

Helping Libraries Thrive: Keeping Our Eyes on the Strategic Objectives

Tom Sanville, Director of Licensing and Strategic Alliances, LYRASIS (Tom.Sanville@lyrasis.org)

Library consortia leaders all have a common objective—to help their library members succeed.¹ Consortia were formed based on the premise that collaborative action would provide more success than individual library actions. Consortia will exist only as long they are needed to deliver on this premise. The economic times require that we focus on the critical realities libraries face and the objectives that must be met.

Let's start with the hard realities. The prospects for library budget growth are bleak even as user expectations, information production, and information prices all are on the rise. To boot, the increasingly rapid expansion and rate of technology changes require an almost constant retooling of library technology. And, contrary to popular belief, the quality information that library users need was not free in print and other hard formats, and it is not and will not be free in electronic formats. At least not the most current information. These realities have intensified, but they are not new. For decades, libraries have developed the means to sometimes overcome and to sometimes simply cope with these hard realities. How do they do it? Through the primary tools of cooperation and collaboration.

While starting with resource sharing and cataloging, the rapid advent of electronic information and information technology greatly expanded the need and opportunities for cooperation. The use of these new tools enabled libraries to expand cooperation to cope and as well as to excel. There is any number of cooperative ILS systems that have developed over the past 20 years. And now, we see a renaissance in collaborative creativity with the energy being applied to open source systems. Of course, a major sea change also took place in the access to and purchase of electronic information itself.

Herein lies one of our greatest continuing challenges.

The economics of a unit of packaged information, a book or journal, for example, can be traced from print to CD-ROMs to online systems. In this regard, we are still saddled with publisher perceptions and practices grounded in a print-based world of information rationing and inaccessibility that no longer exists. We have already achieved some improvements as pricing practices have evolved, but we have not yet created a new and sustainable holistic system. Combined with more and more information production, we are still losing ground.

It is imperative that we dramatically improve the efficiency of library operations and outputs so that much more information access can be afforded and sustained. This is the prime economic directive if libraries are to be vital to our institutions and constituencies in the future. We must not be satisfied with marginal improvement, but we must evolve our approaches as buyers to achieve dramatic results.

Realistically, our efforts to address the prices of information address the symptoms but not the causes of a system that lacks the proper equilibrium among the authors, publishers, and institutional buyers of information. We are in an age of expanding digital information production and user expectations. In order to thrive, library professionals must address the causes, not just the symptoms of an out-of-date and unbalanced publishing system.

The results we need to achieve are not just dramatically better pricing. Even as we evolve the subscription licensing business models for expanded access and economic sustainability, we must also advocate for

and evolve new business models for open access. We must use our licenses to secure, universally, the necessary authors' rights needed to ensure their and our ability to maximize access. We must ensure that necessary preservation and long-term access rights are obtained. Finally, we must advocate for changes in scholarly recognition and publication to provide a basis for sustainable business models and expanded access.

All of these challenges can best be achieved by harnessing the power of libraries through collective action. We have a myriad of consortia now. How do we optimize our collective efforts on libraries' behalf? Is more inter-consortia coordinated action a way of improving the outcome of our activities? As all consortia look to the future of licensing, library operations, and the future of libraries in general, how can we best help libraries cope and excel? We know individual library action cannot succeed. Can individual consortium action succeed? As a community, or as a coordinated set of communities, might we have the best chance? In our licensing and other activities, consortia must expand our role as advocates of library needs. We may not always achieve as much as we want and some programs may be less than ideal, but we must continue to strive with our member libraries to advocate forcibly and make progress. We must leverage our licenses and other programs to address not only pricing but other important issues. With member library support and with the support and coordination among library consortia and networks, in many cases, we will succeed.

Endnote

¹ This article is based on an earlier version appearing in the December, 2010 issue of the quarterly, *LYRASIS Solutions*.