



Jill Porter of the Practising Law Institute moderated the Annual Meeting program "The Money-go-round: What to Do When Payments Go Astray."

Humorous Vignettes Satirize the "Money-Go-Round"

Speakers Share Strategies for Effective Internal, External Payment Processing

by Caitlin Robinson

Although they looked remarkably like Karen Douglas, head of technical services at Georgia State University's College of Law Library in Atlanta, and Christine Graesser, librarian at Brown Rudnick Freed and Gesmer in Hartford, Conn., these two speakers were working the day watch as Nameless Vendor and Unknown Librarian. They assumed these fictional roles during the program "The Money-go-round: What to Do When Payments Go Astray" in July at the 2003 AALL 96th Annual Meeting and Conference in Seattle.

Described as humorous by moderator Jill L. Porter, director of library relations at the Practising Law Institute in New York City, the scenarios Douglas and Graesser presented sounded painfully familiar to many audience members. The vignettes were created to demonstrate that, when discussing payment problems, vendors and librarians frequently have quite a different understanding of what the admonition "Just the facts, ma'am" means.

SCENARIO ONE (apologies to the speakers; these are summaries, not transcripts):

Librarian: My account number is 09876. I have invoice number 1236790, dated 2/12/03, that appears as unpaid, but \$123.40 payment was sent on 1/1/03.

Clueless vendor: Account number, please.

Librarian: Account number 09876. I'm calling in reference to invoice number 1236790, dated 2/12/03.

Clueless vendor: Invoice number and date, please ...

In the scenario above, the librarian is well-informed. The vendor reminds you of the interviewer in that old Bob and Ray routine about the Komodo dragon; she is following a script and not listening to the details provided.

SCENARIO TWO:

Clueless librarian: I have all these invoices that are marked as past due.

Vendor: Invoice numbers?

Clueless librarian: I don't have those, but I'm with Bob, Carol, Ted and Alice, and the invoices were sent July-March 2002.

Vendor: Account number?

Clueless librarian: I'm not sure, but I'm with the central office in Wherever, S.D.

Vendor: Let's see what I can find. [*Much searching.*] Those invoices were for updates to *Tax for Dummies* sent to J.D. Lawyer over a year ago.

Clueless librarian: Oh, those were sent to a partner who no longer works here. He left over a year ago, and you should see the mess in that office. Can't you just cancel those invoices?

Needless to say, in this scenario, the librarian lacked basic information regarding her local situation and was indeed clueless about basic business practices.

A final scenario showed the audience how quickly resolution can be reached when both vendor and librarian are well-informed.

Using the scenarios as a frame of reference, the speakers guided the audience through a check list of helpful tips and tricks for ensuring efficient and effective vendor payment processing. Porter walked the attendees through the check list, while Douglas and Graesser served as panel respondents. The tips addressed two major problems.

1. Many librarians do not understand the payment process from the vendor perspective.

- **Know your accounts.** Know which titles are paid to each account number. Regularly ask your vendors to list each of your account numbers. Resolve account number problems promptly.
- **Pay defensively.** As a concrete example of why this is necessary, Porter provided a very useful summary of how vendors are taking advantage of "lock-box" technology. When payments are directed to a vendor's lock box, they are sent not to the vendor, but rather directly to a bank. This facilitates rapid deposit, transfer and availability of funds, a significant advantage in today's business environment. The vendor never sees the original payment mailing. The bank provides the vendor with management reports describing the payment received. The bank, in turn, has not seen the original invoice and must

rely on the data included with the check to gather the information that will allow the vendor to credit the payment correctly. As part of the lock-box service, the bank usually photocopies the payees' check, but they may not recognize that accompanying material is relevant. In a situation like this, librarians need to "pay defensively," including as much information as possible directly on the check document.

- **Foster and maintain good contacts with your vendors.**
- **Address problems promptly.**
- **When necessary, use the CRIV tools** (<http://www.aallnet.org/committee/criv/resources/index.htm>)

2. Librarians also frequently do not understand how payments are processed within their own institutions.

- **Know your local accounts payable staff.** Identify local contacts for assistance with problem resolution. Review the information maintained in their online and offline files.
- **Know how your organization pays bills.** Know your payment cycle. Review the backup paperwork that is sent and retained.
- **Issue checks for specific invoices, not across the entire account.** Avoid sending checks that cover multiple invoices. These larger checks are difficult for vendors to process correctly, particularly in a lock box environment.

- **Minimize book and journal purchases by nonlibrary staff.** Books ordered by, and sent directly to, a faculty member or partner can be problematic, especially if the vendor bills the library for the material. It is important to have policies that address direct purchases.

"The Money-go-round" program presented the audience with useful, practical information, with content well suited to the 30-minute program format.

The opening scenarios were humorous and caught the audience's attention. The check list device kept the speakers on track and allowed them to move effectively through the content. The panel was well-balanced, although some of the panel responses could have been a bit more concise. I would have liked to have seen more panel control for the lively question-and-answer session that followed, encouraging brief questions to allow broader participation. It would also have been helpful to have a device for abbreviating the inevitable, and less applicable, vendor-specific complaints.

If you're thinking about purchasing the tape, the introductory-level assignment for this session is accurate. Librarians who hold a number of different responsibilities

in addition to the acquisitions crown will find the presentation useful. Seasoned acquisitions librarians won't find much that is particularly innovative.

As one of those seasoned folks who spend a fair amount of time on acquisitions matters, I would like to see a similar program address the vendor side of the equation. Wouldn't it be great to hear a vendor-librarian review panel discuss a check list of solutions for the top 10



From left: Christine Graesser of Brown Rudnick Freed and Gesmer and Karen Douglas of the Georgia State University College of Law Library enacted two humor-filled vignettes about what can go wrong in vendor-librarian payment discussions.

vendor-side problems? Can anyone say, "Applying a payment against the open balance, not to the cited invoice?"

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