



Finding a New Balance: Technical Services Meets Adidas

by James S. Heller

There is little difference between finding the right pair of shoes and finding the right piece of information. Connecting library users to the information they need is pretty similar to how a shoe company makes, distributes, markets and sells shoes. Before books are placed on the shelves, the goal of the library's technical services unit is to ensure that the library is stocked with the resources and materials library customers need and delivered to them when they need it.

A customer can find shoes by checking out L.L. Bean's printed catalog or Web site at www.llbean.com or by roaming the aisles of a shoe store or a department store. The library patron can locate information, both print and digital, with finding aids, such as a catalog or an index; by perusing the stacks of a library; or by searching an online database. In each case the customer is looking for the same thing: the right shoes for his or her feet or the right information for a research problem.

The New Balance Web site explains its patented suspension system. The site details the cutting process, which involves skiving, embossing and embroidery. New Balance's typical running shoe has more than 20 pieces of materials for the upper part alone. The company uses a variety of "lasts" (a plastic foot mold) for different sports.

The Nike Web site describes "The Making of an Athletic Shoe ... In a Nutshell." The average Nike shoe features 34 parts, and

approximately 170 workers are involved in making a single pair. The process of bringing a Nike shoe to market involves category product teams consisting of Nike designers, developers and marketing specialists, according to the Nike Web site.

The process of creating athletic shoes may be fascinating to those who manage New Balance and Nike. But most customers who buy athletic shoes really don't care about the nuances of the shoe-making process. They just want to find shoes that fit, that meet their needs, and are available at fair prices. The same holds true for information shoppers: Library patrons are not interested in how the information arrived at the library (or to their computers); they just want to be able to find the information when they need it.

Librarians are designers, manufacturers, packagers, advertisers, retailers and customer-service representatives. Public services staff — the library's "salespersons" — connect the library customer with the product: information. Public services staff can't perform their duties without the library's technical services unit. Technical services staff deliver the product to the market: They order, receive, inventory, process, pay for, catalog and shelve the items.

Efficiency. As in the commercial sector, technical services units need to work efficiently without sacrificing quality. If Nike isn't efficient, it will either make fewer shoes, or its shoes will be more expensive to produce. Production can't stop, or even slow down, when several of the 170 people Nike says it takes to make a shoe are sick or on vacation.

The same is true of libraries. If work stops or slows down in the technical services unit, fewer materials are ordered, processed and cataloged. A sluggish workflow will particularly affect time-sensitive information, such as newsletters and looseleaf services, the value of which decreases daily. Because library technical services units have fewer than the 170 workers it takes to produce a Nike shoe, library staff must be cross-trained to perform a variety of tasks.

Efficiency is no less important in law libraries than it is at Nike. Law libraries use shared cataloging because it's efficient. The library that originally catalogs or modifies the multitude of Library of Congress records will need more staff. Without that extra help, the library will experience cataloging

backlogs. However catalogers cost money. Hiring more catalogers means less money to spend on books, fewer books to bring to market and possibly fewer public services salespersons. Just as Nike uses the same tongue on many different shoe styles, shared cataloging helps the library improve workflow and increase production.

Access. An L.L. Bean customer who can't find the shoe he or she wants using the L.L. Bean catalog or llbean.com will not buy a shoe from L.L. Bean. If the shoe a customer wants isn't available at Footlocker, he or she will look elsewhere. Likewise, if library customers cannot find the books they want, they will not read them.

Of course, shoe shopping and information shopping have changed over the years. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, my parents took me to a shoe store with salespeople who were adeptly familiar with their products. Today Nordstrom may have skilled sales personnel, but the customers pay for that extra service. Few Footlocker employees are knowledgeable about the shoes they sell. The L.L. Bean shopper must use the company's catalog or Web site, and then hope the shoes fit when they arrive a few days later. Today most library users are also self-servers; they try to find the information and resources they need without the help of the salesperson/librarian. With this in mind, it's time to find out a little bit about library catalogs and integrated library systems.

In the early 1990s, the College of William & Mary libraries decided to migrate from VTLIS, Inc.'s product to a different integrated library system. The librarians focused on the different features of the online public access catalog, OPAC, because they assumed that the customers were interested in those details.

But it turns out that students and faculty care a lot less about bells and whistles than we librarians. Information shoppers — those who use libraries — usually want one of three questions answered: Does the library have a particular book, article or document? What has a particular author written? What information does the library have on a particular topic?

In the 1950s and 1960s, access to books and articles was through the library catalog or print indices. During that same period, everyone bought shoes at freestanding, owner-run shoe stores. Librarians still assume that their customers use the catalog. But most faculty, students, judges and attorneys say they can find most information using LexisNexis™, WESTLAW or some other online database. Lines aren't forming at the OPACs.

When *you* want to locate a piece of information do you sprint to your online catalog? Be honest, now. When I searched for information on re-engineering technical services for this article, I used the popular Internet search engine Google first. If I needed more information, I figured I could find some appropriate library journals or perhaps a book. I didn't need to take the second step. On the first Google page alone, I found reorganization plans for two university library technical services units and an American Library Association article on outsourcing. I didn't find every article ever written on the topic, but I wasn't looking for everything.

Some people say that the solution is to catalog digital information — the “if-you-build-it-they-will-come” theory. Will cataloging digital information encourage library patrons to use the OPACs? Not unless Shoeless Joe Jackson is sitting at the reference desk. At one time, law librarians considered cataloging the LexisNexis™ or WESTLAW databases, but there's no such talk today. Everyone understands that trying to catalog the World Wide Web would doom catalogers to the fate of Sisyphus, the laborer of the underworld condemned to continuously roll a rock to the top of a mountain only to have it fall back down, again and again. Law librarians should be realistic about what their customers will use and also how to best use the libraries' resources.

In an article in the January 2002 *Library Journal*, “The Consequences of Cataloging,” columnist Roy Tennant described his experience searching a regional union catalog for one of his books, for which he found seven independent records. “It appeared that two or three base records had been embellished or altered in various, mostly trivial ways,” Tennant wrote. “One added ‘maps’ to the physical description. Another quibbled

with the copyright date and measured the book 1 centimeter smaller than the other records. One record said ‘leaves’ instead of ‘p.’ for the pagination notation.”

Tennant also criticized subject notations. “Except for the differences in subject headings, all the differences were completely and utterly inconsequential to the user,” he wrote. “Since these variations were so trivial, why hadn't these records been merged? Because the system being searched is a ‘virtual’ union catalog. The records are . . . merged on the fly after searching separate catalog systems.”

“How should our catalog systems mask information in displays where it isn't important but still make it displayable when users want to see it?” Tennant concluded.

Tennant has it half right, but his M.L.S. apparently precluded him from going all the way. As a consumer who wanted to find his book, Tennant realized that the changes made by catalogers were “completely and utterly inconsequential to the user” and “mostly trivial.” The question he should have asked — but didn't — is why *any* cataloger should waste his or her time making “completely and utterly inconsequential” changes?

A catalog system shouldn't have to, as Tennant suggests, “mask information in displays where it isn't important but still make it displayable when users want to see it.” Rather, a catalog *shouldn't have* information that isn't useful. A cataloger shouldn't waste his or her time including such information that doesn't add value to the end user.

Librarians who deem the public access catalog as the most important component of their integrated library system have it backwards. A straightforward, vanilla OPAC — the Google of OPACs — may do nicely. It works for me, most reference librarians, and our faculty and students. We probably don't need the Cadillac of OPACs when an all-wheel-drive Subaru works just fine.

Remember that the OPAC is just one part of an integrated library system. The best system is the one that works best for the technical services staff. They are the ones who type and point and click all day, every day, to deliver the product to market.

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Statistics and Outsourcing. One can't write about efficiency without mentioning statistics. All libraries need to maintain some statistics to run their libraries properly. Librarians need statistics that are required by accrediting agencies and by their bosses. But unless one is billing library resources to different practice units in a law firm, is it really necessary to know how much money was spent on labor materials or the tax collection?

Nike and New Balance need to know how much they spend on leather, eyelets and glue. Does a library? Technical services staff maintain most library statistics, but they have better things to do. Staff who

spend time counting beans will not be ordering, processing and cataloging books; they won't be bringing the goods to market.

As for outsourcing (or "contracting out"), the "Made in America" label is quickly disappearing. Nike probably hasn't made a shoe in the United States since Nike founder Bill Bowerman burned up his wife's waffle iron while creating his first batch of shoes. Staff costs money, and full-time staff cost more money. Is it more efficient for in-house staff to catalog and file or should those duties be contracted out? If a library can't afford and really doesn't need another full-time cataloger, can it share a cataloger with a neighboring library?

Shoes vs. Books. Providing library services is not much different than making, distributing, marketing and selling shoes. There is a bottom line: Can the customer obtain what he or she wants when he or she needs it? Placing the customers' needs first leads to the conclusion that efficiency and access — and in many cases simplicity — are as important in the nonprofit library world as it is in the competitive shoe industry.

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