

Vendor Relations: Tales from a Vendee

Abstract: Julie Kitchen is a law librarian with many years experience of working for law firms large and small. In this article she provides an account of her personal experiences with vendors over the years and offers some suggestions for helping to improve the relationship.

Keywords: vendor relations; law firms; law librarians

Introduction – the “good old days”!

Gosh, those were the good old days, when the supplier’s rep popped in for a cup of tea. We would just run through the future publications list and request a few books on approvals. As a result of our little chat, I might even run to making some definite purchases. We would then shake hands and bid farewell at the library door. In those days everything was organised around hard copy catalogues, face-to-face interviews, correspondence and a few telephone calls. There were no e-mails and no bombardment of electronically mailed, slightly breathless, announcements about the latest publication or service. This is often an automated marketing announcement relating to an area of law not covered by my firm or relating to technological innovations of startling dullness.

In my earlier days in the business, the relationship with the vendor was based on supply and demand. If something was needed urgently then my favourite rep, who understood my business and the time pressures I was under, delivered materials when necessary. He even, in one instance, got his brother-in-law to deliver it to my office door. This action is what I call being very customer-plus. As my lawyer was in “I need it yesterday” mode, this was a real benefit to me and one which I remember to this day.

That delivery was a London one. Now that I am out in the provinces, or in my case in a different country, we do not get that luxury. Our supply route is without bookshops and personal deliveries. So you big city librarians please remember to be grateful for the range of facilities available to you, I miss them.

With regard to the vendor relations of my youth I may be looking back through rose-tinted glasses, but it did seem a happier time.

Brave new world

As you can tell, I have been in the business for rather a long time, so now I will drag us all into the 21st century

world of vendor relations. To quote the bard what a “brave new world” (The Tempest) we find ourselves in. Today the book/journal purchasing side is just the tip of the iceberg. Cut-throat modern negotiations relating to highly priced online services take a large chunk out of my time each year. Some services demand more than one negotiation. They often include several meetings, followed by a clarification by e-mails, then consultations with department heads and the Finance Director. Each year I have to ensure that we still need all the services we had last year. I have to tell the partners in charge the cost of the services and we have to decide if they have the budget for them. As they do not tend to be the main users, these being mainly the information staff, fee earners, trainees and paralegals, I have to be sure I can make a convincing case for each service. These are the ones which my users and I need to keep us competitive.

The negotiation period can be extremely stressful but, if the relationship between the vendor and the customer is a reasonable one, and there is an understanding that we are both trying to do our best for our relative businesses, then an amicable settlement is finally reached. In recent years, due to the severe credit crunch, many of us have faced a judgment of Solomon, as we try to make a choice between favourite services. The risk for the vendors here is that, if we lose a service, then we usually find we can live without it. In my experience it is very rare that these services are re-instated following a cancellation. For example, I thought that I would suffer from the loss of the *Financial Times* and *Times* from newspaper databases, but I am coping without them.

My relationship with the vendor

So how do I relate to my vendor? I tend to relate to them in the way they relate to me. I hope that they understand what I need in the way of products and services. I hope that they will advise and help me to react to current conditions, through the good times and the bad

times. If I am told to implement extreme budget cuts and I am honest with my vendor, I do react badly if he then takes up my time trying to influence me into buying a new and exciting, unbudgeted for, service. This may be one which we have had on trial and which we have found does not suit our current needs.

My perspective

I am not trying to be difficult, we really cannot afford to buy it and we do not want it. I am not just asking you to come back with a better deal. Also, please trust me when I tell you that I have demonstrated it to the relevant departments in my firm. If someone needs a product or a service I will make a business case for it and we will review it. I review all new works and products. If I can see a use for them in my firm I will investigate further and probably ask you for a demonstration or a trial of the product. If that works for us then I will work with the relevant members of staff on my side to get the product in at the best price you can offer us.

I want my vendors to succeed in selling me products. I hope that my vendor will know the products which they sell or know someone who does, who they can refer me to. I have had difficulties with some of my vendor representatives. I had one a few years ago who had a training background and they knew that side of the business very well. As a consequence I was constantly being offered more training. This was useful but the rep. was unable to provide me with vital information on online or hard copy products.

Another rep. spotted that the sale of online services carried a heavy commission and consequently spent all visits trying to persuade me to buy premium services. One vendor split books and online so we had two different contact points and got very limited services on both of them. I really need one point of contact plus the name of a substitute when our main rep takes a holiday. If I get a bad service from my vendor rep. I may be "out" when they call again. I am sure we can make it up with a bit of additional communication. I also like vendors who are prepared to consider suggestions and ask for ideas. I like to know why a service has been introduced or changed and if there is a good reason. This is because the change has an effect on my readers and I need to explain the added service/change to them.

User groups

I recognise the value of user groups and I realise how difficult it must be for vendors to structure them. I am on a group with one supplier, but not on a group for another major vendor. In my last firm it was the other way round, I was not on a user group for the first supplier but was on the other one. I suspect that most

information people are unaware that these groups exist, but if you are interested, I suggest that you speak to your representative. You might find you fit in very well and will have a chance to have your say. I am on a small and medium-size user group. I really appreciate the chance to give my views on new ideas and products. This is particularly true of my situation as working in Wales I am now outside the "magic circle" of London information people and on the outer reaches of the legal information world. In this area where legal information outsourcing has become common, I am concerned that the pool of information people with opinions, which often help improve the services we buy, will be lost.

User education

With regard to the next generation of information workers, I am concerned that very little is taught on library and information courses in the UK on how to deal with vendors. While investigating literature on vendor relations I found one Canadian university which was offering a module on vendor relations, including talks and other sessions from vendors for their students. There was a vendor relations issue of the *American Journal of Library Administration* in 2006 which touched on various aspects of the information worker and vendor relationship. It would be useful to hear from vendors of various products during information courses. It is likely that information people will be called upon to deal directly with their vendors in whatever work they find themselves in. Negotiation skills, hints and tips would certainly be useful to new information workers.

What we need

It would also benefit us and our vendors if they would appreciate exactly what we require from a service. For example, Hammicks has an excellent online invoice and order checking service and we have been waiting for the bigger suppliers to provide us with that for more years than I care to remember. I attended a meeting about 10 years ago, during which the assembled company were given assurances that we were about to receive such a service from one of our major suppliers. It is a great shame that we are still waiting for it. We have the facility for entering client and matter plus fee earner information on several services. This provides us with the information necessary to charge out for those services. It can even help us to present to our firms a business case for additional services, where the statistics on charging out are high, so this information is of great benefit to us. We would like vendors to give us the content we need. We do not want to hear promises that cannot be kept, as this is worse than not making them at all.

The role of the information professional

It is our duty to act for the benefit of our users. It involves being friendly to our vendors, but making the best deal we can obtain to bring in cost-effective services to our firms. It is incumbent on us to make sure that we have the best services and the best deals. I always make a business case for a new service or for the return of an old service. If I

cannot produce a good case, then it becomes obvious it is not a product or a service which we need. I promise to let the vendor know and to give my reasons, but I do expect them to do me the courtesy of believing me. I want us all to be in a win-win situation, me, the vendors and my users. Let us treat each other fairly and understand our business.

Please feel free to e-mail me at work with your stories, hints and/or tips and maybe we could follow up with some of your ideas and experiences.

Biography

Julie Kitchen is currently Law Librarian and Information Manager at Hugh James in Cardiff and has a wealth of law firm library experience. She began her career at Linklaters & Paines and has worked in a variety of law firms, both large and small.

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Everything You Always Wanted to Know About CRIV but Were Afraid to Ask

Abstract: The Committee on Relations with Information Vendors (CRIV) is one of thirty-seven committees organized under the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL). The purpose of CRIV is to facilitate communications between information vendors and the members of the Association by monitoring complaints and providing constructive suggestions to vendors of legal information. The Committee also serves to educate AALL member librarians on helpful ways to communicate with information vendors. This article by Rob Myers provides a brief history of CRIV, outlines the Committee's organisation and structure, discusses its activities in pursuit of its charge, and outlines its goals for the immediate future.

Keywords: vendor relations; United States; AALL

Introduction – Purpose of CRIV

The Committee on Relations with Information Vendors (CRIV) is organized as one of thirty-seven committees created by the American Association of Law Libraries'

(AALL) Executive Board to address specific topics relating to AALL business and the field of law librarianship. The purpose of CRIV is to "facilitate communications between information vendors and the members of the Association by monitoring complaints and providing constructive suggestions to vendors of information in any