

Strategies to keep the wolf from the door

Collection development when the budget is tight

by Dennis Dillon

With public institutions facing reductions in state budgets and endowment income suffering from a weakened stock market, libraries everywhere are taking a hard look at the funds available for acquisitions. Any kind of change presents both an opportunity and a danger. Below are some thoughts that may help your library develop its plans to weather the storm.

• **You can not set foot into the same river twice.** Just as rivers are continually flowing and changing, so is information. One of the key tenets of collection development is the recognition that the needs of library users do not remain the same. Budget difficulties provide an impetus for the re-evaluation of current collecting efforts, as well as an opportunity to discuss refreshing the collection with library constituents. The next time a user sets foot in your library, it will not be the same library as the last time he or she visited. The librarian's goal is to keep this ever-changing library focused on meeting the needs of its users.

• **Stop the bleeding.** When either a person or library has a serious injury, the principles of first aid apply. Those on the scene need to locate the biggest wounds and apply a tourniquet. For most libraries, the biggest source of potential red ink is serials and continuations. What to do? Libraries can take a page from the book used by financial experts. When reviewing a client's investments they always ask, "Would you make this

same investment today?" This same principle applies to the library collection. Given your current budget and your current user group and your current use patterns, would you purchase this serial today? If the answer is no, then cancel it.

• **Bite the bullet.** When a wounded soldier's leg or arm had to be amputated in the days before anesthesia, they were asked to "bite the bullet" to deaden the pain. Sometimes budget realities are so stark that gentle compromises and soothing words are insufficient to meet the crisis at hand. When it is time for hard decisions, make them and move on.

• **The road to ruin is paved with good intentions.** All libraries are the beneficiaries of publisher deals, vendor deals, consortia deals, a multitude of deals of the various kinds, all of which supposedly save the library money while increasing the amount of material in the collection. However, what is true in times of plenty is not necessarily true in times of famine. If a deal is only sustainable by sacrificing a higher priority item, then it is not in the best long-term interest of the library. Remember the advice of the financial planners: if you wouldn't sign onto the deal today, then cut your losses and get out of the deal. Ultimately, neither the library nor the publisher is served by the continuance of agreements that defy basic economics and common sense.

• **The library is for the living.** This is obvious. But to put it another way, when funds are limited, it is brought home to library adminis-

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trators in the starkest possible way, that the unborn do not fund our collections or pay our salaries, only the living do. While libraries are a trust that is passed from generation to generation, each library's first obligation is to meet the needs of its current users. Sometimes preservation and long-term goals have to take a back seat to current realities. To put it bluntly, a library that doesn't meet current needs, doesn't get funded.

• **The wise ant and the irresponsible grasshopper.** While the observations above emphasize the importance of meeting immediate, practical, short-term needs, collection development would not be such an engrossing art if one weren't also required to think ahead to meet the needs of the immediate future. In Aesop's fable, the ant planned ahead and laid in a store of food for the winter, while the grasshopper thought only of today and was unprepared for the inevitable. While it is difficult to predict what our libraries will be like ten years from today, it is fairly easy to predict what our users will expect from the library a year from now. Recognizing and preparing for the known inevitabilities of next season, just as the ant did in Aesop's fable, is one of the underlying tenets of collection development.

• **Get off the beaten path.** New books, periodicals, and databases appear daily. Some of the new resources may be more valuable than the library's existing resources. When funds are limited, it is critical to chum existing monies and provide opportunities for new resources to gain a foothold with the library's users. This churning of funds and resources helps to ensure that the library remains a relevant, lively, and innovative institution.

• **Partnering is good.** Partnering with foundations, grant agencies, corporations, and other institutions can be a source of new funds, resources, and content. Partnership projects can aid the collection and build new skills and relationships that assist the library's collecting efforts.

• **Everybody is somebody.** A library is a collection of personal and special interests. Just as all politics are local, all libraries exist to meet the needs of individuals. The librarian's job is to balance the desires of these individuals against what is best for the whole. This is not always easy, but most needs can be met one way or another. In other words, every collection request needs to be taken seriously. These requests, taken one by one, are what makes up the collection and what keeps the library relevant to its users.

• **Technology can be your friend.** Technology can increase user interest, be used to add

new content at a low cost, and increase user convenience. When funds are tight, technology can be a highly effective and visible way to reach out to your users and make a difference in their daily lives by putting library resources directly at their fingertips. Technological innovations, such as institutional repositories, digitization efforts, open archives, e-reserves, and alternative journals, also provide the means by which the library can enlarge the collection, partner with the faculty, and strengthen the library's role on campus, even if collection funds are scarce.

• **You can't go home again (but you can move to a new house down the block).** Some reductions in collecting activity are temporary, such as slowing down the rate at which the library is purchasing books, while other reductions permanently change the nature of the collection. While making these changes to the collection, it is useful to remember that both libraries and users are part of a larger world that is teeming with information options. In other words, there are many strategies that can be employed to meet your user's information needs, and they don't all require the library to make an expensive purchase.

• **The core is not all it's cracked up to be.** With every budget cut, with every rise in inflation, it becomes easier to acknowledge that the mysterious collection core is an ever-moving target. In reality there is no core. There is only a budget, a set of changing needs, and librarians using the budget to meet those needs.

• **Keep your eye on the ball.** All librarians are aware that every library user is both a potential friend and a potential critic. In other words, politics and human relationships are all important. Whatever you purchase for the collection will please someone, and whatever you fail to collect will make someone unhappy. The important thing is to stick to the library's mission, try to maintain the friends the library already has, and to make as many new friends as possible. When it comes to building a library collection, everyone is a potential friend, and every relationship is an opportunity.

This general advice won't solve your library's budget problems, but it may provide a framework that can help structure discussions about what your library's priorities are and what it can do to meet its budgetary targets. The only other advice I can provide is to, as they say in Texas, "Brace your backbone and forget your wishbone." ■

In an ocean of information...



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