The Audiovisual Supplier: Dealing with Dealers and Distributors

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"Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough."
(Isaiah 56:11)

The audiovisual supplier—the dealer or distributor of audiovisual goods and services—comes in many shapes and sizes. Fortunately for us all, the majority of suppliers do not fall into the “greedy dog” category. For the audiovisual librarian, faced with new and ever-changing technologies and public demands, the establishment and maintenance of good relationships with suppliers is of prime importance.

When a reliable dealer is found, he is to be cherished. His role should continue before, during, and after the sale. Sound advice and guidance are needed before a transaction to help make a wise choice which may not necessarily be the cheapest in the short run. During the sale, especially if it is a large one requiring many separate components (such as a video installation), the dealer may suggest substitutes and other changes within the allotted budget. It is after the sale, however, that may be the most critical time. Especially when dealing with expensive equipment (and to a lesser extent software items), the service follow-up is the most important aspect of all.

HARDWARE DISTRIBUTORS

Any piece of mechanical/electronic hardware will need tender loving care sooner or (preferably) later. This is one of the main reasons for not automatically accepting the lowest bid. One reason that a company may be able to offer the lowest price is precisely because it has no intention or capability of offering vital services to its customers after delivery.

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After a few mistakes have been made and a certain period of time has passed, anyone can separate the honest and reliable dealers in his vicinity from the “greedy dogs.” The first time around, however, is the most difficult. How does one find the reliable dealer? Aside from the obvious method of looking in the local Yellow Pages, one can talk to other audiovisual users in the community. This might be another library, another school, or even an advanced hobbyist.

It is difficult, and frequently impossible, to obtain reliable, objective reports about hardware items. *Library Technology Report* can be of some help, but it does not cover every item. Although it does not evaluate equipment, an annual publication, *The Audio-Visual Equipment Directory*, is a good place to start when looking for just about any item of hardware. This directory should be on every standing-order list. The sheer variety of items offered is bewildering and, unless one has special training and knowledge, the technical specifications can be virtually unintelligible. This is yet another situation where a knowledgeable dealer is an invaluable reference tool. He is usually prepared and eager to aid in the selection of equipment that is within the budget and will satisfy (and continue to satisfy) a library’s needs.

Beyond the dealer who will actually sell to you is the manufacturer. Despite the wealth of information found in the *Audio-Visual Equipment Directory* and available from whatever dealer or dealers one has chosen, the manufacturer can often supply additional information to help make an intelligent choice.

For an expensive investment such as videotape equipment, the manufacturer or importer will frequently be willing to send a representative to discuss your needs and problems without obligation. This ploy, of course, would be most valuable after deciding upon a particular brand. The manufacturer will have advance knowledge of any imminent model changes, and can provide more detailed information about his product than any individual dealer is likely to have. While the manufacturer’s representative will not really feel free to recommend a particular dealer, he will, if pressed, offer information about his largest clients. This information might be important if you are concerned with minimum delivery time.

The terms of a warranty or guarantee must be complied with in order to meet the manufacturer’s conditions for keeping it in force. For example, if any modification of equipment is done, it may void the manufacturer’s warranty. Both the manufacturer and the dealer can give advice about this.

Trade shows are regularly held in many major cities. The local
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Educational Communications Council or the equivalent (often associated with schools) may have exhibitions at these shows which are valuable to attend. On the national level, *Business Screen* is a good publication in which announcements will be listed; *Variety* and *Billboard* are other informative publications. Once again, the dealer would be a likely source of information, even if he is not exhibiting. Surely, some of the manufacturers he represents will be there. Even if one has no immediate intention of buying it is good to know what is new. Such exhibitions are also a good opportunity to get on desired mailing lists.

An informed dealer can often steer his customers into new paths of thought. The most expensive solution to any given problem is not necessarily the best. If there is the possibility of acquiring videotape capability for a particular project, a good dealer might suggest the less expensive alternative: audiotape. If what is to be shown is truly visual (such as a dance demonstration), videotape is a logical choice. If, however, material to be prepared for the archives is chiefly speech (perhaps a book-talk), audiotape would be the proper choice.

As examples of the types of questions to ask a dealer, consider the following:

1. When is audiotape better than videotape?
2. When is forward projection of slides better than small-screen rear-projection?
3. When is open-reel format to be preferred to the audio-cassette?
4. Should one produce a filmstrip or a set of slides?

A good dealer should be able to outline the advantages and disadvantages of almost any situation based on his experience.

Concerning relative cost of equipment, there are two basic philosophies to consider. One philosophy opts for the most elaborate and expensive hardware it is possible to obtain with any given budget. The theory behind this is that good equipment will last much longer and is cheaper in the long run. The opposite philosophy contends that the cheapest equipment should be bought and disposed of or replaced whenever necessary.

Once again, the dealer's advice should be sought. Unless the model in question has recently come on the market, he will know, in general terms and for average use, how long it will probably last. The dealer should play a role with respect to his clients that is more than that of an order-taker. Taking time to give the salesman a tour of the facilities.
and to explain in detail what is being accomplished puts the dealer in a much better position to serve his customer. Conditions and needs can vary so widely that only a custom-tailored answer will do.

There is truly no "best" 16mm projector or other piece of equipment. The "best" is whatever is best for a unique set of circumstances. What might be a perfectly suitable piece of equipment for permanent installation might not be at all suitable if it has to be transported to a variety of locations. When buying a piece of fairly delicate electronic equipment such as a television set, the dealer might not be able to make the best suggestion if he assumes that the set will be installed in a corner and never moved. If the customer does not explain that the television is to be moved around, the dealer will probably not suggest buying a sturdy, wheeled case lined with foam rubber to transport it. It should be remembered, however, that even the best dealer sometimes does not think to suggest an item he does not regularly stock.

Essentially, we have been talking about the wholesale rather than the retail dealer. In the context of audiovisual hardware, the wholesaler is one who is in business primarily to serve the industrial and educational markets. Most of his stock-in-trade will be illustrated in a catalog. Not every item will always be in stock and ready for immediate delivery. Usually the catalog will contain the list price as recommended by the manufacturer. The specifications and copy will probably come directly from the manufacturer and be printed up with no changes. (This accounts for the similarity of most company catalogs.) The marked price is seldom the selling price, however. To begin negotiations, it is good to ask if there is a state contract price—if indeed the state in question negotiates such prices. Dealers will seldom volunteer this information, but invariably will answer directly if asked.

Some items, such as still cameras, lights, and turntables, might be purchased from a local retail dealer. Long before there is any need for such a person, it is wise to foster at least a nodding acquaintance with local retail dealers. If it is a camera shop, for example, requests for projector rental, etc., can be referred to him. If you publish a catalog of films available to the public, it might benefit circulation to leave a complimentary copy with the local retail dealer. When the time comes to buy smaller items, he will probably give you a substantial discount.
Software comes in a variety of guises, each with its own merits and potential uses. The most familiar to librarians and teachers remains the 16mm film; other formats are rapidly gaining ground, however, particularly videotape in the one-half inch and three-quarter inch formats. An important trend just over the horizon is the videodisc. If, as reported, the discs will sell in the general price range of phonodiscs, the implications for libraries, schools and home users will be tremendous. Among the envisioned products is a player priced in the $400 range, in price competition with a moderately priced stereo system.

It should be noted in regard to 16mm film that, in addition to the usual pattern of outright purchase, the possibilities of leasing and short-term rental also exist as a growing trend. While a familiar favorite such as *The Red Balloon* is available by lease exclusively, the opportunity does exist to negotiate with distributors about many titles, particularly feature films. Films Inc. has long had a number of excellent titles for lease, including the classic film that belongs in every collection: *Citizen Kane*. Very recently, United Artists has also entered the leasing picture. Many other distributors have a list of titles available for leasing.

Because the situation is constantly changing, one could profit from asking about the availability of any film one might want. More companies are considering leasing films as time, the economy, and competition bring new pressures to the distribution business.

There are many times when commitment to a five-year or life-of-print lease is not desirable. The long-term leasing of features is most conveniently handled on a library-system level as a part of its regular service. However, an often-overlooked possibility is joining with several other local libraries or schools on a cost-sharing basis. The object is to bring an expensive feature film or series of films to a number of local institutions. Such cooperative effort can result in considerable dollar savings.

Most of the major distributors are willing to offer much help in planning a program. If, for example, a film normally rents for $100 per showing, many libraries would find it impossible to fit it into their limited budget. However, if four libraries decide to band together and schedule the film during a two-week period, the distributor might offer the film for that period for $150. For $37.50, therefore, each
library would be able to show the title that would normally cost it $100. This is the type of deal that can be worked out through individual negotiation. If a distributor's business relies on mail-order (and most frequently it does), a turn-around of two circulations a month is about average. Using the example given above, the distributor comes out ahead (he has received $150 instead of $100 for a film during a two-week period) and each of the renting institutions comes out ahead by $62.50.

While each case, each title, and each distributor will add a new factor to the equation, a rule of thumb based on several years' experimentation with precisely this type of program emerges. For any given film, double the lowest basic rental fee and multiply that figure by the number of months you intend to lease a title. The final sum should be a rough figure around which you can work with the distributor. If there is daily truck delivery, or if the libraries are willing to carry the print from library to library themselves, the number of libraries which can be served is much greater than the number of circulations the distributor can expect to handle with a mail-order business.

Once a rough figure has been determined and negotiations for the actual price have begun, the distributor may offer a much lower price than anticipated. This is particularly true with certain older films that may not have become major "cult" titles. Sometimes, however, a price larger than the estimate has to be paid for some of the great foreign classics or popular recent titles.

Sometimes the distributor will not be able to release a particular title for an extended period. He may have an insufficient number of prints to handle both special orders and his regular trade, or his distributor (the legal owner of the copyright) may not be willing to allow the sort of deal we are considering.

Occasionally, it will be necessary to negotiate on the basis of the number of showings rather than of the time period the film will be in your possession. In this case, the distributor might want the full regular fee for the first showing and a percentage of the full fee for each subsequent screening. In almost every case, however, the price turns out to be a bargain.

A word of advice: much time can be lost by indecisive planning. If, for example, five libraries decide to work out a shared-cost program of feature films, considerable discussion will inevitably arise about which titles are to be chosen. The distributors must then be contacted to check on prices and the shared-cost arithmetic done. If there are
too many conferences, disagreements, disappointments, etc., the
planning could drag out forever and cost more in staff time than the
savings such cooperation could bring. What is needed is a group of
program planners who have the authority to say "yes" or "no"
immediately without needing to check back with a director about
budgets, meeting room availability that week, and so forth.

Each person involved with the planning should be prepared to
suggest titles, accept reasonable compromises based on availability
from the distributor and the needs of his colleagues, judge when the
programs can be realistically scheduled and make switches when the
need arises, and commit money up to some previously set limit.

Once a good relationship has been established with a distributor, it
is often possible to get quotes by telephone. Of course, the distributor
might prefer to think about it for a longer time—if you have the time.
However, as more and more library systems and individual libraries
are making these arrangements, distributors are quickening the pace
because they are getting accustomed to dealing with such needs.
Especially in times of tight money, such deals are important both to
the libraries and to the distributors.

On the subject of buying films outright, the story is a shorter one.
Purchase is usually a matter of critical previewing and, if the decision
is made to buy, of looking up the current price in the distributor's
catalog. However, it does pay to reserve some funds for special sales
or closeouts.

There are a few "rules" to consider and apply to the situation in
question:

1. Be sure that you get on a lot of mailing lists and that your files are
   kept up to date.
2. Whenever a salesman calls (in person or on the telephone) ask for
   the latest catalog or list of his recent releases.
3. Since no one can possibly preview all the films released in any
given year, ask the salesman which films have been good sellers to
   other libraries. This is a valuable checkpoint and not a substitute
   for regular previewing; the bandwagon approach is not always
   valid.

An invaluable organization to belong to is the Educational Film
Library Association (EFLA). For a modest annual fee, the association
will keep its members up to date with film evaluations and news of
interest to the audiovisual field. A list of their charges and their many
helpful publications is worth requesting, also. Once a year, the American Film Festival in New York City is held under the aegis of EFLA. The festival provides an opportunity to catch up on the latest releases in almost any category, such as fine arts, social studies, history and archaeology, teacher education, labor and management, religion and society, and feature-length documentaries.

Such materials as slides, filmstrips, and audiotapes are frequently not offered on a preview basis. This will vary depending on the distributor and his policy. Slides, particularly if they are of well-known works of art, are no problem. All that the buyer can ask is that they be technically acceptable with proper exposure, framing, and correct color balance. Filmstrips and audiotapes will require a more critical evaluation. Is the content interesting and accurate? Is the technical quality adequate? An additional test of audiotapes (if you plan to copy them) is to make a trial run. Is the quality of reproduction good? Music can be especially difficult and demands a high-quality tape and top-notch copying equipment.

Many excellent programs that turn up on television continue to be available through distributors long after the original airdate is past. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Brian's Song, Civilisation, The Louvre, and The Mystery of Stonehenge are just a few of the varied titles still playing at regular intervals in libraries and schools around the country. While programs from the commercial networks are divided up among many distributors, it should be noted that productions seen on the educational television stations are available from the Indiana University Audio-Visual Center (Bloomington, Indiana 47401). A catalog listing both purchase and rental prices is available. Volume discounts are available if the order totals $2,500 or more; quantity discounts are also available if two or more prints of a single title are ordered.

The National Information Center for Educational Media at the University of Southern California publishes an Index to 16mm Educational Films, an Index to 35mm Filmstrips, an Index to Educational Overhead Transparencies. All of these are multivolume works. Other individual indices cover producers and distributors, videotapes, audiotapes, 8mm motion picture cartridges, educational records, and slides. Microfiche copies are also available.

The Educators Progress Service, Inc., supplies Educators Guide to Free Films, and companion volumes for filmstrips, tapes, scripts and transcriptions. Most of this material is available with only return postage charged to the borrower.
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The *Landers Film Reviews* is published monthly except in June, July and August. Obviously, this service is geared to use by schools, but libraries, too, find it to be a useful tool. Subscriptions are available through the publisher.

Occasionally, a used 16mm print can be picked up inexpensively. If the savings are considerable, the risk may be worthwhile, but it is better to determine beforehand whether there are return privileges.

Unfortunately, there is a negative side to film distributorship: the filmlegger. This is very dangerous territory, and it is best to avoid it totally. If someone can offer a brand-new print of a title at one-half price, he probably has some connection at a film lab. A legitimate distributor has sent in his negative to have some new prints made up, but a few extra were run off illegitimately. The temptation may be great, but such films are actually stolen goods.

The cost of films is constantly rising. Producers and distributors are faced with rising production costs and skyrocketing lab prices. For every print a filmlegger sells (and for every videotape illegally copied), the distributor is losing a sale. This, too, must be reflected in a general rise in price.

Fortunately, there is something buyers can do to help stop this trend. Distributors are usually willing to take legal action when they hear about violations from legitimate sources.

A major problem with distributors is the scheduling of prints for preview. Prints are increasingly expensive to have made up and to schedule. The ideal customer for the distributor is the one who schedules a preview date for a specific title and manages to return it on or before the due date. It is inexcusable for an organization to keep a print for any extended period, yet this practice is all too common. Indeed, why would anyone hold for six months a print he simply wanted to preview? The thoughtless handling of prints by the potential customer is yet another reason why the price of prints continues to go up.

One possible way of cutting costs, offered by an increasing number of distributors, is to bypass the preview print altogether. If you are dealing with an established classic, the distributor can afford to cut the price if preview is not requested. Sometimes it is also possible to request a new print which you can preview and then keep if you decide to purchase the title. In this case, too, the price can sometimes be discounted. While distributors do not always publicize these facts, it is a trend. Thus it is a good idea to ask when in doubt or when seeking a bargain, because both parties can benefit.

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From time to time it may be necessary to make use of special services or facilities designed for the audiovisual user, including such places as motion picture laboratories, recording studios, or radio and television stations. Up-to-date rate cards should be in the files for ready reference.

Labs are a necessity if you have special identifying leaders, silent or sound, printed up. The option exists to leave the negative in the lab for quick accessibility when more footage is needed. If the negative is kept on file, the small strip with punched holes, probably in the can, should be saved. It is a timing strip used by the lab to control the light intensity of their film printer.

If someone can be convinced to donate the money for a major film or series wanted for the collection but unaffordable on the regular budget, an additional incentive may be to offer them an on-screen credit. To do this, a suitable visual must be prepared. This can then be shot on an optical bench and processed before being returned for splicing at the head of each reel involved. The film department of a local university might be a good place to contact for such services, or you may want to contact a film distributor to find out what lab or labs they use.

A similar situation might exist with recording studios. A radio spot might provide ideal publicity for National Library Week, for example. Under the terms of its FCC license, each radio and television station must provide a number of public service spots at no cost to the sponsoring agency. If friendly relations with the stations have already been established they may even record the advertisement for you free-of-charge, particularly if you provide the voice or talent. The important thing is to provide them with a tape (audio or video) of broadcast quality. Average equipment will not be adequate. In such a case, rental of equipment or facilities meeting broadcast standards is necessary, and your local station should be willing to make recommendations. The groundwork for that advice should be laid long before there is any need for such services, however.

Film rejuvenation is a special service that is especially important to established film collections. Even if a film is out of date or of poor quality, it might have its uses as an example of an out-of-date or poor quality film for those who like to study such things. Most of the time, however, a film whose usefulness is acknowledged may become
scratched, harming its very usefulness. In such cases, the rejuvenation house is a genuine blessing.

In most major cities, there are labs which specialize in the rejuvenation of film. A veritable curtain of scratches can be removed by a special process for only pennies a foot. It is true that there are scratches which cannot be removed: those which form a wide green or yellow line on colored film, or appear as an ugly white line on black and white film, when projected. It is difficult but important to catch a film before it deteriorates to a point beyond which it is impossible to rejuvenate; this skill can be learned with practice.

In order to be certain, however, the rejuvenation lab will usually be willing to examine a film free of charge, and report what can or cannot be done to it. If rejuvenation is possible, it can be done for far less than the cost of replacing the film—if you still want to keep it in the collection. If you are embarking on this procedure for the first time, ask for a free sample of the lab's work. The results (and the dollars saved) can be amazing.

This sort of work is best done on a fairly regular schedule and not haphazardly. As any collection grows older, it is inevitable that more money must be spent on rejuvenation. If the library is within a reasonable distance of the lab, pickup and delivery are usually free.

A companion subject to rejuvenation is the problem of replacement footage. Most distributors have a minimum number of feet that must be ordered. Check the company's catalog to determine this minimum as well as the price per foot. If a film can be salvaged in this way, money can be saved. Some distributors will put in replacement footage free if you send them the film; others will charge for this service, and still others will sell you the footage, but will offer no further service.

When footage is being ordered, find out how the distributor measures it, or tell him your method. If the distributor knows your method, he can adjust his calculation. Accuracy is crucial; a footage-counter (often built in on an inspection machine) is a must. If a film has many splices, footage lost must be estimated or the count will be entirely incorrect. It is always best to round off the figures, allowing extra footage to be safe. If, for example, the damage is measured as running from 297 feet (from the start of picture) to 440 feet, it would be best to order from 285 feet from start of picture through 450 feet. The lab, in turn, will also probably print a few extra feet.

It is a good practice to enclose a short sample of the film clipped from the damaged footage. The emulsion on a particular print might...
be on one side or the other of the base in relation to the sprocket holes. The sample will permit the lab to identify whether, for example, an A or B wind is needed.

If it is color film, and if the lab is really a good one, they will also try to color-match the new replacement footage to the old sample. For a variety of reasons, color matches are not always possible to achieve. If the new footage is obviously different from the original color, the lab may be able to modify the difference, so that when the film is projected, it will not be obvious that there is a dramatic shift in color.

Although most of this article has been written from the viewpoint of the public library and library systems, exactly the same principles apply to schools and other institutions responsible for audiovisual materials. The trend of greatest value for all to consider is closer cooperation among libraries, among schools or districts, between libraries and schools, and among all institutions.

It has not been possible to mention all the problems that may develop between the audiovisual user and the audiovisual dealers and distributors. To everyone's advantage, the "greedy dogs" are few and far between, and tend to go out of business very quickly. Asking questions and gathering information is important, but the two-way street of mutual cooperation between a reliable dealer and a knowledgeable consumer is paramount.

References

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7. Landers Film Reviews, offered on a subscription basis from Landers Associates, P.O. Box 69760, Los Angeles, Calif. 90069.