

**“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” “A stitch, in time, saves nine,” and other clichéd sayings that are true true true.**

by Ariel Vanderpool

What needs to “give” for libraries and vendors to flourish? I think it has something to do with a Venn diagram of the places where forethought, attention, and creativity overlap. “Thinking ahead”, “good customer service,” and “thinking outside the box” are other phrases that come to mind, covering similar areas of library/vendor interaction. It’s often said that the reason why clichés like these exist is that there is truth in them. Really, though, I think it has more to do with the way those truths can be applied far beyond the original situations that inspired the phrases. So let’s take some of these clichés and apply them to library/vendor interactions.

One such proverb that we should all keep in mind is that “failing to plan is planning to fail.” That might sound gloomy, but “forewarned is forearmed.” Besides, “every cloud has a silver lining.” In this case that silver can be found in facilitating library/vendor interaction through a sort of personalization, seen in record keeping, review and analysis of those records, and creative application of that accumulated information to future interactions. As libraries and vendors both become larger, and as digitalization and globalization simultaneously connect and separate us, the relationships between the individuals at those organizations are challenged in new ways. There is a temptation for things to become increasingly transactional -- library makes request, vendor responds, library clarifies request, vendor researches and clarifies answer, and so on. While there is nothing wrong with this, there is room for growth. In particular, planning ahead for those interactions in order to make them go more smoothly. In practical terms, this may come down to things like a vendor setting up thoughtful and thorough customer profiles for each library, and then using those profiles to anticipate library needs. This sort of profile could be built up over time, bridging knowledge and familiarity lost in employee turnover on both sides and lending a depth of recorded history to interactions between newly acquainted individuals.

A brief example: I work at a medical library at a large research university. Recently, our library wrote to one of our vendors requesting a price quote for electronic access to a journal. The vendor responded with price information for access via a single designated workstation. There was nothing wrong with this answer -- we hadn’t specified in the original email that we wanted IP access for multiple concurrent users. But it was a vendor we had worked with before, I believe for some time, and this response necessitated further back-and-forth in communication. This instance suggested that the vendor’s records lacked information about our prior requests. If some forethought was put into tracking our preferences (what sort of access the library prefers, what sorts of numbers we usually talk about for concurrent users, etc.), and attention paid to those notations, a creative application of collected history to the current request could have saved a step on our side (an email back to vendor clarifying the type and level of access desired), and probably several steps on the vendor’s side (contacting the journal’s publishers at least once more and replying to the library). In the end, these extra steps cost both sides time, and as they say, “time is money.”

But this is an issue that “cuts both ways.” Just as “a problem shared is a problem halved,” it’s definitely not just up to the vendors to solve it. There’s plenty that library folks can and should do to make this dialogue more efficient and pleasant. We should equally be involved in noting what different vendors require of us, and try to have those things (account numbers, network specifications, whatever it is that is regularly needed) ready to hand. In the example given above, we could easily have provided what this vendor needed -- a detailed and specific request, rather than a general inquiry and unstated expectations. The more people we have thinking ahead for these interactions, the better -- and “many hands make light work.”

One might respond to my clichéd “pearls of wisdom” by exclaiming, “Easier said than done!” And it is true, as Thomas Edison reputedly said, that “genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.” But I’m not saying that all of this will change overnight -- after all, “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” What I am saying is that, “If a job is worth doing, it’s worth doing well,” and I believe that applying these ideas would help all of us do our jobs better. Some vendors and libraries have already begun this process, and I want to encourage more of us to do so. While change will happen gradually & with some missteps, “If at first you don’t succeed, try try again.” Given time, “practice makes perfect.”