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Tales from the Other Side: Librarians and Vendors Get Real

Courtney McAllister, Erin Gallagher, Kate Hill
and Daniel Brown

Abstract

Three professionals who have worked as vendors and as librarians throughout their careers discussed overlapping competencies for both roles. These were outlined as adaptive negotiation, managing and prioritizing tasks, optimizing the library/vendor partnership, coping with unique stressors, understanding how to frame your own career, clear communication and expectation setting, recognizing patterns and adapting, and empathy. The presenters encouraged listeners to move beyond understanding the relationship between librarians and vendors as adversarial or as one of simply buying and selling products. They advocated instead to think of the relationship as one of mutual respect and collaboration, where people in both roles share common goals of delivering excellent customer service.

Keywords: Library/vendor relationships, communication, professional development, collaboration

“Tales from the Other Side: Librarians and Vendors Get Real” challenged the notion that librarians and vendors must be at odds, arguing instead that they collaborate and learn from each other. The three speakers have all worked as librarians and vendors at some point in their careers, giving them a unique perspective on both sides of

this relationship. Courtney McAllister, Library Services Engineer for EBSCO, led the presentation, followed by Erin Gallagher, Chair, Acquisitions & Collection Services for the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida, and Kate Hill, Library Services Engineer for EBSCO. The presentations were pre-recorded and delivered online only; there were no audience comments.

McAllister, whose previous roles included Electronic Resources Librarian at Yale University, introduced the panel and set the framework for the presentations. She explained that they would be discussing shared competencies between librarians and vendors, as well as skills and strategies they had learned working in both roles. Slide images accompanied the presentations to represent symbiotic relationships in nature. McAllister began by discussing the shared competencies of adaptive negotiations and managing and prioritizing tasks.

Negotiations for librarians and vendors have changed beyond the traditional role of simply bargaining for resources. McAllister describes the negotiating competencies for librarians as taking an agile responsive approach. In addition to working with vendors, they may also need to negotiate within their own libraries, between other units, or between other libraries. Strategies must shift depending on circumstances. Vendors must also be adaptive, similarly facing internal—as in advocating for development work or making cross-team efforts—and external negotiations. McAllister stressed that all forms of negotiation are often more complex and time sensitive than in the past. There is an ongoing educational process between all parties.

Managing and prioritizing tasks also requires increasing flexibility with conditional priorities. Librarians need to make time for the random needs and requests that come with consolidating multiple jobs and roles and the phenomenon of scope creep. This requires much more emotional energy than in the past, as librarians must constantly evaluate impacts. Task management tools such as Trello, Excel, or even Post-it Notes help, but there is clearly no “typical day” for e-resources librarians, who often “backburner” their own objectives to meet increasing expectations. Although vendor

roles may be more defined, there is still some range in terms of budgeting time and organizing territories. Professionals in both roles constantly need to adjust expectations based on unexpected developments.

The next speaker, Erin Gallagher, started her post-MLIS career as a collections consultant for Ingram Content Group, a major academic book vendor. Despite being warned against going “to the dark side” by friends and colleagues, she smoothly transitioned into a library role after working three and a half years for Ingram. She found some of the perks of working for a vendor rewarding, especially coming out of graduate school, but eventually grew tired of the lifestyle. Working both sides of the vendor/librarian relationship gave her a holistic view of the ecosystem, with insights into the importance of collaboration, unique stressors for each role, and ways to frame one’s career when transitioning. Gallagher also offered resources and articles—with the caveat that they were written pre-COVID—for more information, reproduced at the end of this article.

Collaboration is the key to optimizing the library/vendor partnership, as people in both roles want to succeed at providing excellent service to library users. Librarians, providing they have the time and resources to do so, should actively contribute to problem resolution. Vendors can also provide opportunities for libraries to be part of solutions. Librarians can seek out opportunities such as joining advisory boards to consult on the development of new products. In general, both parties should go beyond the legacy buyer/seller relationship. Through active communication, librarians can better understand vendors’ expectations and perspectives to change the language of agreements to satisfy all parties. Collaboration can also occur through scholarship, and Gallagher encourages us to say “yes” to panels that include a mix of librarians and vendors.

The roles of vendors and librarians each carry their own unique stressors and they can help each other cope through mutual understanding. Gallagher perceives a decrease in morale around the profession, and vendors often bear the brunt of unhappy library

workers. Library workers should be honest, but do no harm, as vendors likely have very little ability to fix all the ills in the account at that moment. Gallagher says she experienced first-hand some of the abuse that frustrated librarians can unleash on vendors simply because she was a convenient stand-in for the company. Working as a vendor can come with feelings of being underappreciated and representatives are “always on” as the face of the corporation. Librarians, by contrast, have more of their own time to themselves. This is particularly true during conferences, where librarians can socially disengage at the end of the day if they want. Conversely, though, librarians get less funding and have less flexibility to travel to conferences than vendors.

Gallagher advised how librarians and vendors can frame their careers when attempting to transfer between roles. Despite being advised that a vendor role would make her unemployable as a librarian, her experience reflects changing attitudes, and people increasingly want to hire from both sides. Vendors bring a firm grasp of the landscape and connections with libraries. At the same time, librarians understand the needs and pain points of their potential customer base from first-hand experience.

The next and final speaker, Kate Hill, had transitioned in the opposite direction from Gallagher, working as a librarian at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, before starting work for EBSCO. Having enjoyed work with electronic resources, collection development, vendors, and licensing, she was encouraged by her contacts within EBSCO to apply for her current position. The competencies she covered were clear communication and expectation setting, recognizing patterns and adapting, and empathy.

When it comes to establishing clear communication and expectations, reference interviewing skills serve librarians and vendors equally well. Librarians and vendors must avoid talking at cross purposes to get the best results. When asking for help with troubleshooting resources, librarians should add as many details and as much context as possible, such as screenshots and descriptions of the steps taken to get to a problem. Librarians might think in terms

of what might be asked of a patron. Despite what librarians might assume, vendors often do not have access to all the library's systems and are not embedded in the library's informational context. At the same time, vendors must spell out what they need from librarians, why they need it, and keep librarians up to date on their progress. When it comes to setting up meetings, librarians should let vendors know in advance what they want to discuss. And vendors should not claim that a meeting will be about one thing and then make it about something else.

Vendors and librarians should both also be adept at recognizing patterns and adapting to changes. For vendors, recognizing patterns is essential for understanding the market and gaining an edge over the competition. Librarians tend to be less interested in the market and tend more to follow trends in scholarly literature. Nonetheless, people in both roles must try to understand the market and the trends in scholarship, as these often address similar issues from different perspectives. Both also need skills for managing change. Hill believes that vendors are often the ones to introduce change, leaving librarians to respond or navigate. For example, a vendor might make a change to a product and announce why it is great from the vendor's perspective without explaining how it benefits librarians. However, librarians should not just reject change because it seems unnecessary or overwhelming. At the same time, vendors should explain why the change is positive and important for libraries.

The last competency Hill discussed, which summed up the point of the whole panel presentation, was empathy. Hill reminds us that, whichever side you come from, on the other side is a human trying to do their best job. Although people in both roles struggle with their own unique stressors, vendors and librarians both strive to improve access to content and help patrons. Librarians should not treat vendors as adversaries. Vendors should not engage in "hard sells." Neither behavior works well in the long run, and a reputation for causing conflict and lacking empathy will follow a person throughout their career.

Although each panelist addressed different competencies, there were many overlapping themes throughout the presentations. All the presenters emphasized the importance for librarians and vendors to have strong communication skills, as each must clearly explain to the other their needs and the significance of their work. Flexibility and adaptability are also traits often cited, as the demands and expectations for both roles frequently change in accordance with changes in technology and job descriptions. Finally, empathy is arguably the most important trait in getting past the notion that librarians and vendors are adversaries. The lines between both roles grow increasingly thinner and blurrier, with more professionals doing both throughout their careers and depending on each other for success.

Recommended Resources

- Gallagher, Erin. "What Collaboration Means to Me: Perspectives on Library/Vendor Collaboration." *Collaborative Librarianship* 10, no. 1 (2018).
- Ostergaard, Kirsten, and Doralyn Rossmann. "Vendor Relations Strategies for Libraries." *Against the Grain* 27, no. 6 (2015). DOI: 10.7771/2380-176X.7222.
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- "Publisher-Vendor-Library Relations Interest Group." ALA CORE, accessed June 28, 2022. <https://www.ala.org/core/member-center/interest-groups/publisher-vendor-library-relations>.
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