

Au Contraire, Robert!



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In the April issue of ATG, Robert Behra (University of Utah) lobbed his “heated response” onto the fire we set with our December/January column entitled “Just Say No: Eliminating Low-Value Tasks.” In his indictment, he describes our fire-making as a *succes de scandale*, and levels these accusations: “Many of the two dozen suggestions they make seem likely to further erode [...] the quality of service provided to our patrons. [...] The future towards which the authors want us to move sounds like one that will be controlled not by librarians but by corporations, one in which the patrons will have no say, and one in which all decisions will be made based solely on the short-term bottom line, with no consideration for long-term consequences.”

Zut alors!! These are pretty heavy charges for a list that included “stop using free text fields”, “stop manual tallies”, and “stop storing publisher catalogs”! Next we’ll find Michael Moore hulking outside R2 World Headquarters, with the LC RollerBall Team in tow. Others share M. Behra’s position, including the splendid, fantastical Katina Strauch, *auteur* of this very publication. She writes: “When I read many of the suggestions, I can say that we would not/will not implement them. Maybe we are old and cranky, but there’s something to be said for experience and tradition.”

Well, one thing to be said for them is that, if unchecked, experience and tradition devolve, respectively, into outdated routine and unquestioned

habit, crowding out their restless counterparts: innovation and change. This viewpoint is represented by another reader, who wishes to remain anonymous in order to 1) keep his job; and 2) attend the Charleston Conference without bodyguards. “I am compelled by your just-say-no diatribe in the latest issue to chime in with my \$0.02: u got skeelz, homes/home slice/home skillet. [We take this to mean he supports our position...] Truly we – as a society, I’m talkin’—need way fewer colored flags sticking out of books, and way more library atriums, library coffee shops, wi-fi. Here’s hoping your peeps will be reachin’ for what you’re preachin’. (Just glad, for your sake, that you didn’t tell ‘em to, like, stop using those inter-campus mailers with the little buttons and strings, else there might’ve been backlash.)” [*For the record, R2 supports inter-campus mailers, but only for the purpose of transporting all the library’s hard-copy invoices to the Controller’s office for a brisk re-keying and introduction of random errors.*]

OK, enough fun. Mr. Behra raises some valid points, and these are serious issues. Our exhortations to stop signing printed purchase orders, writing call numbers in pencil, applying custom bookplates, and even ceasing check-in of print periodicals, are intended to speak to a reality that every library faces: there’s too much to do. Patrons, conditioned by Google, Amazon, and the forward-looking work of librarians themselves, speak clearly about what they want: convenient and reliable remote access to more-more-more online resources, 24-hour turnaround on ILL, direct links from

citations to full text, and simple, effective keyword searching across heterogeneous resources.

Patrons, of course, have no idea what is required to deliver these, but that's our job, not theirs. The continuing growth of electronic resources has created many new and complex tasks: license negotiation and tracking; maintenance of bibliographic and holdings records; creation and maintenance of A-Z and subject lists of e-resources; maintenance of article-level links in OpenURL servers; configuration of proxy servers; troubleshooting access problems; and worrying about whether all of this is good for us. These are at best partially integrated into most library workflows and systems, and often create "invisible" backlogs: print/online packages not yet in the OPAC; holdings statements that are not up to date; server/provider changes with outdated URLs.

Meanwhile, print availability is not diminishing at the same rate that electronic is growing. In the short term, the existence of both formats creates more work, whether as print cancellations, adding online with print when available, or binding back issues while updating e-holdings because the moving wall has moved again. It's a rare day that new positions are added in technical services to absorb the extra load. The result: there's more work to do in most libraries than can be done. Something has to give.

We believe that decisions about what to prioritize and what to forgo should be made deliberately rather than by default. This means that library managers must make hard choices about what to stop doing. They must ask: Who is affected? How often? What does it cost? What else could we be doing instead? Which benefits the most patrons most often? In our view, now is the time to focus staff hours on electronic resources, and to reduce the effort expended on print. Despite patron preference for electronic resources, most library workflows are still geared to print. Most library staff gravitate to handling print, often overworking it, because routines are well-established, and they feel competent with it. This is just human nature. But managers are meant to redirect human nature to serve the organization. This avoidance of confusing but higher-priority tasks constitutes a misuse of library resources. Library managers must deliberately shift in-house priorities towards electronic workflows, and begin to apply more a more standardized approach to print. Mainstream print monographs and serials are well-suited to batch processing, automation and third-party support from vendors, agents, and cataloging

utilities. Libraries need to avail themselves of this support, with staff hours reserved for exceptions and higher priority tasks.

We don't argue that print-related tasks have no value; in fact, they have been primary throughout the history of libraries. But patron demands and scholarly publishing are changing. Each print-related task must be re-evaluated for current relevance and opportunity cost—the value those hours might generate if they were turned to higher-yield, higher-value tasks. Is it more important to keep checking in and binding print periodicals than to update all holdings and linking information for e-journals up? Of course, you want to do both—but what if you can't? Which matters more to your patrons? Which matters more to your staff? Whose opinion matters more? Clearly, libraries can answer these questions differently, but they merit serious consideration.

Finally, to address the "more alarming of our suggestions:"

- 1) "Stop item by item book selection": In most libraries, selection is one of many duties: reference, instruction, liaison work, e-resource trials and other tasks lay claim to the time of selectors. Our suggestion is merely to apply leverage to the problem, by spending selection time on profiles (i.e., strategies for gathering batches of relevant titles) – especially for English and European-language monographs, where vendor services are highly evolved and effective. Item-by-item selection should be reserved for a minority of more specialized publishers, languages and formats.
- 2) "Stop putting new books out for review": We admit to mixed feelings about this, but New Books shelves typically require multiple manual location changes for every item. A list of such titles posted on the library Web-site (with links to extended metadata) is a much better solution--especially if it can be generated automatically from the ILS. The underlying questions are always the same: Does the value of the service justify the cost of item-by-item handling? Is there a more efficient way to achieve the same objective?
- 3) "Stop periodical check-in, at least for some categories of material": We love this idea, but it wasn't ours! See the superb article

"Implementing the unthinkable: the demise of periodical check-in at the University of Nevada", by Rick Anderson and Steven D. Zink [*Library Collections, Acquisitions, & Technical Services* 27 (2003) 61-71]—for a very compelling case. How risky is it really to assume that subscriptions mostly work? How much does check-in cost? What else could check-in staff be doing? Every library should consider this for newspapers, weekly magazines, and anything that will be purchased again on microfilm—i.e., high-volume, low-price, low-risk titles.

- 4) "Stop binding journals" In Rick Anderson's words, "binding older issues of print journals is, with rare exceptions, a matter of providing excellent protection to materials that need little, if any, protection." At the University of Nevada, "the vast majority of older print journal and magazine issues are now housed in plastic boxes in the main stacks." This approach seems to satisfy patrons, and virtually eliminates the time spent seeking missing issues, adjusting location, holdings and check-in records, not to mention the actual cost of binding. Staff hours freed by this are redirected to link and holdings maintenance for higher-demand e-journals. Remember, this approach needn't be adopted for all titles in order to realize savings.

Our "just say no" approach is meant to stimulate thought and short-term action, but it's also aimed at a long-term goal: keeping libraries cost-effective and relevant to their users and sponsoring institutions. All too often, academic libraries use the spectre of "long-term consequences" as an excuse for avoiding or deferring difficult decisions.

Granted, for instance, the archiving problem is not fully solved. Does this mean that every library has to retain, check-in, and bind all its print journals—even if the hours dedicated to those tasks limit patron access to the electronic versions?

We're not in favor of corporations ruling the world. But a bottom line does impose a discipline from which many libraries can benefit. Recognizing that every choice has a cost can help clarify priorities. Like corporations, or even Michael Moore, libraries cannot simply continue to grow, absorbing more tasks and resources. They must be managed, which sometimes

means "just saying no." While a long-range view offers much of value, it must be balanced against economic and practical limits. The organization must adapt. Setting priorities means some things will no longer be done. We believe those priorities should be set consciously, and in light of patron demand. Any "consideration of long-term consequences" should include hard questions about which tasks offer the most value to patrons now.