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ONLINE DATABASES

Vendor Communication

By Carol Tenopir

LIBRARIANS, DO YOUR VENDOR reps provide you with the information you need in the way you need it? Vendors, do you feel you are communicating effectively with your librarian clients? A recent survey of North American and European academic librarians commissioned by Jim McGinty, vice chair of Cambridge Information Group, and carried out by consultants David Oglivie and Simon Inger may help improve this tricky, but important, communication process.

McGinty presented the first results as the annual Miles Conrad Memorial Lecturer at the 2005 annual meeting of the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services (NFAIS). McGinty told the audience, mostly vendors, "We spend as an industry probably tens and tens of millions of dollars communicating to librarians. We have huge sales forces that go out and call on librarians, and rarely do we ask how effectively, how well we are communicating." Almost 200 academic librarians responded to his web-based questionnaire or in-person interviews.

Getting information

Consortia play a critical role in helping librarians learn about new resources—99 percent of North American librarians ranked consortia as "somewhat" or "extremely" important for finding out about new products, as did 92 percent of European librarians. This is both good and bad news. Not all products lend themselves to consortial offerings, and, as McGinty said, "you hate to have the number one source...about your product be a third party." He advised vendors to "look at consortia not just as people with whom you do a deal but as people...to provide information about new products and services."

Other information sources ranked highly (over 90 percent) include discussions with peers and courtesy service trials. One European respondent requested vendors "be generous and flexible with

trial times and extensions for trials." McGinty warned that trials can't just be the two-week trials of old but may need to last four to six months.

Information sources deemed somewhat or extremely important by more than half of the respondents, in descending order, are trade shows/conferences, vendor brochures, in-person representative visits, ads/articles in the trade press, and collections review meetings. More subject librarians find personal visits and in-house training important than do head librarians. Large universities value collections review meetings more often than

McGinty got other clear messages: explain the product content clearly and accurately (one respondent said, "Know all the ins and outs...when doing demos"); be flexible in scheduling and use the librarians' time efficiently; understand the library environment, including the various functions of the library; and know where the product fits into the overall scheme.

Reps also need to understand the technical aspects of their product. McGinty's survey showed clearly that "librarians want a straight answer right away out of the mouth of the salesperson." Telling someone the tech support people will

One message is clear: librarians do not want to hear about new products over the telephone

medium or small libraries. Trade shows are favored by heads of libraries at the largest universities but not as often by others.

No real consensus

Close to 30 percent of librarians prefer in-person visits to find out about new products, but 18 percent chose that as their least favorite. Twenty-two percent like to go to their personal computer for a remote presentation as their favorite method, but for 15 percent that is their least favorite. Vendor web site browsing and vendor catalogs have both proponents and opponents. Reps need to be flexible and know their individual customers.

One message is clear: librarians do not want to hear about new products over the telephone. Over 35 percent of respondents picked that as their least favorite method. McGinty warned his audience, "If you run a telemarketing operation, you've got a problem.... That telephone is only to be used to make appointments."

Some clear messages

One U.S. librarian spoke for many respondents when she said "reps need to be much less sales focused and display much more knowledge of their products."

take care of that isn't enough anymore, so "the people we send out to call on librarians now have to be very comfortable with the technical environment." Finally, vendors should understand how the product fits into the university and gain faculty support.

The learning curve

McGinty concluded that reps have a difficult job, since 25 percent of their customers say they don't even want to see them! But he warned, "don't send reps out unless they are extraordinarily well prepared," because, as this survey shows, academic librarians are "approachable but extraordinarily time-sensitive" in a "stressed environment." Owing to continuing innovations, they are "focused and process-oriented, well-educated consumers," and "they expect and appreciate competency." I suspect many librarians will recognize themselves and their desires in the results of this survey. Vendor reps now have the word on what librarians want from them.

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