure to offer digital access or additional content for a specific subject area, or insistence on decreasing troubleshooting time for online products, or other external circumstances that affect the library's priorities.
- User groups: Be sure to communicate to the vendor the library's service philosophy, and clearly identify the library's user groups.
- Product needs: Include needs for resources to serve various subject areas, as well as required management tools.
- Service needs: Clearly explain the library's requests for subscription support and management, training, usage statistics, or other service needs.
- Characteristics affecting subscription:
    - Budget cycle
    - Selection to acquisition process
    - Correct/updated billing and shipping addresses
    - Authorized personnel for various tasks (licensing, invoicing, etc.)
    - IP ranges, FTE counts, etc.

Make sure the librarian knows the vendor's:

- Role within the company
- Account structure for the library
- Billing methods
- Variety of products available
- Products to which the library already subscribes from that vendor or competing vendors
- Any relevant business news from the company, which may include
    - Acquiring another company/being acquired
    - Takeover of titles germane to the library's interests
    - Changes in upper level company administration
    - Products being developed.

Within the larger context of understanding each other's needs, there are several characteristics of communication that help develop healthy relationships. Rick Anderson's description of the "Top Ten Qualities of a Good Customer" includes several of these characteristics—the librarian must be, at the right times, assertive, tough when necessary but also reasonable, fair and ethical, strategic, and professional.[4]

[4] Rick Anderson, Jane F. White, and David Burke, "How to Be a Good Customer: Building and Maintaining Productive Relationships with Vendors," *The Serials Librarian* 48, nos. 3-4 (2005): 322-24.

Anderson also encourages librarians to have a specific agenda when meeting with vendors, and to take charge of those meetings. One way librarians can set a targeted agenda for meetings with vendors is to stay informed about the company and any changes in its products. Many vendors maintain newsletters and lists to which they will add librarians. Another important consideration for the librarians meeting with vendors is to be sure they have strong in-house communication with selectors, reference staff, instruction staff, IT staff, and any others whose input is vital to make sure that users will have access to the resource.

Know the Products

- The Titles You Want to Acquire: The librarian should clarify exactly what product has been selected before placing any order, and should ask additional questions, such these: Are there competing titles? Is this title bundled with any others? Is there a competing publisher/vendor? How well do these resources work with other library services, like the open URL resolver, federated searching, or the library's preferred authentication method? The librarian should also understand how users might use the content—whether the articles can be emailed or exported to citation management software, for instance, or reports downloaded to spreadsheets. Trial access to electronic resources provides an important evaluation period as well as easing the setup if the resource is purchased by a library.
- Vendor-Provided Management Products: These products, such as serials management systems, can make ordering, claiming, and reporting more efficient. Some helpful reports for collection development may include checklists of subscriptions, e-journal availability of subscribed titles, or historical price analyses, among others. Subscription details like licensing and activation of online journals, or payment information are important features of serials management systems.
- Publisher/Database Provider Administrative Interfaces: The ability to customize appearance and functionality are important reasons to be familiar with the management system. These management systems usually offer downloadable reports for subscribed titles and coverage dates, and COUNTER-compliant usage reports, in addition to any other necessary information. Universal settings for user options, like email options for articles, search results options for user manipulation, and personal online save folders, are features that librarians should look for in these systems. The administrative modules might also support the creation and maintenance of URL's for the product or components within the product. For instance, are stable article-level links available for class assignments or reserves? May a proxy server URL be automatically appended to document links?

Negotiating and Licensing

Many of Rick Anderson's "Top Ten" qualities listed above are applicable to negotiating and licensing library access to resources: librarians should be assertive on behalf of their libraries and patrons, tough when necessary but reasonable in their expectations, fair and ethical, strategic, and professional in particular. Clear communication is absolutely necessary at this point in the vendor/librarian relationship and it is not enough just to send a vendor an order for Title ABC. Please consider all of these factors in negotiation:

- Pricing: The options and basis for arriving at pricing may include bundling or package options, up-front versus ongoing payments, consortial discount availability, FTE, Carnegie classification, and prior sales discounts, among other factors.

- Identifying the details: Other factors affecting total invoice, including service charges, credits, or perhaps any discounts for which the library may be eligible, in addition to anticipated increases in the near future.
- The order might also be influenced by these factors:
    - Are multiple-year contracts available and to the library's advantage? Do they come with price caps?
    - Subscription versus purchase costs (and what rights does the purchase of an electronic-only resource entail?)
    - Is automatic renewal a possibility, and should the library consider asking for a prorated term to consolidate the renewal period for each vendor?
- Additional services: Are there vendors' services like library training materials or onsite training, EDI invoicing, or help tracking journal packages? There may be a variety of additional vendor services which may influence the library's decisions.
- Licensing terms: What is necessary? What is negotiable? What is flatly unacceptable? In licensing, these are general questions that must be answered at a local level. See the NASIGuide: Licensing 101 for additional details.[5] Licenses have continued to increase in complexity, adding costs in staff time for both vendor and library.
- ALWAYS GET IT IN WRITING: verbal explanations of agreements aren't enough.

Ongoing Service

Ongoing service requires commitment and action from both the vendor and the librarian.

- From the Vendor:
    - Order support. Ordering, invoicing, claiming, activation of online content, cancelling, and problem-resolution are only some of the activities requiring ongoing support. Fortunately, many of them can be performed by library staff using the vendor's management system. It is, however, important for the vendor to provide a single access point for these support services. Notification of bibliographic changes should be automated for the librarian, whether via email or by notices within the management system.
    - Training. If one's library staff members plan to use a vendor's management tool, training can help to use the tool most effectively. Discuss whether the vendor training includes tutorials, help sheets, in-person, and/or live online sessions, and ask for the types of training that suit the library staff best.
    - Problem Resolution. The librarian should do some homework prior to contacting the vendor's help desk, including verifying order and payment details, or license terms, for instance. Be as specific as possible when working with a vendor on problem resolution. For example, screen shots of the problem may be especially helpful to the vendor's representative for online access issues. Another example is when a print claim has not been received, be prepared to tell the vendor how many contact attempts have been made and on what dates. Lastly, telephone calls may be a fast way to reach a person and explain a convoluted problem, but they should be followed up with emails to clarify understanding and provide any necessary context.

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[5] Rick Anderson, "NASIGuide: Licensing 101," NASIG, March 2005 http://www.nasig.org/publications_licnego101.cfm accessed 30 May 2008).

- From the Librarians: Librarians should also consider their commitments to ongoing service to vendors, and consider opportunities to serve vendors. These opportunities may range from
    - Offering feedback when vendors request it
    - Participating on panel discussions
    - Serving on product development forums
    - Participate in user groups
    - Reference to other potential customers
    - Serve on advisory boards.

Ethics

The ALCTS Statement on Principles and Standards of Acquisitions Practice is an especially helpful document for librarians considering ethics in dealing with vendors.[6]

- The librarian's first responsibility is to the library and its users, who deserve the librarian's scrupulous attention to fair business practice on their behalf. Librarians must avoid cronyism or favoritism. Instead, one must evaluate the products on their own merits, and the vendor's services on a documented track record.
- Librarians also have a responsibility to act ethically toward vendors. Respect the library's agreements with the publishers and the vendors, including confidentiality clauses. Pay invoices on time, or make arrangements with the vendor. Be prompt in returning contacts, and respect the time that the other party carves out for meetings. Represent the institution truthfully in regard to size, enrollment, and other particulars, and avoid "sharp practices," which include exaggeration or deceit in order to receive greater access to goods and services than the library has contracted for.[7] Try to resolve gripes with a vendor privately instead of airing them on blogs or email lists. Finally, expect the vendors to act ethically towards librarians.

Conclusion

All librarians have inherited various relationships with vendors, and their successors will inherit their relationships. Because of this fact, librarians must take the long view; as Ronald Gagnon reminds librarians, these relationships themselves should be considered an important investment.[8] Nothing is more important to maintaining vendor relationships than communication—frequently, in writing for clarity and later referral, and in person whenever possible. A final thought might be Anderson's overarching theme: "be assertive, but reasonable."[9]

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[6] Association for Library Collections and Technical Services, "Statement on Principles and Standards of Acquisitions Practice," 1994. ALA ALCTS <http://www.ala.org/ala/alctscontent/pubsbucket/alctsresources/acquisitionsres/ethicsacq/principlesstandards.cfm> (accessed 13 March 2008).
[7] Rick Anderson, "Understanding the Ethics of Vendor Relations," *Buying and Contracting for Resources and Services: A How-To-Do It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schumann, 2004): 141.
[8] Ronald Gagnon, "Library/Vendor Relationships from a Public Library Perspective," *Journal of Library Administration 44*, nos. 3-4 (2006): 96.
[9] Rick Anderson, Preface to *Buying and Contracting for Resources and Services: A How-To-Do It Manual for Librarians* (New York: Neal-Schumann, 2004): xii.

For More Information:

Anderson, Rick. *Buying and Contracting for Resources and Services: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*. New York: Neal-Schumann, 2004.

Anderson, Rick, Jane F. White, and David Burke. “How to Be a Good Customer: Building and Maintaining Productive Relationships with Vendors.” *The Serials Librarian* 48, nos. 3-4 (2005): 321-326.

Brooks, Sam, and David H. Carlson, eds. “Library/Vendor Relationships.” Special issue, *Journal of Library Administration* 44, nos. 3-4 (2005).