The Evolution of Commercial Library Supply and Service Houses

GEORGE BONSALL

In marking a copy of the 1888 catalog of the Library Bureau for its next printing, Melvil Dewey added "Founded 1876" to the printed incorporation date of 1888. The Library Bureau, the most important of early library supply houses in America, was actually formed in 1882 as an outgrowth of the Supplies Committee of the American Library Association, to whom Dewey had turned over a very small business he had started in 1876. Whatever their actual birth may be, commercial library supply and service houses are surely happy to celebrate with libraries everywhere the centennial anniversary of the founding of the American Library Association, the first publication of the Library Journal, and the formal presentation of the Dewey decimal system of classification, which opened a new era in information science in North American and throughout the world.

Very broadly, library supplies and services in the present context may be classified as stationery-type items, furniture, media supply (wholesaling), technical services, circulation systems and bibliographic services—not necessarily in that order. The smaller or newer houses may be concerned with only one or two of the above categories, and others with many of them. Few, if any, houses are identical in their coverage, which may cause some confusion in the selection of suppliers and will therefore be commented upon separately. The firms considered in this article, including subsidiaries of companies engaged in other fields, are those serving libraries as a primary market. Publishers, periodical distributors, binders and manufacturers of business equipment are not considered.

Automation, and the development of MARC in particular, has (or will soon have) influenced library operations everywhere. In discussing supplies and services available from commercial library supply and service organizations, it seems useful to divide them into those

George Bonsall is President, Bro-Dart Corporation.
which existed prior to MARC and continue to be the backbone of service to libraries, and the newer and more dramatic—if less measured—tools of the post-MARC era.

Since stationery-type items (normally referred to as library supplies and which also include shelf accessories, small items of equipment, etc.) are unique in this field, library supply houses have undertaken their manufacture or conversion. A large number of such items have been invented or developed by library supply houses either speculatively or in response to specific requests from libraries. In this respect, the library supply house is very different from supply houses or jobbers serving other fields. Manufactured and converted items are supplemented by other products of lesser demand which make it possible for libraries to avoid the additional acquisition and handling costs involved in breaking up their requirements into many parts. There is considerable similarity among the lists of items handled by firms marketing library supplies, all of which issue illustrated and priced catalogs.

Library furniture is classified according to its material (wood or metal), its style (traditional or stylized), and its function (replacements and additions, or new installations). Furniture, primarily of wood, is manufactured by a few of the library supply houses. There are also a number of firms which manufacture wood and steel, or steel furniture only. Manufacturers of furniture often issue priced catalogs of stock furniture, usually used as replacements or additions. Quotations must, of course, be obtained for new installations and custom-built items. Some library suppliers provide a furniture consulting service relating primarily to requirements involving significant library additions or new construction. Such consulting services have grown from the traditional development of suggested layouts and budget estimates to include planning for some of the more sophisticated equipment for use with library media (e.g., visual projection equipment and sound equipment). Such services are available either for a fee or at no charge. Suppliers who specialize in work for libraries are quick to develop new products in response to technical library requirements.

It has only been in the last few years that media distribution by library suppliers meant anything other than distribution of books. Even now only a selected range of audiovisual materials is distributed to libraries by such suppliers, although there is every likelihood that broader coverage of both audiovisual materials and related services will develop in the next few years.
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Firms selling books to libraries may be divided into three types: (1) general book wholesalers, handling books of all publishers distributed through normal commercial channels; (2) firms selling limited classes of books to libraries (e.g., medicine, law); and (3) firms selling books to a restricted marketplace, such as schools. In addition to the usual pattern of book selling, some houses offer approval or leasing plans. In addition, just as there are a few houses selling both library supplies and furniture, a few sell both library supplies and books, and one house sells all three. Issuance of catalog materials and prices is varied.

The media supplier (wholesaler) is a source of supply for the media which is produced by thousands of individual publishers. Through the commitment of significant capital investment, the wholesaler eliminates the need to deal individually with thousands of publishers (each of which has different business practices, procedures and requirements), enabling the library to receive a uniform product, conforming to the needs of most libraries. The uniformity of service procedures available from the wholesaler opens the door to the involvement of the supplier with the library's order-placement, receiving, and associated procedures. Such involvement may be viewed as being a cost-effective one when compared with earlier traditional methods. As a result of this increasing trend, the library/supplier partnership is quite evident, and the benefits derived are clearly substantial.

A generation ago, the idea of buying a book cataloged and processed outside the library was unheard of. In the late 1950s however, contract cataloging and processing was tried experimentally, and libraries that were short of staff or falling behind in their technical service departments began to use it. For the first time it was possible to see the tremendous number of variations possible in meeting the individual requirements of thousands of libraries. It was not until the mid-1960s, when large government funding made possible the creation of thousands of new school and college libraries and the expansion of many others, that contract cataloging played its first important role. The new libraries had little staff and had to move quickly. Although specifications varied widely, they were far more simple than those of older public and college libraries, and the large volume could be handled more readily.

The various houses then offering books cataloged and processed to specification (there was little demand for audiovisual cataloging at that time) charged a base price for a "standard" product, usually
including a list of free alternates, to which were added separate charges for other custom requirements. The extra charges gave many libraries an opportunity to re-examine their costs and compare them with benefits derived. Many subsequent changes resulted in economic advantage for the libraries. Spurred on by technical developments, the move to standardization has today escalated this trend beyond anything which could have been foreseen a dozen years ago. This will become more evident in a discussion of the post-MARC era.

Library circulation control systems, from the simplest manual system to computerized equipment, is an important area of products and services provided by some of the library supply houses. There is no single book-charging system which is all things to all libraries. New systems have been designed to meet the special needs of different types and sizes of libraries, depending upon their volume of circulation, reserve or recall requirements, and efficiencies in handling overdue and delinquent borrower information.

The case for the use of commercial supply and service houses is easily made. They are cost effective, a fact which is better recognized as the growth/budget squeeze tightens. No one today believes that what is done by contract costs money and what is done in-house is free. Those who serve for a fee seek profit. This must and does come from savings to the customer due to volume, greater specialization in job categories, utilization of expensive and sophisticated equipment, flexibility in handling peak demand, and other efficiencies of concentrated service and production planning. The fees of library supply and service houses have the very real check of those looking over their shoulders—their competitors. Furthermore, the library paying for goods or services holds an extra card: the right to fire.

For a library whose purchasing office requests bids from potential suppliers of product or services, it is important that librarians make sure all acceptable library suppliers of the items required are on the purchasing office’s bid list. Suppliers try to ensure that they are on bid lists, but it is a difficult task. From time to time there may also be misunderstanding about the categories into which infrequently ordered items fall. Some of the terms used by the library may not be recognized by purchasing office personnel. This problem can be minimized by indicating on requisitions the broad area covered by suppliers’ catalogs (library supplies, library furniture, etc.).

While the bidding process is viewed with dismay by many librarians, this is largely true because of the inability to delineate in written specifications those requirements and procedures needed by the
library to assure efficient and satisfactory relationships between vendor and library. Such problems have materialized in virtually all areas, including supplies and furniture, but have been most evident in the area of media supply. The commercial firm, however, can be of immeasurable assistance in this otherwise troublesome area. Those who are willing to do so can develop comprehensive, detailed and yet unrestricted specifications for a given library. Library purchasing agencies are generally very receptive to such specifications in that they simplify both the task of qualifying capable potential vendors and the job of evaluating vendor problems. Utilizing a commercial firm for draft specifications development also benefits the library by creating a forum in which vendor capabilities and library requirements may be opened for discussion; the outcome may well be a cost-effective improvement in order-placement and receiving functions.

Some of today's larger supply houses have experienced a dramatic change in their organization and capabilities in this post-MARC period. Instead of being identified as a seller of specific products or services (e.g., library supplies, media wholesaling, or library furniture manufacturing), the supply company today frequently takes a "systems approach" to the services it offers. This systems approach can be seen to follow the concept of value engineering, which consists of the analysis of the ultimate goal to be achieved and the development of the most cost-effective methods by which such goals can be achieved. The foundation for this very significant development derives from a much closer relationship between the commercial supplier and the libraries. This in turn stems from the traditional commercial concern with gaining a thorough understanding of the practices, objectives and problems of its markets. Also of importance is the realization that the profit motive requires the commercial firm to develop cost-effective products and/or services.

For a better understanding of this kind of development, one must examine closely the results to date—and project the consequences into the future—of the distribution of bibliographic data in machine-readable form. Through its MARC program and distribution service, the Library of Congress has, of course, created the basis for both commercial and noncommercial services relating to the supply of bibliographic data in standardized form.

The combination of the computer and MARC have brought about the realization that many of the thousands of variations previously thought to require time-consuming, manual effort can be accommodated within the automated system. Moreover, in addition to the
advantages of speed and flexibility provided by the computer, it is now possible to capture bibliographic data in machine-readable form as a byproduct of the book order at minimal extra cost. The significance of this major accomplishment is that it puts the library in a position to move toward library automation and its associated benefits. These may include the implementation of an automated circulation control system, or the replacement of the library’s card catalog with a book or microform catalog. Each of these possibilities, of course, requires that the library’s holdings and the bibliographic information associated with them be in machine-readable form. The computer has also made possible efficient and low-cost conversion of bibliographic data now available in the library only in card form. Library awareness of these services and their significance is growing. Like the tip of an iceberg, there is far more available than is initially apparent.

The maturation of a whole range of library automation concepts into a series of tangible and affordable tools for increasing library effectiveness and efficiency is evident today. In many ways one should view the pioneering work carried out principally by large institutions as being analogous to the pure research activity common in the scientific environment. Only recently have we seen the beginning of the engineering and product-construction phase of the development cycle. Viewed in this way, it becomes clear why the oft-heralded breakthroughs announced in the professional literature have had no measurable impact on the operation of the vast majority of libraries. These breakthroughs actually have been a reflection of progress made in increasing the fundamental body of knowledge concerning the topic, rather than being announcements of improved alternatives to library operation. This does not suggest that the value of these pure research activities is in some way diminished; without the foundation and framework that they provide, little could be accomplished. However, it must be recognized that the next step, the engineering and product-development step, is inevitably taken by organizations with capabilities and motivations that are substantially different from those of the research group. To expect researchers to develop the final product is as unrealistic as to expect engineers to conduct pure research. In our economic system, the task of final product development and support is with few exceptions undertaken by the commercial sector, where the willingness and ability exist to invest funds and resources effectively. The library can achieve many of the benefits made possible by the far-reaching and interrelated
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services now available by focusing on what it would like to accomplish rather than on apparent obstacles. This approach creates an opportunity for a substantial improvement of library operations.

Librarians and administrators who recognize that the problems underlying library operation today require a more business-oriented approach (i.e., value engineering, cost-effective procedures, etc.) will welcome the emergence of a more comprehensive library service organization, embodying the resources, knowledge and flexibility to assist in reaching their objectives. It will require the coordination and cooperation of departments within the library to take maximum advantage of these capabilities. For example, the selection of a single supplier—responsible for the supply of media, bibliographic information, provision and maintenance of the library’s automated catalog, maintenance of accounting information (relating to costs of materials and services), provision of circulation control and interlibrary loan facility, and the resulting supply of inventory and management reports—will involve virtually every department in the library. A library may secure from a single supplier with a single order: books, processing, bibliographic information and production of the library’s catalog, as well as maintenance of the library’s record of expenditures. In addition to such comprehensive service, the same supplier can provide the circulation control system (hardware and software) utilizing the bibliographic data updated through the acquisitions operation, permitting the library to generate information relating to the use of its resources (i.e., management and inventory usage and control reports).

The phenomenon of bibliographic data networks for library use has given rise to much speculation concerning their impact on the future of the library. There has been a great deal of confusion about just what these networks truly offer and how their offerings can best be exploited by the library.

In order to understand bibliographic data networks, it is helpful first to understand what they are not. They are not a library operations system. Although a network facility can be a supportive component of a given library’s operation, the network itself does nothing to improve the performance of the library. In fact, it has been convincingly demonstrated that the mere injection of a network facility into the library without careful consideration of a given library’s overall system requirements can have a negative influence on both economics and performance.

A network facility is a utility—a utility much like those providing
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electric, telephone and other services. It is characterized by some of
the same semimonopolistic behavior as other utilities, and suffers
some of the same limitations imposed by the need to provide an
essentially uniform and somewhat inflexible general service to cus-
tomers with differing specific needs. It becomes evident that the task
of gaining improvements through use of a network utility is one that
must follow, not precede, the design and implementation of the
overall library automation system. To do otherwise is as pointless as to
contract for electrical service without first having understood and
planned the application of that utility.

As mentioned earlier, we find ourselves at the beginning of the
engineering and product-development cycle of library automation
tools. How long will it be before meaningful advanced systems are
actually available? The answer is that worthwhile automated systems
are available today. It is true that their scope and function are
relatively modest when compared with that which will become avail-
able. There are good reasons, however, to consider seriously their
adoption now rather than waiting until an indeterminate future time
to take positive action. Some systems to consider are discussed below.

*Circulation control systems*, especially those that deal effectively with
interlibrary loan functions and collection management information. With regard to the latter, be sure that the system can actually
present circulation, patron and other management statistics in a
useful fashion. Some can only collect data. Expect a modest saving
of staff time but a substantial opportunity to improve service.

*Book and media catalogs*, with special emphasis on microform versions.
The economics of this card catalog alternative are quite good today,
and the current capability for easily producing special-interest
subcatalogs is quite attractive. The presentation of an entire page or
screenful of information in a book catalog helps to make the search
process much more effective than the one-entry-at-a-time card
catalog reference. Good microform viewers designed expressly for
library use are available.

*Automated ordering systems*, both electronic and microform. A substan-
tial number of dollars and an even larger amount of time can be
saved in the ordering process. Up-to-date publication status, cata-
loguing availability, information, and price can be known at the time
the order is being initiated. Perhaps most importantly, the use of
these systems provides assurance that there is an accurate com-
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munication to the supplier of exactly what is desired by the library. The electronic systems are extremely fast and accurate. The microform systems tend to be quite economical.

The most compelling reason for not deferring automation is that the entire process of moving to more effective systems is evolutionary and takes time. Although dramatic wholesale change impacting a library's entire operation is occasionally discussed, in practical terms a well-managed ongoing program of progressive adoption of new systems is usually the most realistic approach. If done in concert with knowledgeable vendors, a building-block approach is practical today.