

by Chris Graesser

Are We Branded?

Examining the Nature of Librarians' Relationships with Publishers

In the interest of self-disclosure, I should say outright that I have more LEXIS T-shirts, WESTLAW backpacks and CCH tchotchkes than you can shake a stick at. The big game at the AALL exhibit hall every year is to see how many freebies one can stuff in that BNA bag (I use the whole collection now for grocery shopping). And now that I have a child, well, I'm on the lookout more than ever for good toys at the booths.

Publishers always have spent plenty to get our attention and to foster good will. The giveaways are just the fun parts of that effort. In addition, publishers play a significant role in underwriting AALL and Chapter programs, scholarships and other activities. But that doesn't compromise me in any way, does it? Can librarians dance 'til dawn with West and the next day demand that prices be lowered for case law reporters?

Attending a publisher-sponsored event does not compromise a librarian's integrity, provided we do not forget why we are there—not to mooch from our friends, but to mingle with the publishers.

There are a few things to consider in this analysis. First, how does this relationship affect the judgment of librarians as consumers and standard bearers for information access? Second, how does the relationship influence the attitude of publishers toward librarians and librarianship? Finally, what is the public's perception of the publisher/librarian relationship?

How much influence do gifts have on a librarian? It depends on the librarian. Generally the more experienced librarian is less likely to be swayed by marketing efforts. A librarian, new to the profession, usually is not familiar with fair trade practices and standards for legal publications; these are not topics taught in library school. Therefore, librarians bear the responsibility to educate themselves in these matters. During this transition from novice to veteran, we may be gratified by the little gifts and free lunches. Or, we may be intimidated by the money expended by publishers. Networking, continuing education, and professional association activities are important at overcoming this hesitancy.

Imagine, however, what life would be like without this relationship between librarians and publishers. Set aside the fact that our Annual Meetings would be much less glamorous and our Association would face the unappealing choices of charging higher fees for the same functions or providing fewer opportunities for its membership. We could, if we had to, make do. But if we did not have regular interaction with publishers, our libraries would suffer. Ultimately, publishers would be less responsive than they are now. Customer service and product quality would decline. Yes, I would be the first to say that there is plenty of room for improvement. But without an ongoing working relationship, things would be much worse.

In fact, librarians have a lot to gain by fostering a working relationship with publishers. By getting to know the senior executives who attend those receptions and exhibit halls, a librarian can get a sense of a publisher's *modus operandi*. This equips the librarian to better tackle a billing problem or negotiate an electronic license with a particular publisher. When a recognizable librarian expresses an opinion about the way a particular product is being developed, the publisher is more inclined to listen. Attending a publisher-sponsored event does not compromise a librarian's integrity, provided we do not forget why we are there—not to mooch from our friends, but to mingle with the publishers.

Gifts and big parties are another matter. This is truly where we become branded. Do we learn anything valuable when we pick up a paperweight from a vendor's booth, if we don't talk to the vendor? Both the branding and the good will engendered by gifts are superficial. However, branding does affect the perceptions of others, as I will discuss below.

Unfortunately, our employers unwittingly foster our dependence on publisher handouts when they begrudge librarians their one conference a year. If we have to be fed by corporate sponsors in order to keep our travel expenses down, who is accountable—librarians or the employers who refuse to adequately fund professional activities?

When our salaries are low, are we that much more impressed with a free lunch or new gym bag?

Does marketing play a role in publishers' attitudes toward librarians, both individually and as a part of AALL? It depends upon the publisher. Most librarians would agree that attitudes towards librarians vary a great deal from publisher to publisher. Do some publishers feel that supporting AALL financially means they are owed a certain fealty in return? Perhaps. Let us remember one thing: we are the customers. We librarians have a great deal of influence on the legal publishing market, and we should make use of that power. We should do everything we can to make it a buyer's market. Encourage the small publishers. Work the exhibit hall. Ask hard questions.

Librarians, particularly those in leadership positions in our profession, need to be especially conscious of the apparent conflict of interest we risk in courting publishers' support. Many librarians were uncomfortable with the LEXIS brand that appeared on the name tags at the Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, and they have a point. AALL needs to examine carefully where the line should be drawn.

Many rank-and-file AALL members have voiced their suspicions that the AALL Executive Board is in the publishers' back pockets. In fact, most AALL leaders are interested in advocating for the membership as consumers, while being conscious that a cordial relationship is in everybody's interest. AALL leaders are like all other librarians. They must walk a fine line between working with publishers without compromising their professional responsibilities.

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Finally, there is public perception. After many years, I have concluded that it is unwise to display legal publisher brands at work. If we have a preference for one product over another, it is our job to make recommendations to our patrons, but we should not become tacit billboards. I take my mugs home, and I do not wear publisher T-shirts on casual days.

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