

## LEVERAGING THE SYNERGY OF THE LIBRARIAN AND THE VENDOR

*Today's law firm requires a new partnership for mutual success*





Over a year has passed since *Spectrum* published “Piercing the Vendor Veil,” an article discussing the gone “good old days” of vendor relations and the realities of today’s information selling. Recent industry events have illustrated that the old ways may not have been the best ways. As law firms rethink the new business of legal services, librarians find themselves struggling to create new processes for “these times” and thus “tomorrows.” The legal industry has always consisted of a relationship between consumers and providers. The challenges affecting today’s legal resource industry should therefore be a shared responsibility.

### This Time

Changes in the legal research industry have been occurring subtly for more than a decade. Librarians have responded well, oftentimes reinventing themselves. Reaching out across departments, they have added to traditional reference services the responsibilities of competitive intelligence, knowledge management, and, in some cases, the customer relationship management. They have recognized the new economic times and actively supported the firm’s mission of cost containment, maintenance of partnership profit, and strategic growth. They have striven to be a part of the revenue stream, taking a leading role in the business research of the firm’s sales initiatives and recruiting.

As law firms struggle with the realities of the new competitive marketplace, client demands for cost reduction have dramatically impacted firm management. Cost containment has given way to reductions in budgets and administrative staff. Senior management, unable to manage that which is not acutely visible and profitable, question the value of the library staff’s non-billable administrative time. As well, they continue to be perplexed about the relationship existing between print and online, wondering why both are necessary to support firm research. For the first time, many librarians are given a monthly “billable” hour’s budget while still being required to maintain administrative library services. Memos are written to management, analyzing billable and non-billable librarian work hours. Firm resources

continue to be revisited with the canceling of duplicative materials leading to the analysis and suspension of subscriptions to “like materials.” Yet budgets, along with the support staff, continue to be reduced.

More and more, firm content choices are becoming short-term, reactive financial choices. Senior administrators pay little heed to long-term resource strategy, concentrating instead on maintaining clean balance sheets for possible future mergers. Balancing scholarship requirements against a firm’s demands of increased efficiency and profitability gives way to the bottom line. Many senior librarians question how best to demonstrate to firm management the librarian’s value as an integral part of not just the cost of a collection, but its long-term strategic development. Feeling that they have lost the confidence and attention of the “C suite,” librarians are often left wondering how, and if, it can be recovered.

### Consumers

Although all librarians have an occasional audience with the “C suite,” they are rarely able to establish an ongoing relationship with this group. After all, senior administrators and librarians are charged with two distinct and separate responsibilities for firm health and welfare. Meeting usually only during budget season, C’s are concerned more with big picture, long-term firm goals, while librarians work on a more granular level by assisting firm attorneys in realizing those goals. However, there is a group with whom the C-suite and librarians both share a long-term and fixed relationship, and that is the practice heads.

Legal practice departments are the cornerstones of a solid law firm, and both the C suite and librarians package themselves around the leaders that run them. Practice heads rely on librarians to provide research and reference, as well as for collection development. In turn, the C’s rely on practice heads for associate management and foreseeable revenue. Practice heads have a high visibility within a firm as they continually work with marketing/sales to cross-sell and grow new business. Practice heads share the progress of these activities with senior management, discussing possible venues of new business. They can share client antidotes as well, speaking in terms of

fees earned, and their activities and financials are routinely managed and analyzed by the firm’s strategic financial analysts who provide the firm’s “weather report.” Clearly practice heads could be a strong champion for librarians.

However, even champions need to be fiscally prepared and, in today’s law firm, that includes not just knowledge of costs but an understanding and justification of the costs for which one is responsible. Economic challenges mandate that management request even the most successful department reduce costs and overhead. A department’s resources, be they print or online, rank high on the balance sheet along with office cost and associate salaries, both pretty much set in stone. Therefore it is only inviting to cut content, but at what cost?

As consumers of legal information, practice heads must be made cost competent, and it is a librarian’s responsibility to make this happen. When was the last time you revisited a department’s resources not just to analyze costs but to analyze the actual value of the resource? Remember, “old ways” are not always the “best ways.” Have you explored alternative resources, perhaps even by asking information providers for a request for proposal? Old analyses may not translate to these new economic times, and librarians may have been concentrating on the wrong numbers. Do we need to monitor and present different financials to practice heads so that they may make educative resource choices, proving to senior management that they, and therefore we, are adhering to firm budgetary goals? This could be an opportunity to reestablish our value—a value based on our knowledge of the resources and of the marketplace. Packaging products and services around practice heads as best practices will need to be based on new financial analyses and strategy. Are we prepared?

### Providers

It is evident to resource providers that the role of the firm librarian has morphed over the years. Paths vary from firm to firm but during the past 20 years the big shifts have been from reference collection arbiter to professional research adviser, to firm knowledge custodian and conspirator, to market/client/Intel-expert and, in some cases, to “all of the above.”

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In today's law firm economy, flat to declining billing growth is a fact of life, and cash is the lowest common denominator guiding all investment decisions, including the shape, breadth, and depth of the firm's assembled knowledge base.

In enlightened firms, the library continues to be a center of knowledge and a sharp, leading edge in pursuing potential new business and in executing legal research rapidly and (cost-) efficiently. In less comfortable reactions to market pressures, some firm libraries closed this year, and some leading librarians have been displaced. This profession is not under threat per se, but in many cases the health of the librarian role reflects the shifting shape and size of the library budget and the physical library.

In this harsh economic light, vendors that spend time in the firm understanding a librarian's pressure and reflecting those growing pains in their own businesses can work with librarians as partners. While the major vendors are pursuing their own margins, they are also generating and building better products and services to survive in this economy of commoditized web-based information. Recruiting vendors that listen to business needs and

respond with pragmatic options will provide leverage to succeed in a firm.

Strategic options from pragmatic vendors should include:

- Creative information contracts
- Diversified content offerings with practical, practice-specific slices
- Multimedia bundles or bundled pricing that preserves the value of the knowledge librarians need rather than the container it is offered in
- Sharp market information, tools, and services that provide leading-edge, current information about potential and existing clients
- Practical software, tools, and services that augment a librarian's knowledge base

A true business partner will work with librarians to audit and professionally reshape the library to match both future vision and budget and not simply load them up with branded product. Competent vendors share this philosophy and will partner with information professionals for joint success.

## Tomorrows

Both librarians and the producers of information have a responsibility to the

legal profession to transcend the "old way" that they have traded information. The "good old days" of "legal information merchants" just vending information do not translate to the new marketplace. Collaboration, invention, and fluidity are what are needed now in order to create our tomorrows.

When is a vendor not a vendor? When it is an effective business consultant or partner who can help develop and grow the impact of a library while reflecting and enhancing the firm's business strategy.

The librarian of 2009-2012 should be able to stand on the shoulders of his or her business partners to offer greater vision, greater leverage, and a more integrated knowledge base that help the practicing attorneys of the firm to trade more efficiently and to grow their respective franchises. ■

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