

Ethics

And Business Practices

by Margaret Maes Axtmann

Libraries of all types and sizes engage in business relationships every day. Here are some examples of these relationships:

- ordering, receiving, and paying for library materials;
- negotiating discounts with suppliers;
- contracting for outsourced library services;
- securing license agreements;
- leasing or purchasing equipment.

The literature that addresses ethical dilemmas in library business relationships historically concentrated on issues such as accepting gifts from vendors and the influence that

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might have on vendor relations. In recent years more has been written about the symbiotic relationship that exists between librarians, especially acquisitions librarians, and vendors. Librarians and vendors frequently work cooperatively to develop new services that meet the needs of the library and its users but that also benefit the vendor in other customer relationships. Librarians and vendors frequently share common interests; librarians and vendors frequently become friends. What ethical implications does this have for librarians?

The AALL Code of Ethics states that a librarian "must avoid any possibility of personal financial gain at the expense of the employing institution." Similarly, the American Library Association (ALA) Code of Ethics says, "We do not advance private interests at the expense of library users, colleagues, or our employing institutions."

These broad statements apply directly, albeit not exclusively, to acquisitions practices in libraries. ALA's Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS) has promulgated two supplementary documents that address more fully the issues surrounding business relationships. Among its twelve Principles & Standards of Acquisitions Practice are the following considerations for librarians:

- strives to obtain the maximum ultimate value of each dollar of expenditure;
- grants all competing vendors equal consideration insofar as the established policies of his or her library permit, and regards each transaction on its own merits;

- subscribes to and works for honesty, truth, and fairness in buying and selling, and denounces all forms and manifestations of bribery;

- declines personal gifts and gratuities;

- fosters and promotes fair, ethical, and legal trade practices.

The Guidelines for ALCTS Members to Supplement the American Library Association Code of Ethics contains similar provisions for librarians:

- strives to develop a collection of materials within collection policies and priorities;

- fosters and promotes fair, ethical, and legal trade and business practices;

- supports and abides by any contractual agreements made by the library or its home institution in regard to the provision of or access to information resources, acquisition of services, and financial arrangements.

The nature of acquisitions and collection development work produces ethical questions on a regular basis. As AALL looks toward a revision of its Code of Ethics, how should the Special Committee on Ethics address the topic of business practices? Should the Code contain broad sweeping statements supplemented with principles and guidelines, as ALA has done? Should the Code expand beyond the traditional business relationships into areas such as licensing, outsourcing, or user fees? How can the Code anticipate new trends that affect ethical business relationships?

The Special Committee on Ethics welcomes your thoughts and comments on these topics. Committee members are Margie Axtmann (Chair), Anne Abate, Wes Cachran, Ralph Monaco, Kay Schlueter, and Kate Martin (Executive Board liaison).

This is the last in a series of articles from the Special Committee on Ethics. The committee will be sponsoring an activity at the Annual Meeting in Anaheim. Watch for program announcements. In the meantime, the committee urges all AALL members to read and consider Peter Schanck's article, "Conflicts of Interest in Law Libraries," which appears in the Winter 1998 issue of *Law Library Journal* (vol. 90, no. 1, p. 7). The committee plans to address conflicts of interest in the near future.

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