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Productive partnerships...

Library management systems – can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em — to adapt an old adage. Library management systems are probably one of the biggest change drivers for libraries, and after years of languishing as very poor cousins to the Amazons and Googles of the world, are finally catching up and meeting expectations.

One of my most enduring memories of working in the State Library of Victoria in the mid-70s was watching in awe as the cataloguing department descended on the old enquiry room every morning before the library opened, bearing large numbers of catalogue cards. It was all done very quietly, the relevant drawers were pulled out, as the cataloguers filed the fruits of their previous day's labour above the rod. The drawers that held new cards were left slightly open. Coming in behind them were the checkers, who made sure that the cards were filed according to the filing rules, and their job was to pull the rod out and settle those cards forever. There was a timeless quality to the operation, and a security in knowing that this is what generations had done before them.

The first sort of library automation used in public libraries at least was extremely efficient, using barcodes and batched data that was sent off every week for processing. It wasn't until the mid-1980s that I first worked with an online library system. These systems were very 'circulation and back room' orientated, and although very clunky by today's standards, they started to make a real difference to the way libraries did their business.

By the mid-1990s graphical user interfaces were appearing, and not all of those brave library management system pioneers survived. But finally we were starting to get something that was attractive for customers to use and could promote our collections. As the second-generation of systems was replaced by the third, libraries faced the big expense of replacing their dumb terminals with personal computers. Around the same time the world wide web arrived and the whole provision of library services faced a revolution.

And now we have systems that can add content, can calculate wait times for holds, can alert customers if something that they are interested in comes into the library, and generally adds value to a user's virtual library experience. Single sign-on eliminates the need for constant authentication, and pre-programmed searches help people find information quicker. Many libraries now look on their systems vendors as partners in developing services that can best meet the needs

of staff and customers, which seems to me to be a valuable and productive relationship. As an Association we really appreciate the library management system vendors' support in sponsorship, advertising revenue for publications such as *inCite*, prizes and awards, and their participation in trade exhibitions at conferences. So, thank you to all those vendors out there!

ALIA is very aware of the need to work with all of our suppliers and vendors and National Office staff are working on sponsorship guidelines to help groups, conference organisers and others looking for sponsorship. We need to be mindful of the demands that we place on our suppliers, and not kill the goose that lays the golden egg. At the same time, suppliers recognise that it is our business that provides their livelihood, and most are happy to put back into the sector that supports them. Many of our suppliers share our values and ethics as librarians, and recognise the importance of libraries to the communities that they serve. As the convenor of the trade and sponsorship committee for the ALIA 2004 Biennial Conference on the Gold Coast, I have been very appreciative of the support shown by our suppliers and vendors to make sure that the conference is successful and that we can provide a wonderful program of events for our delegates at an affordable price. Trade exhibitions add life and colour and realness to a conference and it is always a good opportunity for customers and suppliers to meet and to show new products and services.

It is an important relationship between the trade and libraries, and we need to make sure that in the spirit of true partnership both sides benefit, not one at the expense of the other. Another way that ALIA is being mindful of these relationships is to limit the number of conferences that are held in any one year. This is to better manage risk and to bring some sense of strategy and planning into the conference calendar. The flagship conferences including Online and the ALIA Biennial provide an anchor for different groups to organise satellite events or workshops around these major conferences. This means that public libraries or the school libraries or any of the other groups can still provide that continuing professional development that is directly related to their area without the responsibility and heavy workload that organising a stand-alone conference entails.

So we look to our suppliers and our vendors to work with us as an association and a profession to further our joint aims of making libraries in Australia the best we can. ■

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