

I, User — Competitive Librarianship

by **Rick Lugg** and **Ruth Fischer** (Partners, R2 Consulting, 63 Woodwell's Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 603-746-5991; Fax: 603-746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org>

“...all competition is a kind of furious plagiarism.”

— **G.K. Chesterton**

As much as we love working with libraries, neither of us has worked directly in one; we have always preferred the energy and focus generated by competition. During our years at **YBP** (which ended in 1999), we faced excellent competitors in the approval plan arena: **Blackwell's**, **Academic Book Center**, **Coutts, Baker & Taylor**, and **Midwest**. Over time, the most intensive rivalries developed among **YBP**, **Blackwell's**, and **Academic**.

Under the brilliant (if sometimes tumultuous) leadership of **John Secor**, **YBP** in the late 1980s and early 1990s assembled a senior sales group that included at its core **Doug Duchin**, **Gary Shirk**, **Bob Nardini**, **Stephen Pugh**, and **Rick Lugg**. We won some and lost some, but our attention for every sales call and presentation was sharpened by knowing that **Dan Halloran**, **Barry Fast**, or **Bob Schatz** from **Academic** — or **Charles Wittenberg**, **Steve Sutton**, **Kim Anderson**, **Scott Smith**, and **Jack Walsdorf** from **Blackwell's** — would be vying for the same business.

Back in our respective offices in Contoocook, Portland, and Blackwood, the clashes in the field drove service improvements: expansion of coverage, shorter fulfillment times, innovation, and lower prices. Competition extended deep into our organizations, from sales to operations to IT. We constantly sought ideas that would set us apart. But no advantage lasted long: **GOBI** came first, but **Collection Manager** and **Book Bag** followed hard on its heels, each adding some new feature that improved the concept and raised the stakes. We followed news of each other's developments and strategies with a zeal born of survival and the zest born of a real contest among equal players. We adapted and disciplined our respective organizations to survive and grow in a difficult environment — or, to put it another way, we plagiarized furiously. Ah, it was a grand time!

In six subsequent years at **R2 Consulting**, through participation in strategic planning and workflow analysis, we've witnessed a more restrained competition among libraries. Libraries compete with one another for their place in the **ARL** or **Oberlin Group** rankings. They challenge other departments to maintain or increase their share of the university's budget. They dicker with Campus Computing over who controls the Information Commons. They monitor developments such as course management systems,

looking for an opportunity to play a role. And of course, libraries watch each other — and though a level of “plagiarism” exists, it can't really be characterized as “furious.”

But these are old and internecine wars. More striking (and striking at the heart!) and worrisome is the arrival of new competitors from other lands. **GYM (Google/Yahoo/MSN)** and their ilk are competing for and often winning that most coveted prize: the attention and loyalty of information seekers.

GYM, of course, is simply consultant shorthand for a long list of changes facing both libraries and library suppliers. The “**Amazon Effect**” has raised expectations for clarity and completeness of online presentation, as well as delivery times. The prevalence and convenience of full-text electronic content has radically transformed user expectations, and **GYM** have been quick to notice and respond, cf. **Google Scholar**. **IM** and text messaging have become important communication tools. Social bookmarking and user-generated tagging begin to look like open-source cataloging. Technorati indexes 38.2 million blogs; to what extent is that content on the library's radar screen? **RSS** feeds alert users immediately to relevant new information, based on their preferences. 2:00 AM is an actual time that undergraduates seek information. **Barnes & Noble** and **Borders** have redefined expectations about library space. Collaborative learning and course management systems have changed how students and faculty work.

These are difficult times. This disrupted market and these new competitors are much less gentle, often better-funded, and operating on a different set of premises. **AACR2** and **MARC** are not hallowed ground to them. Their goals are based on the tenets of the Web: to distribute power to end users, reducing the need for information intermediaries, no matter how skilled; and to serve users where they work, anywhere from **IM** and **Facebook** to **Blackboard** and cell phones. And of course, many of their services develop from “furious plagiarism” of libraries — after all, **Yahoo!**'s directory structure was inspired by the **Dewey Decimal** system; the **Google Print** and **Open Content Alliance** folks are hanging out in library stacks for a reason. **Google Scholar** looks pretty familiar as well. In sum, the rules have changed, and continue to change. Competition is tougher and more necessary than ever. Good!

Because, although competition causes ulcers, it also confers benefits. A competitive threat can wake us up, and instill a sense of urgency. It forces us to focus on users, efficiency, and effectiveness. Competitive think-

ing compels us to identify our core skills and advantages, to test them in the market, to think in terms of opportunities and threats. It draws our focus outward, toward users and competitors. Good competition can help us define our priorities, and explain ourselves persuasively.

In fact, libraries do hold an edge in many areas, especially if they're willing to acknowledge new conditions, to stand and fight, and to make their case. What are the library's competitive advantages? Well, here's a start:

- The library “brand” (assurance of information quality)
- Special Collections (unique content)
- Metadata and Information Structure
- Breadth & Depth of Print Collections
- Controlled Vocabularies and Classification
- Relationships with Academic Departments
- Locally produced original digital content (from theses to data sets)
- Archiving (caretakers of the historical record)

Under competitive conditions, some libraries are floundering, mired in tradition and denial, or hampered by the insular perspectives of some long-time staff. But others are leading — innovating, competing, “furious plagiarizing,” reclaiming and improving ideas that **Google**, **Yahoo** and others have appropriated from us, and offering new ones of their own. These people and organizations are rediscovering and redefining the core of library service in the face of competition — and sometimes winning!

- The **University of Minnesota** has created an “Undergraduate Virtual Library” (<http://www.lib.umn.edu/undergrad/>) that incorporates **Google**-style searching, quick links, customization, blog hosting, and **RSS** feeds.
- **Ross Atkinson's** “Six Key Challenges for Collection Development” from last fall's **Janus Conference** (<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/2608>) acknowledges a radically changed content environment, and offers clear collections strategies that, if implemented, could enhance libraries' competitiveness.
- The **University of California** system's **Bibliographic Services Task Force** has issued a stinging critique of the **OPAC's** current capabilities, and detailed recommendations on how to improve the user experience of searching.

(<http://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/sopag/BSTF/Final.pdf>).

- **Susan Gibbons** and colleagues of the **University of Rochester** (including an anthropologist on the Library staff) have closely studied undergraduate information-seeking behavior as a basis for extending the Libraries' reach into dorms, frat houses, dining halls, and buses. (www.taigaforum.org/pres/GibbonsTransformingTaiga20060327.ppt)
- **University of Pennsylvania's PennTags** (<http://tags.library.upenn.edu/>) enables user-defined tags for Web bookmarks, as well as library content.
- In the spirit of "aggregating supply", many consortia and library cooperatives have instituted 1-2 day interlibrary borrowing. See **NExpress** for an example (<http://www.wellesley.edu/Library/NExpress/>).

These are just examples, of course. There

are many more initiatives underway: links to **OpenWorldCat** records from **Google** search results; improvements in searching that range from **NCSU's** new **Endeca-based OPAC** and graphical interfaces such as **TLC's AquaBrowser** to **FRBR-ized** results from **RLG's RedLightGreen**; all manner of digital repositories hosting everything from theses to massive data sets; and a renaissance in Special Collections discoverability. New undertakings appear every day. (Shameless Commerce Division: **R2** has developed a half-day seminar highlighting many of them.) In short, many of our colleagues have entered the fray, and are showing librarians to be world-class competitors. Long may they run, because we're engaged in a marathon, not a sprint:

"The knowledge society will inevitably become far more competitive than any society we have yet known."

— *Peter Drucker*