Introduction

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In 1973, when the publications committee of Library Trends proposed an issue on “An Analysis and Survey of Commercial Library Supply Houses” for publication in the library centennial year of 1976, it became necessary for the editor to look sharply at the commercial contributions to the profession of librarianship to determine what shape an issue on the topic would take. It soon became quite obvious that in the past ten to fifteen years there has been a great change in the availability of commercial library supply houses, the nature of their services, and the type of products they handle.

When Melvil Dewey organized and founded his commercial library supply house as the first to concern itself specifically with library needs (at the same time he was founding ALA and Library Journal), his concern was with the development of library supplies and furniture designed specifically to serve the profession. Beyond that, the suppliers who served libraries sold books, periodicals, binding and some services, thus limiting the extent to which commercial houses served libraries. Also, for a long period of time libraries were a secondary market for producers of commercial products rather than a prime market. While libraries are still not generally a major market, they have become a prime market for commercial library supply houses; there are also specific library sales divisions in many companies, as well as many more companies which exist solely on sales to libraries.

With the onset of inflation, the rapid increase in budget allocations for personnel, and the rapid changes in handling library information, the library supply house has become an entirely different breed. Librarians are now working in the commercial supply field and, because of the flexibility that the search for profit supplies, it has been the commercial supplier rather than the professional practitioner

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who has furthered changes in the field. This makes the topic of the commercial library supplier a most significant one in the rapidly changing arena of library service.

This issue of Library Trends is an attempt to study trends in the development of the library supplier, both those aspects in existence and new ones that are emerging. Each contributor was asked to review critically the functions of the suppliers in his specialty area, to identify the types of services being performed, listing some of the elements which must be considered in selecting a supplier, in discussing costs and pricing policies, and in determining ways to evaluate the supplier. The publications committee also requested that the emphasis be placed on profit-making institutions and the services they provide to all types of libraries, rather than on nonprofit institutions which at present may be performing services for a fee. The literature is not formidable in this area. Acceptance of the commercial supplier as a partner in developing improved library service has been slow in coming but those contributors with commercial connections were reminded that the purpose of this issue was to develop an understanding of the supply relationship, to delineate problems of dealing with the supplier, and to speculate on the future of the situation.

Not all commercial library suppliers could be discussed, so selection was based on the editor's own determination of significant areas for consideration in this centennial year of librarianship. Library furniture and furnishings had been the subject of an entire Library Trends issue in 1965. Developments are still taking place in this area, but it was felt that the state of the art has not significantly changed, and this topic was omitted for the current issue.

This does not mean that some of the old standards were overlooked, however. Instead, an effort has been made to consider old and new facets of library applications of the commercial library supply houses. Thus, Luker and Runyon discuss the problems of computer involvement, attendant supplies and hardware as libraries might encounter these problems while developing an automated project. Roth follows with an article on the oldest commercial supplier—the book wholesaler—taking note of the services and the changes in those services. Huff presents a significant paper on the serials supplier at a time when that commercial enterprise is undergoing drastic change due to interlibrary cooperation and consolidation as a means of making library service more efficient and less costly. Folcarelli and Ferragamo approach the topic of microform publications, hardware and supplies from the different standpoints of li-
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brarian/library school professor and sales manager supervising installation of large segments of microfilm in libraries. Together they discuss the considerations and concerns in the purchase and use of this growing group of library materials. Also in the computer area, Brownrigg and Bruer draw on their experiences in developing an automated turn-key system at New York University as they analyze this important new development which has its own set of concerns and a special group of commercial suppliers.

Audiovisual materials, particularly films, are increasingly in evidence in libraries. Hingers brings his public library system experience to bear in discussing dealings with suppliers of both software and hardware. He also reviews short-cut approaches to effective decision-making which may be familiar to some, but new to many.

Library binding remains a significant problem in many libraries. Since dealing with a library binder is often considered to be a function of the purchasing department, Matt Roberts of the Library of Congress was asked to examine the problem as a professional. He has done an excellent job of considering the library binder, the price problem, improvements in the art of binding and the concerns with the purchasing agent in buying binding. McConkey, with long experience in writing a column on new development in library supplies and equipment, examines the library supply house in Dewey’s terms in its traditional role of providing libraries with the little necessities vital to their operation. He was asked to discuss the sources of supply since so many of the items are now available from the local stationery supplier, campus bookstore, etc. He suggests a basis for decision-making which demonstrates a firm understanding of the problems involved.

Cataloging as a concept has been written about more than any other service practiced and used by libraries. Hines, who has been a leader in many of these writings, reviews the services provided by many suppliers in competition for the library dollar. He offers a definition of commercial cataloging services which gives an indication of what they are and what they do, and relates them to noncommercial services to indicate their effect on libraries. In the final paper, Bonsall discusses the evolution of commercial library supply and service houses. In a very positive way he supports the belief which motivated this issue: by working in concert with knowledgeable vendors it is possible for managing librarians to adopt new systems and improve the services today’s library offers to its users.